# universität wien

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## The Making of a Writer:

## An Anthropological Study of Creative Writing Clubs in Vienna

verfasst von / submitted by

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## *Uni-Verse*

There's a uni-verse for each of us
Down in a cellar room
That's where we ascend – to dream
On Wednesday afternoons

Each uni-verse is different
Some to hide – some to open up
Some for one – and some for all of us

And as we enter journeys
Inside our little room
Thunder, storm and lightning –
Of words envelop us

So - traversing galaxies –
Each of us will gain
The smallest peck of stardust –
If just a tiny grain

Occasionally a star will fall,
A shooting star drop by –
Yet never is our uni-verse
Blocked by a clouded sky

*Florentina Jungwirth*

"If composing new works is in continuity with reading or

listening to existing ones and remembering past ones,

then everyone has within themselves the capacities of a

composer. The difference between artists and audiences is a matter

of specialisation and concentration, and not a difference in kind."

*Karin Barber* (2007:211)

"Writer […] is not an everyday identity.

It is something that must be created, constructed."

*Taylor* (2013:131)

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# 1.    Introduction

It happened towards the end of June. The first Austrian lock-down had just ended and everyone was eager to get back in the streets, stay on the open, meet people and generally start again the usual activities. The atypically cold and rainy weather couldn't affect the lively atmosphere. The pandemic was still there, still on the minds of many, and in few months it would have struck a second and more powerful blow. But for now people just tried to make the best out of that shortly reacquired though different freedom. Cautiously, maybe even a bit anxiously, but merrily.

In this climate I found myself holed up in a cellar with dozens of other people. Why? To read and comment on texts, obviously. Unfortunately my strong springy desire for light and fresh air had to temporally come to terms with the pub's basement that served as meeting point of "Uni-Verse: Creative Writing Society at the University of Vienna". Not even a window offered a glimpse of the sky and the world outside, substituted instead from an impressive, and sometimes disturbing, amount of mirrors. It was in this room with exposed brickwork that it happened.

Everything started like a casual conversation. It was just one of the plentiful moments where members of the associations engaged in banter and chit-chat. As I will explain in chapter five those constituted the backbone of creative writing associations in Vienna and were primarily used for the socialisation and acculturation of their members. It was thus precisely during one of those moments that Anmol and Scott[1] had their argument. Argument is maybe an exaggeration, but for sure it was a lively exchange of views with people firmly rooted in their positions. There were of course other participants to the debate, but those two took the lion's share heading the two main diverging positions.

The topic of the dispute was: "what makes a writer?". According to Anmol it mainly depended on how people described themselves and defined their identities. Scott on the contrary argued that he met many people describing themselves as writers who never really got themselves to write any line. It was the activity of writing and the composition of texts that defined someone as a writer, not the way s/he portrayed himself/herself. Anthropologically speaking we could argue that the solution here generally lies in the middle and that the definition of a group is the outcome of the interplay of in-group and out-group actors and definitions.

The conversation had however to stop before this option might have been suggested in order to let the meeting begin. However, it kept on lingering in my mind and suddenly the interrogative that spun the debate also became the axis along which I oriented my research. The very title of this

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1    Anonymised.

thesis owes a lot to that conversation at the beginning of my fieldwork. The word "making" can indeed be interpreted in two different ways. The first one is closer to Scott perspectives and assumes the writers to be the object of making. The interest should consequently lie in the conditions, both structural and contextual, that define and create writers as such. If we however take writers as the subject of the period the investigative lens should be oriented towards the outcomes of the writerly activity of individuals. Chapters five and six are devoted to the presentation of the research results and aim for instance at offering insights into both those two different understandings. The first of the two considers for instance writers as products and investigate how communities of practice (Eckert & McConell-Ginet 1992) centred around serious leisure (Stebbins 2001) contributed to the construction of a personal and collective identity as writers. A discourse about writing was here employed as a technology of the imagination (Sneath, Holbraad & Pedersen 2009) to help individuals form their own expectations and orientations with regards to their lives and individual futures. This would have not been possible without the support of a community, which creation and belonging was actively sought from the associations' members. The same chapter investigates thus how communities of writers were formed and how through the sharing of personal experiences, spaces, moments of banter and chit-chat it was possible to establish a shared communitarian identity and a sense of cohesion later revealed in feelings of belonging and the care and attention the communities had for their vulnerable members

This vulnerability was partially dependent upon the content of texts. Chapter number six investigates precisely what kind of relations individuals had with the texts they wrote. Interviews and participant observation seemed to highlight a general tendency of the associations' members to infuse texts with one's personality and life experiences. Often this was a liberating act that allowed members to get rid of overwhelming experiences, or rework them by establishing an appropriate distance from which to look at them. This feature was very often defined from my interlocutors as the therapeutic or cathartic power that writing had for their lives, since it helped them to cope with their life experiences and living conditions. Imbue one's self and one's life experiences in a text also implies the transfer of a writer's agency to the text as it has already been shown by Reed (2004) allowing for the written lines to transport individuals "on the wings of fantasy" and make them feel real emotions. This too was a cathartic device my interlocutors profited from. It also highlights how the kind of self and person envisioned was an ongoing and growing one (Ingold & Hallam 2014), set in conversation with texts in a mutually shaping effort. However, when we say that writers were forming their personality through their relation with texts, both theirs and from others, but especially through the (re)editing of their own written words, something that also often implied the infusion of one's self in the writing, we shouldn't understand the associations' members as possessing a form of ex-

panded personhood like it has been reported for other contexts (Strathern 1988; Fowler 2004). What happens through writing was in fact precisely a form of detachment and complete objectification which might be understood at best considering it as a form of self-expression more than through the lens of non-individual personhood.

But why do people feel the need of a community and approach writing as a form of therapy and catharsis? A possible answer is given in chapter four where I tried to argue how a widespread insecurity engendered from late modern[2] living conditions made people willing to engage on an activity upon which they could exert full control. The benefits this could offer to individuals were so many that it brought many members to engage it on a serious leisure (Stebbins 2001) level, that is, with an amount of commitment comparable to workplace situations, even if lacking monetary compensation and strictly binding conditions as it is usually the case for work. In the midst of late modern enhanced insecurity the main benefit serious leisure (Stebbins 2001) could offer to people was validation: a feeling of being recognised as an all-round person and esteemed for the outcomes of one's effort in an impersonal and anonymising world. Validation and late modernity form the general background against which my conclusions have to be read and also form the content of chapter four. Those three chapters compose the core of the master thesis and should offer an overview of creative writing as serious leisure (Stebbins 2001) in the city of Vienna. Specifically I refer here to two associations that formed the settings were my research was conducted. The first one, Uni-Verse[3], already appeared in the previous lines. Uni-Verse represented a bedrock for serious leisure writers in the city, especially those writing in English. The use of this foreign idiom as lingua franca was in fact the main feature joining together its frequenters, causing them to mainly originate from the University of Vienna English Studies Department or groups of expats, most of which were English native speakers. Trapez[4] on the contrary relied on Austria's official language and towards the end of my fieldwork started active proselytism at the Department of German Studies. It however still remained significantly smaller, numbering around two thirds or three fourths members less than Uni-Verse. Trapez also tended to meet less often, reducing their appointments to twice monthly while Uni-Verse kept meeting each week. Trapez setting during summer was also different. The committee often opted indeed for staying on another pub's veranda also letting me this way enjoy the summer weather. Only in autumn, for those few meetings before the second lock-down, the cool weather pushed us to move inside.

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2    I am not using any source for this notion because I am referring to the definition I give in chapter 4 paragraph 1. For the same reason there are no references to either late modernity nor validation for the rest of the master thesis.

3    You can find more information about Uni-Verse visiting its website: http://universe.univie.org/ (last checked 10/02/2021)

4    For more information about Trapez you can visit its website: http://literaturverein-trapez.com/ (last checked 10/02/2021)

Those differences notwithstanding the unfolding of the meetings remained roughly the same for both associations since both shared the same key concern, namely the reading and evaluation of texts from their members. Usually people sent in advance during the week their writings to the associations, which were then printed out, or else made available to the meetings' attendees in digital form during lock-down gatherings. The authors had later the possibility to read them in front of the other members, or let someone else do it if they preferred, and thereafter to listen to the feedbacks given from the other participants. Something else joining together the two associations was their structure, both organised around an organising committee caring for the organisation of meetings and events which were then free to access for anybody who wished to, and the demographic and sociographic profile of their members, nearly all identifiable as well-educated, middle-class emerging adults (Arnett 2000). In both associations it was also possible to recognise a group of people coming nearly every time and that formed the core group of the association and the people I mainly interacted with. At Uni-Verse they were called the "regulars". I have borrowed this term to refer to the habitués of both associations in the following pages.

More about the general profile of the members of the association can be found on chapter four where I treat my interlocutors' moral career (Goffman 1959; Hannerz 2004) with writing and chapter two where I propose my methodological reflection. As Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi (2011) suggest every ethnographic account should indeed offer to the readers the possibility to understand from which perspective the research was conducted and what methods were employed, helping them understand why the researcher came to those specific results. This is precisely what I have attempted in chapter two.

Finally chapter three is mainly devoted to an overview of relevant texts in the branch of literary anthropology, especially focussing on ethnographic approaches to writers and texts. This way it should be possible for the readers to contextualise the present work and judge its value. I also propose there to divide the anthropological study of literature into two different branches: a narrow study, that joins together investigations following a definition of literature as it is widespread in North Atlantic contexts, and a broad one, where the notion of literature is extended to define other artistic textual activities including this way oral compositions and other forms too. Both those two directions have to be understood as part of the anthropological study of texts which also considers texts that have not been composed with artistic aims.

# 2. Methodological Reflection

"The ability of the anthropologists to get us to take what they say seriously [..] has [to do] with their capacity to convince us that what they say is a results of their having [..] truly "been there" (Geertz 1988: 4-5). "Having been there" has long been considered as the fundamental methodological predicament of anthropology (Gupta & Ferguson 1997). I feel very lucky I can affirm this very same sentence in the midst of a global pandemic that disrupted many other fieldwork projects. COVID-19 indeed made for many researchers unattainable, either because of lock-down regulations or to protect one's or the interlocutors' health, the classical notion of participant observation as the attending of a bounded space in a circumscribed time frame (Gupta & Ferguson 1997). That's however precisely what I tried to do with both Uni-Verse and Trapez.

My first encounter with the English speaking association happened by the end of March, after I became aware of it through a quick Google search. It was the day before the Austrian government declared the first lock-down and I decided I needed to make up my mind if I really wanted to investigate literature as topic for my master thesis. I just went there. Very spontaneously. Due to this rather exploratory motivation I didn't immediately outed my research intention but just presented myself in relation to my creative writing interests, which also was the focus of the association's activities. My second time at Uni-Verse was around three months later. I had already started investigating relevant literature and this time I had clearly in mind I wanted to focus on that specific topic. I even sent a message to the Uni-Verse Facebook page asking about their opinion in regard to a possible research there but it went however and I only got a positive reply only a few days after that second encounter.

As soon as I arrived at the association I met again with Marie. At that time she was still Uni-Verse's president and very often also host of the meetings. As such she used to welcome newcomers to investigate who they were and what brought them there, also aiming at presenting them the association. I underwent this procedure too just like I would too at Trapez talking with Charlotte a few days later. In June Marie approached me for the second time. She remembered she saw me three months before and we started chatting. In March we only talked about my experiences with writing, so this time I cautiously mentioned I was planning of conducting a research about creative writing in Vienna that would have had Uni-Verse as focus. Unexpectedly I was met with a big wave of enthusiasm. Marie, just like most of the other members I would have talk to in the next months, was extremely passionate about the project and started making me a list of people I might have wanted to talk to. This way I got to know Trapez. I chose to focus on this association too in order to

maximise the time I could spend for observation, since the "field" was not constantly accessible throughout the research months but only in specific moments of the week. The choice was also motivated from an investigative intention to adopt the comparison of the two groups as source of insight. By the end of research I evaluated such approach as not particularly fruitful. It is in fact true that the two associations differ on the number of members, the language adopted for interaction and the frequency of meetings, but those were all dimensions that didn't affect sensibly my research results which on the contrary hinted at how members of both associations were experiencing similar conditions and vicissitudes.

That same Friday I thus went to a Trapez meeting and after Charlotte's introduction and my presentation I got confronted with the same enthusiasm as Marie's. At first I was afraid my project might have met some kind of reluctance from the members. On the contrary it was immediately judged as extremely interesting from nearly everybody in both associations and the majority of my research partners declared themselves interested in reading the final research outcome. Choosing to explicitly present myself as researcher qualifies the investigation as an uncovered one (Hauser-Schäublin 2008; Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011). I assume indeed that there were no peculiar benefits in hiding my research intention, since the gatekeeping mechanism of the group was basically reduced to those two initial conversations and nearly everybody was welcomed to join the research activities. I also don't think my research partners would have revealed me different kinds of information if I hadn't outed myself as researcher. The topic was in fact regarded as not particularly sensible, which in turn also influenced their opinion about anonymisation, and the possibility to figure in a research text was a much too appealing opportunity to get validated (see chapter 4) to prevent the research to be conducted. At the end of the day however nobody really seemed to care much about my identity as researcher. Most of them just treated me like another member coming to the meetings. Even in more delicate moments, those that made up the core activity of the two groups, members didn't seem to pay attention to matters such as social desirability because under scrutiny from an external observer (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011).

Compared to other contexts I thus had the opportunity to face a very low level of reactivity. For example it was possible for me to immediately capture on paper sudden observations and insights since everybody else around me did the same. During the pauses I left my notes on the table for everybody to read if they wanted, and once I also found a participant having a glance at them. Generally however nobody really did it. I guess this might have depended from the general assumption those were regarding the texts alone, like most of the annotations from the members, or

maybe there was the idea of one's notes to be something private and so at once unintelligible for and interdicted to other people.

Part of the disinterest towards me as research might have also depended from my regular attendance and the participation in chit-chat moments, topic of chapter 5, which helped to establish me connections with other members and get recognisable, and so accepted, within the group as a regular member. The same effect resulted from my actual engagement and commitment to the group activities. Those same chatter moments were probably also my biggest hurdle. I assume a more expansive researcher might have achieved establishing tighter connections with my interlocutors gaining a different perspective, especially concerning the more private aspects of writing. I also believe I couldn't handle very well some discussions where I stop dead on my position, or presented it as much too categorical, risking to alienate me the likings of some of my interlocutors. On the other hand in the moments where my personality came forth I could also establish some kind of relation based on personal affinities and not just an abstract aseptic one of research. It is indeed true an ethnographer should avoid taking positions not to close off the relationships with possible relevant research partners, as Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi (2011) recognise, but it is also true that a researcher is no fly on the wall and it's not possible to be totally neutral during a research. It is also furthermore the case that very often people appreciate honesty and would rather talk with someone not sharing their views than with someone who never takes sides (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011). Sharing different point of views was also a very acceptable practice in settings like the associations which to a large extent where based on mutual opinion exchange. Moreover the kind of topics treated were to a great extent regarded as non-sensible, like fantasy video-games or reading suggestions, so that nobody felt particularly hurt or offended if at odds. In the preference for such topics, especially those related to writing and reading, there is already a hint the community of practice as defining its identity around a specific activity[5].

Those discussions appear thus more interesting to consider for the effect they had on my emotional states than for the research itself. During the months of research I indeed carouselled through various sides of the emotional spectrum that usually accompany ethnographic research (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011), from the initial excitement for the discovery of the group, to the disillusion and fear of not reaching any meaningful insight, from the boredom and need of detachment from the field by the end of research and the pure pleasure of being with esteemed peers or the sudden thrill for some new insight. Equally affecting my states of mind were the reactions to my feedback and text, feeling satisfied when something I said or wrote got appreciated and annoyed or ashamed if refused. I would like to point here how the ethnographer is not only engaging the

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5    See chapter 5.

field as a research but as a person putting into play his/her self and her/his personality with all the stakes and risks such condition bears (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011).

In this sense I feel lucky because I met a welcoming environment where I could join all the activities unhindered and without particular distress. As it might be inferred from the previous lines I didn't however limit my commitment to just attending the meetings. I have as a matter of fact tried to get involved as much as possible so that by the end of my research I still met people at Uni-Verse who were unaware of my research aim and thought of me as just another member. I officially became a regular member of that association two times, one for each semester of research, benefiting this way of the monthly newsletter and the possibility to elect the new committee and also receiving the meeting's booklet in advance. I got also added to both Trapez and Uni-Verse WhatsApp groups, where people exchanged meaningful information about incoming meetings and events and started following the Facebook pages of the associations in order to keep up with news, arrangements and projects. This social network was primarily used from both associations to make people aware of their projects, events or meetings, but also to network with sisters associations, as Uni-Verse especially did. I believe the presence of the associations also in those virtual spaces might have contributed to the formation of a shared sense of identity and community among their members too, just like the possibility to interact with each other on WhatsApp. More on this topic on chapter 5. Generally speaking however those places were still used most of the time to investigate the number of people joining next meetings, or give some relevant information.

After that meeting by late June I kept on attending nearly every encounter of both associations till late November. After that date it still happened to me to attend meetings sporadically but not with the explicit intention of gathering data. The amount of time spent I spent for research can however hardly be considered through the standard framings of fieldwork as Gupta & Ferguson (1997) have described and criticised them. In the first place it wasn't an intensive immersion in the field, but much more an extensive one extending over several months but with only singular circumscribed weekly incursions to the research settings. Those incursions had also to stop for the summer break both associations took preventing me to engage in participant observation for whole August and part of September. Some busy week where I spent four days out of seven concretely gathering data might have been seen as compensating that long pause. Those weeks in addition to the weekly meetings I also got interviews and events from the associations, usually Uni-Verse, scheduled. But even in those moments are not fully ascribable to how Malinowski (1978 [1922]) original intended fieldwork as full time contact with the "natives". More than saying when I started and when I ended my observation I think it makes more sense to talk about the number of meetings I could actually attend with the aim of gathering data. Those were 17 in total, 10 at Uni-Verse and 7 at Trapez,

everyone lasting from approximately two to four hours. In addition I also took part in 5 events organised from Uni-Verse, most of them so-called "social activities" plus the presentation of their third anthology.

Not only the time but also the place of my research didn't fit the classical definition of anthropological research (Gupta & Ferguson 1997). I believe my movement between "there" and "here" resembled the way Gupta & Ferguson (1997) wrote about Central European researchers which should have preferred engaging fields not to far from their homes and travel regularly between the two places. My research setting was indeed within Vienna's precincts, which is also the city I am currently living in. This proximity, even if making it possible to always get back to one's spot of observation to gather or check data, was for me also quite problematic because I couldn't really find a final moment of farewell and detachment. Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi (2011) assume this should be easier for people doing uncovered research but what I actually experienced was that I was brought to keep on attending the meetings since those were always at my fingertips. Indeed, I never really stopped attending the meetings, I just stopped gathering data. Making this choice I couldn't help but feeling a bit guilty. There could have been so many new insights and information that I just missed because not taking notes and writing my field diary. I had however come to the point when I really felt a need of detachment and break and to spend my energies for other activities. This feeling was especially strong in the last meetings I attended where I had the feeling of not noticing any new information. I suspect the interview with Claudia might have been a bit complicated also because of this state of mind that characterised the last part of my fieldwork.

Even within Vienna however the actual location of my fieldwork is quite hard to define. Its summer part took indeed place in two specific settings, that is the two pubs and bars the associations chose as hangouts, but in autumn COVID-19 didn't leave my research unaffected. By the end of summer members of the associations were already sceptical about meeting in person and when the Austrian government declared a second lock-down both Trapez and Uni-Verse finally decided to move all their activities to an online version if they hadn't already. Uni-Verse mainly opted for Zoom while Trapez experimented with several different platforms. This movement was of course accompanied by the insurgence of technical problems of various kinds, from cameras and microphones not working to the additional video-call fatigue. This notwithstanding more than a rupture this moment of re-assemblage seemed to stress continuity. Having to rely on a video-chat software implied as a matter of fact the redefinition of new interaction rules which put in plain sight the elements I was looking for in my research. After all it is in moments of crisis that the key elements composing a social institutions become apparent, as Buroway (1991) argues. COVID-19 was my litmus test, showing for example the importance of sociality and sociability for both Uni-Verse and Trapez once

those were constrained into the limits of the video-call platforms. People were indeed forced to implement a netiquette that allowed them not to talk on each other and avoid the hissings of microphones and other background noises. I will talk further about how the translation to a computer environment changed the sociability of the groups in chapter 5. Important to note here however is that COVID-19 didn't stop the activities of the associations allowing me for a few more months of participant observation. Interviews too of course had to be limited to that online form, just like participant observation had be rearranged to that setting.

That second method represented the one I maybe engaged the most during my ethnographic enquiry. That is often recognised as the core and the key feature of ethnographic enquiries (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011) so that authors such as (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011) state an ethnographic investigation can be legitimately considered as such only in the moment it primarily relies on participant observation. I chose to adopt that specific form of research because my interest precisely lied in understanding how people interacted with texts and how they formed a community around those, something that couldn't be answered through exclusive reliance on interviews, but needed the observation of the interactional processes in loco. In order to do that I participated actively at the associations activities trying to comment on other people's texts. I also sent three texts to Uni-Verse for feedback and took part in feedback sessions discussing them.

Participant observation is a method that strongly relies on the personal sensibility of the researcher and the kind of data gathered just like the information s/he will have access to directly depends on his/her subjectivity and defining traits (Hauser-Schäublin 2008; Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011). It is a method where the researcher put oneself out there personally and for this reason it is fundamental for the ethnographer to clear to her/his readers his/her positionality and the main features of his/her person that might have influenced the research results (Hauser- Schäublin 2008; Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011). In this illustration the two dimensions one could follow are those of showing similarities or showing otherness. I believe often in anthropology researchers are faced with some kind of mixture of those two dimensions coming to realise anthropology is just the longest journey back home (Remotti 1990). When thinking of my research partners however with what kind of "there" was I actually faced with? Just like Wulff (2017) noted that studying Irish writers actually meant to "study sideways", borrowing the word from Hannerz (2004) and Ortner (2010), meaning the study of "people [...] who in many ways are really not much different from anthropologists and our fellow academics more generally" (Ortner 2010 : 223), so too I came to realise I shared an impressive amount of sociographic and demographic characteristics with my research partners and sometimes it almost felt like if a third ethnographer had came s/he wouldn't be able to distinguish me from them. We all were highly-educated emerging adults (Arnett 2000)

interested in writing, even if from different perspectives. I remember one of the first days of fieldwork. The official meeting was already over and people started chatting about intertextuality and other topics quoting scholars that might have well become sources for this same thesis if I hadn't adopted another disciplinary glance. I was baffled by the level of self-consciousness and self-reflection my research partners related to writing. It was of course my mistake to underestimate the competencies of my interlocutors and I should have approached the field assuming I didn't know anything about the topic and let my interlocutors introduce me to their knowledge. Which I tried to do actually, it was striking however how close that was to the one I would employ in any everyday life or university setting. This made hard for me to switch off all my assumptions and conclusions about the topic and just listen without bringing up some former knowledge and preset I already had on the matter. This was a striking contrast with my former research experiences. I remember when I did my field practice among dustmen and community workers of the local civic amenity site in Tirol how one of my biggest issue was that of translation: how to communicate to my interlocutors notions such as agency or political ecology in words they could relate to and use as footholds to start a conversation and tools to explain the world surrounding them. The discussion mentioned above at Uni-Verse made me aware I would not have to face such problem in this research and that people would have expressed themselves with my same lexicon, tackling similar issues, even if coming from different disciplines. When speaking my research partners and I were thus all referring to the same universe of meanings. However, for this same reason all along fieldwork my biggest fear was that my proximity might have brought me to interpret the utterances and actions of my interlocutors to pre-conceived categories and world view being blind to other interpretations and judgements, especially those of my interlocutors. I hope I could limit any possible bias by the rigorous following of ethnographic procedures. Each time after meetings, events or interviews I wrote in my field diary the unfolding and main happenings of what I just experienced. I also furnished those lines with observations and insights that specific situations provoked me. Most of those reflections however were mainly written on a second diary that was explicitly designed to collect my general considerations about theory and possible explanations, also taking relevant literature in consideration.

The centrality of the personality of the researcher also brought me to reflect a lot about neutrality. During the research I felt I couldn't just engage the field neutrally as a pure observer but my personality was constantly, and often inadvertently, coming out defining my interaction with others. The existence of supposed neutral point of observation is anyway rather questionable. The researcher doesn't move in the void and doesn't interact with inert materials. S/he can't help but practically change the context s/he is observing, willing or not. For example at meetings after

interviews I was often left wondering if some specific comment of a former interview partner has been originated from something discussed during the interview. Validation for instance was a word I heard some people say only after our discussion, very probably because they shared the feeling this notion told something important about their life experience at the association. But the researcher changes the field of observation also in more indirect ways. My first time at Trapez I noted for instance that I couldn't find the association online typing "creative writing Vienna" on Google and this brought the members to reconsider the website search keywords. Or it also happened that I suggested at Uni-Verse to meet for a shut-up-and-write! session, an event focussed on writing where talking was allowed only during the breaks and based on the idea that writing with others might stimulate one's creativity, or at least get around one's laziness, and shortly after this kind of event was actually organised. Or when I helped setting up a Collaborate platform for a Trapez meeting. I thus do not sustain by any mean the idea of the ethnographer as detached observer only gathering data, preferring instead the idea of one literally getting her/his hands dirty with experience. The researcher is thus himself/herself inevitably part of the field s/he is observing and that's why I believe a methodological self-reflection should be considered as a fundamental integral part of any ethnography.

Self-reflectingly I have thus to state how the two associations were very interesting for me not only as ethnographer but also as person and I believe I would have enjoyed attending them even outside the research context. This depended very likely from my similarity with my research partners. I see in this proximity an instance of what Schlehe (2008) defined as the "distance dilemma" [Abstandsdilemma], that is how far and how close should and ethnographer be to her/his topic of research and his/her interlocutors. The risk in being too close is that of going native, incorporating the values, visions and understandings of the research partners, if not even the attitudes and ways of doing, getting blind to relevant research dimensions. But what if the ethnographer is already somehow "native" like in my case? I know Vienna is not the place I have been reared up, just like English and German are not my mother tongues, but I assume I might be inserted in the same social cluster and categories as my research partners. Social groups after all aren't homogeneous and there are always discrepancies of visions, beliefs and attitudes among their members which do not all equally conform to a stereotyped category but are individuals with own distinctive traits. Groups, nation, ethnicities, classes, castes and other social categories indeed exists according to how people, ethnographer included, choose to draw the line between in-group and out-group. So I believe the ethnographer to always be somehow part of the social group s/he is examining, even if maybe her/his presence is only marginal and temporary. Doing ethnography is not so much about being an outsider but observing social interaction in a non naive way, defamiliarising and questioning what is

going on even, and especially, if the research partners and oneself take it for granted. In this sense I believe "anthropology at home" the way I did my research to be always perfectly feasible. Anthropological fieldwork should see its definition detached from the research of otherness (Gupta & Ferguson 1997).

My regional origin, the biggest source of difference between me and my interlocutors, didn't also seem to represent any particular hindrance. Most of Uni-Verse members were as a matter of fact not originating from Vienna and even Trapez saw the presence of people coming from different areas of the world. In this sense I can further argue for the belonging of me and my research partners to the same social group. More than being typical to Vienna these associations appeared in a certain way to belong to a cosmopolitan intelligentsia always somehow similar all across Europe and North America. Tolerance for people of different origins and opening towards the world can indeed be seen as a defining feature of educated middle-classes. I consequently never had to suffer from stereotypes connected to my Italian origin or "Italian-ity", nor had to be faced with exclusion of some kind. I am aware people coming from Italy still represent some kind of preferred foreigner in Austria compared to other areas of the world and that my perspective wasn't as such much sensible to matters such as prejudice and exclusion. I still believe however the above mentioned opening and tolerance might have made the research possible even for people coming from those areas. My regional origin still played a role anyway. Focussing on an activity that puts language centre stage sometimes I felt my linguistic proficiencies weren't enough, especially active ones. This influenced the kind of discussions I had with the members of the associations which were always a bit shaky. I had for instance a conversation with Scott* where I used the all time the word "librarian"[6] to refer to booksellers, which in turn caused huge misunderstandings. Commenting texts was also sometimes extremely laborious for me and many times during feedback sessions I lost the thread of the discussion or felt like I was not really entitled to give any feedback because of my lacking language proficiency. I suffered a bit from impostor's syndrome in this sense since I was not so committed as my research partners even though I was taking part to the activity as their peer. This didn't go unnoticed and many times I got also invited to express my opinion freely, another expression of the protection given to vulnerable members exposed in chapter 5. Those invitations show that my interlocutors expected me to take part in the activities first of all because I was interested in them and was a member of the association, and only secondarily as researcher. I tried my best to accomplish that role, both to comply with my research partners but also to experience the activity as it is proper of participant observation's methodology. I sometimes went thus to the associations with the clear goal in mind of wanting to give a feedback. As for the interviews I chose

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6 In Italian booksellers are called "librai" and librarians "bibliotecari".

to adopt English for Uni-Verse members and German for those coming from Trapez, mainly because that was the language I was used to interact with them in the association's setting.

A further key dimension of one's positionality in the field, which really can affect the access to specific information is gender (Häuser-Schäublin 2008). In this light the associations were quite unique settings. By the end of my research all committee positions, within Uni-Verse were occupied by women and in Trapez there was only one man among the three members who actively engaged in organising the meetings and keep the association running, the two feminine ones also being the two presidents of the association. This is might depend for the general evaluation given to creative activities in Austria and other North Atlantic contexts where those are mainly associated with women as Charlotte told me in her interview and also Taylor (2013) noted. I am not however so sure the composition of the associations mirrored the composition of their committees. In my field diary I always wrote down who attended the meetings with me and checking their gender there they were pretty often almost evenly divided between men and women, not counting different gender ascriptions of which I am not aware of. This situation might require further investigation. It didn't seem however to affect my research in any meaningful way but in the composition of the interview sample. Interviewing past and present presidents of both associations meant as a matter of fact that women were overrepresented. I don't believe the kind of information I would have access to would have been much different if I were a woman, but it would have changed the perspective adopted to make sense of them.

Much more relevant in granting me access to information or not was maybe the way I conducted interviews. As Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi (2011) highlight ethnographic research is a multi-method research procedure, where participant observation has to be integrated with other research strategies. I chose thus to implement my research with interviews. Those were 6 in total lasting from one to two hours depending on the talkativeness of the interview partner. Generally they took approximately one hour and a half. Four interviews were conducted with female participants, two wit males, four with members of Uni-Verse and 2 with those of Trapez. The choice of whom to interview was mainly motivated by convenience sampling, that is according to those who first made themselves available (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011). But I also tried to give voice to people representing different segments of the associations. For this reason I interviewed both present and former presidents of both Trapez and Uni-Verse and when I noticed the over-presence of female, long-standing, that is attending the associations' founding around three years before the research, and Uni-Verse members I tried to integrate it investigating newly came, male and Trapez ones. This notwithstanding there is no aim at representativity in the sampling. The ultimate goal of ethnographic methodology isn't after all the generalisation of results but the production of a rich

understanding of how individuals make sense of the context they live in (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011). For that reason I actively chose to interrogate primarily Austrian natives because I wanted to understand why they chose to adopt English for their writings and if this could have been framed as a technology of the imagination (Sneath, Holbraad, & Pedersen 2009). I stopped conducting interviews when I reached theoretical saturation [saturazione teorica] and felt new interviews didn't add any new information (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011).

Another specificity of my sample is that it only takes into considerations regular members and people attending meetings frequently. My research results can thus be extended with caution to those who attended the meetings but fleetingly. On a practical level those were more difficult to contact because of their unpredictable attendance. Keeping on participating in the meetings I got to know better those who also where there frequently and could thus establish with them a connection source of many insights. Their continuous commitment might also be interpreted as sign of serious leisure as explained in chapter 4. To contact the less involved members I might have relied on snowball sampling but as said I above my interest wasn't much to gain a general picture of creative writing in Vienna but specifically investigate my two research settings.

Except from the first interview I did with Anmol which was meant to explore possible research directions, all the other were carried out by the end of the research with the aim of testing the hypothesis and explication frames that I've been developing during the months of observation. Anmol's interview, together with Philipp's one, was also the only one conducted in person. It was done at the pub where Uni-Verse used to gather just before one of the meetings while Philipp's one happened in the living room of my apartment in Vienna. The choice of this second setting was motivated from the fact that the Austrian government already closed pubs, bars and other restaurants and shops but was still quite permissive on meeting other people. I don't think those two settings restrained the interlocutors from expressing themselves. I believe they felt at ease in there and experienced a positive feeling of comfort. The only interruptions to those to interviews were motivated from the coming and going of waiters bringing food at the pub and of a flatmate of mine starting cooking which prompted Philipp to ask if we could please shut the door for our conversation. All other interviews were conducted via Skype as they happened during the second Austrian lock-down. The use of such platform had some advantages and some disadvantages. A very positive point is that there was no background noise as both I and the interviewees happened to be in their respective homes. Being in a well-known environment they know as safe might have predisposed them to approach the interview with serenity. This feeling might have also been motivated from my attempt to give them exhaustive information about the interview, its esteemed duration, the topic we would have talked about and reassuring them they had more than sufficient

knowledge to answer my questions. The interview was presented has being about the relationship of the individual with writing.

Before actually starting the interview I made my research partners aware of the recorder and I assured them I would have used their statements for research purposes only. People generally didn't reacted with hesitation or excitement to that information. In the same moment I also presented them a privacy consent form, of which necessity I was persuaded from my first interview with Anmol. Before starting her interview she asked me if I had prepared it catching me off guard. This question shows how widespread was the notion of safeguard of personal data among my interlocutors. Recently at the University of Vienna it has been discussed the need for social scientist to follow European Union guidelines to provide such documents. Many university's anthropologists working outside Europe noted how that was impossible because of literacy rates among their interviewees and how that might have spoiled their possibility to conduct any interview at all being written documents and forms automatically associated with oppressive state politics (Herta Nöbauer, Personal Communication). Researching in Vienna however the expectancy seemed to be diametrically opposite. The ethnographer has in this light to adapt to local expectations towards interviews which in parts of Europe seem to include the widespread anxiety about the treatment of one's own personal data. I thus prepared a form which I let Anmol sign and also presented to everybody else I encountered for an interview later on. Most of my interlocutors still didn't seem to care much about it and gave me their consent light-heartedly to use the content of the interviews and even mention their names[7].

Connected to the privacy questionnaires is also the matter of anonymisation. Both associations would have indeed appreciated to see their names explicitly mentioned because they saw in my work an opportunity for advertisement. Naming explicitly the two associations implies however that the actual people I have interacted with are quite easy to identify. My interlocutors seemed not the care much about this. After all the topic of the interviews was not sensible or private: what should have they feared from seeing their actual names written down? At the moment of writing I share

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7) I still do think however the privacy consent form is actually problematic, because it tends to protect the researcher more than her/his interlocutors and is not intended from a standpoint of equality of the people getting involved in the interview. It's main aim seems that of avoiding the accountability of the researcher. It is indeed questionable how can it safeguard the interlocutors once they have signed it. If it is in fact true that people can beforehand choose to be mentioned anonymously or negate their consent, once taken that step the researcher still remains the only keeper of recordings and transcriptions and the only fully entitled to their use preventing any successive claim from her/his interlocutors about how their utterances have been used for the construction of the thesis. In case those might wish themselves or their words not to be mentioned any more in the research results on pure legal terms they have no possibilities of making their voice heard.

with them this opinion that they are not made particularly vulnerable figuring in this thesis. I see in the avoidance of pseudonyms when possible a good practice of anthropological transparency. I remember for instance how a professor from my Bachelor was extremely disappointed with another anthropologist she had worked with. They were both engaging the same association as field when reading the final research outcome of her colleague however she noticed how the anonymisation had been used to actually mix together different features of different people creating life stories that didn't correspond to actual individuals but were just stereotyped ideal types. I am aware however that conflicts or other consequences for my interlocutor's private lives might arise from their statements in forms I wasn't able to foresee, especially since they are members of very small communities. To minimise possible backlash I let my interlocutors sing the consent forms only once the interview was over. This way they could decide if they really wanted me to use the interview information for my work and if they really wanted their actual names to be mentioned, also considering what they said during the interview.  Only those who explicitly agreed on both points are named explicitly in the following pages, while the other people I have interacted with have been anonymised. I furthermore asked one last time before starting writing on the WhatsApp groups of both association, a place that is highly visible and reachable for every member, if they were sure they really wanted to be mentioned. In both cases I received affirmative responses.

After the introduction to the privacy consent the interviews finally started. Following Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi (2011) suggestions the first part was though as an introductory one where both interviewer and interviewees could start getting used to the interview environment. I consequently just asked my research partners to count me about their career (Goffman 1959; Hannerz 2004) in writing, that is the history of their relationship with writing considering its beginning, turning points and future unfoldings. Later on I would use those first accounts as starting points to investigate relevant dimensions asking my research partners to expand relevant points and explicated them further. This procedure implied that it was extremely hard for me to follow a premeditated interview questions order which had to be adapted to the current discussion's situation. The questions were however very often forming clusters, most of which identified during participant observation, that allowed me to ask them together in the same part of dialogue. In addition I also tried sometimes towards the end of the interview to expose to my interview partners what could have been possible conclusions of my thesis quoting late modernity and serious leisure and asked for their feedback as backtalk practice (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011). I believe this procedure and structuring of the interview was quite fruitful. It indeed helped me to join together the freedom and the exploration of discursive interviews, discovering maybe topics and dimensions I didn't think about at the start, while keeping the focus of structured ones (Cardano,

Venturini & Manocchi 2011). The biggest inconvenience was that not following any specific order left me wondering if all relevant points had been touched and since I wanted to make the best out of the interviews I really wanted to do that. The final part of the interview tended thus to collect an increasing number of prolonged silences where I browsed through my questions looking for unanswered ones. My interlocutors were very comprehensive and no one seemed to be bothered from those pauses. The questions coming next appeared also as detached from one another since the original intended continuity got lost having I already asked many of them, giving maybe the feeling of logical leaps in the questions' order.

I followed the technique used at the beginning of the interview also in other moments. I often let my interlocutors wander off, because I think they might still touch upon relevant points that weren't planned in the interview design. At the end of the day I have tried to give the interviewees a feeling of casual conversation letting them free to touch upon points they deemed relevant, while at the same time trying to guide the conversation in meaningful directions for my research. It was not always easy and everyone responded to this setting following her/his individual disposition. Everyone   shared however a very strong desire to engage in a discussion about themselves and their writings and writing experiences. Especially problematic to interact with, as Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi (2011) recognise it usually happens in interviews, were too talkative or too shy people. In the first case it was hard to understand the moment when to stop them before they detoured too much, while with the others it nearly felt like one had to extract them words by force. The most fluid interviews were those with people with whom I could establish good levels of mutual understanding, familiarity and agreement based on affinity of characters and worldviews, as scholars too recognise (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011; Schlehe 2008), I see indeed interviews as shared endeavours, results of a process of co-construction where interviewer and interviewee are equally engaged in the building of data. The role of the interviewer is maieutic, helping his/her interlocutor to bring up, give shape and reflect on some facts s/he hasn't thematised to herself/himself yet (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 201).

The interview setting isn't anyway one of symmetry. Inasmuch the researcher is posing questions s/he has a somehow more powerful position than his/her interlocutor (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 201), at the same time this position is vulnerable because s/he is dependant from her/his interlocutors for information. When the latter allows the researcher to access his/her knowledge I believe the reaction should be one of gratitude. Restitution and thanksgiving are consequently very good practices of social science research. In this we can not only see some instrumental end to maintain good social relationships for future research, but also a fundamental instance of reciprocity Mauss (2002 [1924]) and other talked about. For me this was however not directly possible because

of the online format of the interview.The use of more concrete rewards was after all not necessary also because people didn't seem to need any incentive to take part in the interviews (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011) but the validation that was inherent to it. I assume the mentioning of them and the associations in this work could compensate work the same way and count as thanksgiving.

Even with thanksgiving mechanisms research settings are ostensibly never devoid of power differences. For example, in the interview setting it is usually only the researcher posing questions. I hope that still didn't influenced my data over acceptable levels. For instance I see in the fact that people didn't feel constrained to disagree with me during the interview hints of relation as equal as possible. Being aware of this dimension I actively played with it in the interviews. Even though it is advised not to express one's opinion not to engender in the interviewee self-censorship (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011), I sometimes indeed resorted to this technique to elicit reactions and informations. In this procedure I avoided as much as possible to name topics and notions that my interlocutors hadn't mentioned yet, if not to define similar notions they had described but not named. This choice was made to avoid imposing my categories on their speech.

In the mutual endeavour to construct data was of no help my tendency to make quite involute formulations that often weren't immediately clear to the interviewee and forced me to repeat them again. This also depended on the impromptu character many questions had, trying to adapt the original written questions to the present interaction. Sometimes people didn't even understand it was a question but just tough I was expressing my opinion. Other times I already qualified the questions I was going to ask as difficult or strange before even asking them. This might have not been appropriate, since it might have already put my interlocutors in a specific state of mind, engendering expectations towards the questions which might have in turn affected how they replied. Another case happened when I mistakenly gave for granted what my interlocutor meant by good and bad reading. When I got asked back what I meant by that I realised I was overlapping my definitions on those of my interlocutor. I still don't think however my questions generated some relevant observable reactivity in my interview partners. I guess since the interview topics were not considered as particularly sensible everybody felt free to express himself/herself neglecting restrains given from social desirability. I guess this might have also depended from the assumption I as researcher was at least partially sharing with them the passion for writing and would have thus not judged them.

I concluded each interview with the same group of questions asking my interlocutor how s/he defined "writers" and if s/he though to belong to that category. Shortly thereafter everybody took one's leave. Unfortunately I couldn't rely much on post-interview moments. During my degree I

have listened to many professors how chatting with the interviewee with the recorder off gave them often more relevant insight than the actual interview moment. I guess conducting interviews on-line influenced that because it enabled an easier detachment from the interview setting. But I also consider some my too hasty behaviour and other appointments of my interlocutors might have played a role.

Adopting the PC has a medium for the interview had also some other disadvantages. Being an online video-call software the setting where most interviews took place one had to adapt to its affordances and the consequent behaviour rules. Technical problems were however the main issue. Battery running low was for me a specific source of anxieties because it always left me wondering how should I react. Should I interrupt my interlocutor's words flow to announce it or should I just disappear from the screen in order not to make him/her lose her/his train of thoughts even if might be perceived as rude? I answered this question extemporarily and had different reactions: some people just went on speaking while others stopped, no matter what I chose to do. One day an interview was also forced to end because of technical issues. There were works in the apartment and the power was suddenly shut down disconnecting both my computer and the recorder which was using electricity coming from the socket. Fortunately the recording got saved anyway but I had to apologise for the inconvenience and conclude the interview using the WhatsApp video-chat function. Finally a positive side of Skype recordings to be explored further in the future is how it allows for the researcher to observe himself/herself during the interview allowing him/her to sound out how his/her body language and non-verbal communication influenced the interview and how s/he can improved in this respect.

After each interview I wrote down in my field diary general observations about its unfolding, reporting aspects that might have influenced specific answer, interruptions, reactions and generally considerations about interview settings and my interlocutor's behaviour. Later on I transcribed all interviews. Doing that I tried to be more accurate as possible also noting changing of tones, pauses, velocity of speech and how fast people answered questions. Both transcriptions and the field diaries were later analysed using MAXQDA. I chose this programme because in its trial version it doesn't impose any limitation to the usage of its tools and functions, but it restricts this free access to thirty days. The programme was quite helpful for coding the material but it had a fundamental shortcoming for me, that is, I could not connect codes through logical relationships. I think thus in the future I would rather use other programmes for the analysis of qualitative data. The procedure I adopted for coding was close to Grounded Theory as it has been proposed from Strauss & Corbin (1996). I approached each text through open coding coding fragments that appeared as relevant (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011). Some of those codes where thought on the moment, others

where the result of my reflections after the months of research. This wasn't thus open coding in the strict sense but an adaptation to my research interest since my goal wasn't totally explorative. As phenomena for the axial coding I indeed chose those that represented the thematic areas I tried to deepen and test in the interviews. I followed a constant pendular movement between open and axial coding constantly connecting the subcodes to the codes they were categories of (Strauss & Corbin 1996).

To conclude I would like to state how the associations represented a space where I too could feel at home. I happened to casually write short stories in my free time in the past and it was stimulating to interact with people not only committed to their writings but also to create a nice environment. Trapez and Uni-Verse were nice places not only for researcher but also to pursue one's serious leisure. I don't know how and if my personal career with writing will evolve in the future, but I know I can always go back to those places to find good feedbacks and good mood.

# 3.    Writings About Writing

Few researches can pretend to ground their insights on brand new terrains. The one you are reading doesn't belong to that group. Even if still representing a minor investigative direction within the wide spectrum of anthropology solid foundations have as a matter of fact already been laid for the anthropological investigation of literature. It follows that to properly frame my contribution to this field it would first be necessary to quickly sum up what has been done so far in this area of study. Most of all I will focus in this brief overview on researchers adopting an ethnographic perspective. This choice mainly depends from what I believe to be anthropology and the kind of perspective it would most profitably assume on the matter. What is actually however this matter I am writing about? Topic of the following paragraph is precisely the elucidation of what is literature and how it could be framed within anthropological scholarship.

## 3.1.  Defining Literature

What is literature? Can this really be a topic for anthropological investigation?

Answering those questions is not easy, but necessary, given that for communication's sake people need to agree on a shared meaning for the words they use and talk about. And the meaning of literature seems to be a quite specific one. People living in North Atlantic contexts are used to define by that a specific group of written texts mainly coming from individual authors and recognised as valuable for the artistry involved in its production, making its components stand out against less artistically fortunate literary pieces. How all those texts and their authors conjure up to form a canon, how new members are admitted inside it -what becomes literature?- and how this notion has been later extended to name similar phenomena, like the sources used in academic texts, are not immediate matter of reflections here. What should immediately capture the anthropologist's eye is indeed the geographic delimitation of such notion. Using the term literature we should be aware that we are referring to a circumscribed understanding of texts that is historically contextual and value-laden (Barber 2007; Brandel 2020a), with authors that are likely associated with specific values and roles (Taylor 2013). This is what I would call the narrow understanding of literature.

Cultural relativist concerns make this definition with all its specificities thus hardly extensible to other contexts, like it would likely be inappropriate to use the notions of "mana" or "trickster" to describe boss-employee relations or urban legends in a big European city. Both those two notions represent indeed specific local manifestations of what anthropologists have studied in relation to more abstract concepts, that is power relations or mythology and religion. So, just like the study of mana is regarded as a branch of the study of power, the focus on literature in its narrow sense has to

be inserted in a broader definition of literature. This broad definition should keep together any artistic usage of words to compose and perform texts irrelevant of the medium trough which this is accomplished.

Historically anthropological analysis of literature should be inserted in this broader frame. Precisely this understanding allows for the definition as literature of oral texts that have long been anthropologists' favoured investigation topic. The beginnings of this analytical direction can be traced back to the inception of anthropology as science. The attempt of Boas and his disciples at saving native American oral texts in the midst of the advancing USA expansion towards west by fixing them on paper and recordings can indeed be recognised as the foundational moment of the anthropological interest for literature (Barber 2007). I suppose the long-lasting successive framing of anthropology as the study of people without writing might have prevented for a long part of the discipline's history the engagement with written material. This notwithstanding there were foundational works produced in this context and that still have powerful analytical value like the works of Karin Barber (2007), Jack Goody (1981; 1986; 2010) and Lévi-Strauss (2017 [1978]).

Is this broad understanding the befitting analytical distance from which to gaze at literature? I would suggest we should take a further step back and consider the study of literature, both broad and narrow, as a specification of the study of texts. Ever since Geertz (1973) *Interpretation of Culture* this word found a widespread resonance within anthropology. I would however leave out of this umbrella category all those studies cloaked in a semiotic coat and arguing for a general extension of the notion of text caused by "man [being] an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (Geertz 1973:5) and making thus everything subject to interpretation. I would instead limit the definition to those investigations facing texts as objects, physical or not, artistic products or not, understandable as "configuration[s] of signs that [are] coherently interpretable by some community of users" (Hanks 1989: 95) following the principles of coherence and meaningfulness. A major turning point in the history of this analytical direction can be identified in the publication of *Writing Cultures* (Clifford & Marcus 1986). Following the critique to what has been the usual way of composing ethnographies and its implications many anthropologists were brought to reflect actively on texts. The majority of those focussed on their own writings (Wiles 2018), but there were also inputs to approach texts in a new light. Approximately the last thirty years saw thus the emergence of scholars investigating the dimension of reading (Boyarin 1993; Long 2003; Reed 2002; 2004; 2018; Rehberg Sedos & Fuller 2013; Driscoll 2014; Helgason & al. 2014; Rosen 2019), writing (Barton & Papen 2010), storytelling (Maggio 2014; Vendel 2018; Lane 2019; Lazzarotti 2020), literacy (Goody 1981; Street 1997). Those different analytical directions didn't only share a common origin but also the same understanding that texts hadn't to be studied

per se but in relation to the social fields where those are produced, used or enjoyed. The specificity of the anthropological endeavour of understanding texts precisely relies on extending from the objects themselves to consider them in the wider social and cultural settings they are inserted into.

## 3.2. The Story so Far

Defined what we mean when we talk about literature and how to frame it in relation to anthropological scholarships, the following lines will only overview texts dealing with the narrow understanding of literature. Wiles (2018) and Brandel (2020a) already attempted to sketch an overview of this anthropological engagement. The latter proposed to divide this endeavour into three different approaches: 1) authors who chose to focus their inquiries on literature; 2) the consideration of the anthropologists, especially the ethnographer, as a writer and the product of her/ his work as a piece of literature; 3) literature as a companion along the academic and life trajectory of anthropologists, many of which composed or enjoyed literature throughout their life experiences. The second approach mainly refers to scholars contributing to the Writing Culture debate. Blending together this second and third direction there are authors that attempted literary experimentation of various kind for their ethnographic and scholarly work. Some of those seemed to follow Gupta & Ferguson (1997) invitation asking why "[i]f the call to "decolonise" anthropology is to be taken seriously […] should we not juxtapose "native" representations of "themselves" [that is their writings] and ethnographies written by those serving the colonial government?" (Gupta & Ferguson 1997:31). They consequently juxtaposed their writing with those of their research partners or other writings coming from the field (Herzfeld 1997; Ghodsee 2011) while others read their ethnographic data and social research through the oeuvre of well-known writers (Rapport 1994) or reflected on literature as a guide for ethnographic writing and as a striving for mixture and mutual exchange between literature and anthropology (Narayan 2012; McLean & Pandian 2017).

Wiles (2018) compartmentalisation of the anthropological undertaking with literature is similar to Brandel's (2020a) one. She sees in those different approaches three branches originating from the same stem. However she substitute anthropologists' own relation with literature with the array of authors that tried to look at text as sources for ethnographic material, inferring from those insights about the social setting where they were produced. The basic idea behind this approach is that "'[f]iction [is] rooted in historically and culturally specific contexts [and] can provide a rich source of information about societies that can or cannot be investigated through traditional ethnographic methods [since] writers of fiction combine keen observations of their society, scholarly research, self-consciousness, and poetics in their constructed interpretations of meaning" (Cohen 2013:3). In

this research direction it is possible to insert the scholarly works of authors such as Handler and Segal (1990), Archetti (1994), Cohen (2013) and Viart (2016).

Of all those different directions I will focus in the following lines only on the one confronting literature ethnographically. This choice is mainly motivated from the consonance of those investigations with the aim of the research strived forth in this thesis. I consider indeed my work to dwell in a narrow perspective of literature, a perspective akin to Wiles (2018) third branch of literary anthropology, that is, studies considering literary texts and practices ethnographically framing them in relation to the people that produce or consume them. Anthropologists very own writing practices have indeed already been subject to wide debate and I doubt this work might add much more on that. I also believe it is time for anthropologists to remove their self-reflexive blinkers to look around at how other people engage with writing. In that we might even be able to gain some insights for our own writing too, like Narayan's (2012) work showed. In doing that I believe it is however fundamental to adopt an ethnographic approach. Studying texts can be fascinating, but those remain mute if there is no human being that let them talk. This person can be the anthropologists, as in the case of Handler and Segal (1990), or their research partners counting them what they see in those lines, what they connect to them, what power they have for their lives, and so on. Obviously one could read Jane Austen trying to answer those same questions but how can we know about the pertinence of our interpretations if there is no one to engage for backtalk? Where should the border between anthropology and literary criticism lie? This approach "has arguably been limited by restrictive disciplinary and epistemological assumptions" (Wiles 2018:282)[8]. I believe the strength of anthropology precisely resides in the interaction with other homo sapiens. This is something we can't renounce in our investigations. It is the relation to the people what might make anthropological analysis of texts stand out against those coming from linguistics or literary studies. Finally Brandel (2020a) observation regarding the companionship of anthropologists and literature mainly appears as an obvious fact of life and as such doesn't seem much analytically productive. The reflections of scholars he inserts in this section might be preferably connected to either the *Writing Cultures* (Clifford & Marcus 1986) debate, or general reflections about literature.

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8     In "Three branches of literary anthropology: Sources, styles, subject matter" Wiles (2018) specifically criticised Cohen's (2013) work for not making clear what brought the majority of the contributors to her volume to focus on a specific kind of text coming from a specific time frame, that is Victorian realist novels. Her point is that fiction remains such even when it depicts realistic scenes and consequently should always be taken with a pinch of salt and the volume doesn't consider the "credibility problems with using fiction as a material for anthropology" (Wiles 2018:284). As Wiles (2018) wrote, thus factual accuracy generally can't be the guiding principle in the anthropological analysis of novels and other texts , since it can't be directly inferred from them.

I will thus start my account from Janice Radway (1984) *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*. Reed (2002; 2004; 2018) recognise in this work the beginning of an ethnographic interest for reading. Coming from literary critique Radway (1984) approaches a group of women from a Pennsylvania town to counter academic assumptions about the quality of romance fiction. Through the acquaintance with a chain bookshop employee famous for her knowledge of the genre, the scholar achieved getting in touch with a group of forty-two women readers and have interviews with them. Her findings show how romance readers engaged genre fiction as a resistance practice to subtract time from their chores as mothers and housewives putting their own personal pleasure centre stage. She also counters the assumption that such book influence women by suggesting them how the world should be, but on the contrary should be based on stereotypes and cliches that actually depict the world as it is for the readers: where women have a position of weakness within a patriarchal society. In their plots romances do not necessarily agree with this state of things however but "examin[e] an all-too-common state of affairs in order to display possible strategies for coping with it" (Radway 1984:75). The fact that strong female protagonist accepts conventional roles as mothers and wives in the end should be considered as a necessity to deal with male dominance. Paradoxically this kind of ending seems precisely to reinforce for readers the desirability of such roles.

Reed (2002; 2004; 2018) recognised in this seminal work the inception of an ethnographic interest for reading and grounded in it his attempt at sketching a possible anthropology of reading. A first and important step in that direction was his investigation of the relations of agency that exist between authors, texts and readers. In a 2004 article he relied on Gell's (1998) notion of agency to investigate how those were formed among Henry Williamson Society members, their favourite author and the author's books. Reed's (2004) conclusions are that texts represent a form of mediated agency that is able to affect the readers through printed paper. The agency of the writers is manifested in this possibility of transporting readers to worlds where they are at her/his mercy and experience emotional states generated from the texts. Enraptured reading should have allowed individuals to see the world through the gaze of the author. Similarly the written lines might be able to bring people to act in the world, in the case of Henry Williamson and hi aficionado this happened trough voyages to books' settings. In this process readers are however never fully passive, just like they are not active: they are constantly acting and acted upon as long as the writer can only influence them in the minute they actively read. I'll explore further this work on chapter six. In the following years Reed kept on working on similar directions within the Henry Williamson Society investigating for instance how reading influenced masculinity gender construction (Reed 2002), how the characters of stories were used to interpret one's own life (Reed 2019) . Especially

secondary characters were those with whom readers felt close and used to interpret their own life experience. Those same characters were target of research in an attempt to define the boundary between their real life counterparts and their fictionalisation. Members of the society approached indeed texts in an investigative effort to find hints of the real life of their author and this extended to minor characters too. In 2011 he also published an ethnography systematising the conclusions of his investigations at the Henry Williamson Society.

Two other fundamental texts in the writing of this thesis were Taylor (2013) investigation of the Romance City Writers and Wulff (2017) analysis of the Irish literary scene. The first author argues that creative writing circles exists as bridges to connect future writers with an industry established around uncertainty and how the stress on notions such as passion and creative work are actually discursive devices used to transform individuals in flexible workers and leave them alone in facing the whole negative effects of the market insecurity and instability. Wulff (2017) on the other hand approaches Irish literature with the question of why Irish writers so good in this craft. Following the notion of "rhythms of writing" she is able to depict an all-round ethnographic illustration of writing in Ireland, from writing schools and the question if writing can be taught, to the relation of writers with the publishing market, agents and colonial history. All those different dimensions indeed enact different "rhythms of writing", for example the pendulum between solitude writing and public appearances, the different stages and directions of a writer's career or how often a person writes and how s/he manages to solve writer's block.

Works confronting literary practice in North Atlantic contexts are of course a still higher number and saw a major increase in recent years. Among the most remarkable there are publications focussing on televised mass reading events (Rehberg Sedos & Fuller 2013), literary prizes and book awards (Squires 2013), the "literary middlebrow" (Driscoll 2014) and literary festivals (Weber 2018; Wiles 2021). Another notable recent work is that of Brandel (2020b) and his attempt at making sense of Berlin as a global city and its attraction of institutions of world literature. Brandel (2020b), which research setting was a poetic workshop, assumed the poetic notion of prosody as describing how ephemerality influences social life in a big city.

Anthropological research on the narrow definition of literature outside North Atlantic contexts in significantly less in number. This is not so surprising if we consider the specificity of this notion which make it hardly extensible to other settings. There are however some important works here too. One of those is Wiles (2015) own research in Myanmar. Conducted shortly after the first local democratic elections after years of military rule, the ethnography aimed at make sense how writers dealt with censorship in former years. As the author states more than producing an ethnography her aim was to write the book about Myanmar literary scene she would have like to read before leaving

home. Furani (2012) and Bush (2017) are two other representative of a research interest for non-North Atlantic literary practices. The first author offered an account on how Palestinian poets transformed their poetry from classical forms to free verse and argued how this poetic shift had to be interpreted in relation to modern forms of power. Classical Arabic poetry was in fact equated with the past while modern poetry embodied the values connected to the future like "liberal freedom, the private self, urbanity, and the visual apprehension of text. Through these re-orientations of the senses and new alignments of space, poetry enable[d] a secularization not just of language, but as a 'mode of existence' (Furani 2012:206), of society in general, and in so doing la[id] the groundwork for a new relationship between truth and power." (Brandel 2020a:7). Bush (2017) focussed on poetry too. His perspective however investigated how poetry could enable the maintenance of intimate relationships within households in Iraqi Kurdistan, where family members expressed different pious and non-pious orientation to Islamic tradition as a consequence of the strong politicisation derived from the conflict between secularist and Islamist parties. Finally the work of Webster (2009) can be understood as positioned at the crossing of North Atlantic context and other settings. Set in the USA his ethnography deals with Navajo (Diné) poetry and poetics. Like Furani (2012) he too investigates the political dimension of poetry as a mode of reflection about the present and future situation of the community the poets belong to. For instance the use of language is recognised from listeners of Navajo English poetry as either the proof of a failed linguistic acquisition or as hint of the loss of authenticity and tradition. On the contrary Navajo poetics should invite the listeners to engage in "really listening" "a utopian task that strives not after complete understanding, but rather a glimpse of what is being said to us" (Brandel 2020a:7). The notion is expressed in the concept of "intimate grammars" that Webster (2009) used as title of his work.

In conclusion I have to admit I am quite impressed on how fast this field of research is growing. Since I started my research and the moment of writing this chapter there were many books and articles published in the general topic of anthropology and literature and I suspect many more will come in the future. If not long ago authors such as Wiles (2018) and Brandel (2020a) affirmed how this research branch was still striving for recognition I believe it is by now widely more accepted. It still remains a minority research direction within anthropology however and the anthropological interest for it is still seen sceptically in certain academic circles (Wiles 2018; Brandel 2020a) At the moment new initiatives let hope for a prolific investigative future. Palgrave series *Studies in Literary Anthropology* edited by Reed-Danahay and Wulff already offers at the moment of writing a quite impressive selection of fourteen titles about this topic, more than the half published after the beginning of 2020. This is surely one of the spots to keep an eye on to see where the anthropolo-

gical interest for literature will go. Along the way I hope someone will someday start a dialogue with what anthropologists outside English speaking academia have written and will write on this topic. The international ideas exchange would indeed only benefit from changing perspectives.

# 4.    Setting the Stage

People do not move in a void. Every action is embedded in specific temporal, spacial and social frames. To comprehend people's behaviours it is thus in the first place necessary to contextualise the main features of the setting where individuals act and how that might influence their actions. For my research partner these surrounding influencing elements seemed mainly identifiable with those proper to late modernity. I will try to show in the next lines what those were   and how they were reflected in my interlocutors' choice to engage a serious leisure (Stebbins 2001) activity. I will also use the notion of late modernity to explain why the idea of validation and its research was one of the main pushes that brought my interlocutors to engage with writing. In the same subchapter I will complete the contextualisation and depiction of my interlocutors' profile by proposing a possible framing of their careers (Goffman 1959; Hannerz 2004) in relation to their writing and their attendance of the associations.

## 4.1.   Late Modernity and Serious Leisure

Liquid modernity (Bauman 2000), second modernity (Beck 2006), reflexive modernity (Beck, Giddens & Lash 1997) and other labels started being coined by the end of the 20th century trying to describe the present historical moment. Even though they all differ from one another in some more or less relevant ways nearly all of them were based on the recognition of the intensification of the processes that have "traditionally" characterised modernity. I chose thus to use the label of *late modernity*, originally proposed from Beck, Giddens & Lash (1997), in the following pages to generally refer to features shared from all those. Especially the hollowing of former social categories for the definition of the self and the cumbersome burden ascribed to the individual for his/her self definition are the key defining elements I ascribe to that label. Processes of denaturalisation and detraditionalisation accompanied by globalisation and changing economies indeed created a situation where "individuals are faced with a major increase of societal uncertainties and lifestyle choices, while lacking the former traditional safety nets" (Vendel 2018:13). The individual is thus confronted with the task of finding a valid definition that would guide her/him through her/his daily interactions. Identity and self-ascriptions are understood like commodities; sorts of dresses individuals can choose, wear, change and exchange at their own will. The pluralisation of identities should have lead individuals to want their singular and unique one, creating a demand readily contrasted with an offer of a series of services and goods that should help individuals sustain their selected ascription (Bauman 2013). Uni-Verse and Trapez exist exactly

because they answer the desire of a group of individuals to form their identity as writers, as I will explain in chapter 5.

At the same time those kind of associations are evidences of what Bauman (2017) termed as the "return to the tribe". The present situation should have sparked a widespread desire to wind back the needles of history leading many individuals to search for smaller communities to fix their social ascription (Bauman 2017). Bauman (2017) has an extremely negative opinion of such phenomenon arguing communities formed that way are marked from moralism and xenophobia, as each "tribe" is constantly in conflict with the others surrounding it. I am honestly a bit sceptical of such gloomy conclusion, but as I will show in chapter 5, I still believe it is true people tend to form their own communities in a time they have the freedom, and the risk, on choosing how to form those.

> "The actual universe is confusing, and some- sometimes painful, and we don't know what is going to happen, (punctuating) but if we guys try the best we can, and we try to stand by each other and help (ascending tone) each other improve, ehmm, (laughing) that's the best we can do". (Marie)

Sticking together helps to find support in other like-minded people both for practical help and self definition as well as life orientation, obtaining from the community the standards and value with which to judge one's life trajectory. What I believe my research partners seemed to fear the most, like probably many other people living in highly industrialised societies grounded on a service-based economy, and tried to contrast through their participation in the associations was social anonymity: to be just another individual in a faceless crowd. The origin of this anonymity is not peculiar to late modernity. Its inception is as a matter of fact to be already found in modern processes of which later modernity should be an hysterisation. Simmel (1995) for instance already talked of the anonymity of the metropolis over a century ago. Here blasé individuals over-exposed to sensorial stimuli end up measuring their surrounding world just with their intellect [Verstand] making all possible phenomena measurable and equivalent to each other. Anonymity should thus be not only motivated from the increase of the people one interacts with on a daily basis, but also from the way that high number of relationships is managed, that, is through intellect and its materialisation in the form of money as universal medium and measure, ultimately producing in the individual a general feeling of indifference towards her/his surroundings.

In order to escape that condition my research partners resorted to "serious leisure". This notion was coined from Stebbins (2001) to describe a specific form of leisure that is more than just uncomplicated rest. It involves a high degree of commitment and it is time and energy consuming, but at the same time also highly rewarding. In this sense it should be halfway between work and

pure casual leisure. Due to the their involvement in the activity and the fatigue connected to it in fact, it should be akin to work, but, actually, this fatigue is not draining but has positive effects on individuals  helping them recharge their energies and find new strength to face their daily lives, being thus actually a form of leisure. Serious leisure is further differentiated from work because the range of activities people can choose for it is much wider than for their jobs, the experiences associated to it are generally evaluated more positively and people face less constrains as on their workplace. Serious leisure also does not offer any serious source of income, disqualifying such activities from the label of "work". This is how the notion is defined from Stebbins (2001):

> "'Serious leisure' [...] is the steady pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or career volunteer activity that captivates its participants with its complexity and many challenges. It is profound, long-lasting, and invariably based on substantial skill, knowledge, or experience, if not on a combination of these three. It also requires perseverance to a greater or lesser degree. In the course of gaining and expressing these acquisitions as well as searching for the special rewards this leisure can offer, amateurs, hobbyists, and volunteers get the sense that they are pursuing a career, not unlike the ones pursued in the more evolved, high-level occupations."
> (Stebbins 2001:54)

People should get themselves involved in activities of serious leisure because those generate for them uncommon rewards in present day society like "fulfilling one's human potential, expressing one's skills and knowledge, having cherished experiences, and developing a valued identity" (Stebbins 2001:54). Many of those rewards were already present in non-late modern societies and given to individuals from activities and social ascriptions different from leisure (Stebbins 2001). When late modernity however established itself hollowing of or changing meaning to former ascriptions, it also created a hegemonic discourse that pushed the individuals to look for happiness, self-satisfaction and the fulfilling of one's human potential. The identified place for that was to some extent the workplace. Works in the tertiary sector of economy should indeed represent for many the place to find satisfaction and personal fulfilment, a notion that is used to keep individuals performative within a liquid job market (Taylor 2017).

The attainment of self-fulfilment in that place however is still a possibility not offered to everybody. Serious leisure represents thus a place where people can obtain important gratifications and social rewards. One of those is exactly the opportunity to meet with people and make new friends, using the common involvement in the same activity as launchpad for future meaningful interactions and to become part of a vast social world, a community of practice[9], revolving around a specific form of

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9    See chapter 5.

serious leisure. A second social rewards is the accomplishment of something meaningful for the individual and the group. Stebbins (2001) makes the example of a concert for music players, or winning an important match for sportspeople, but I argue the publishing of the anthology I'll talk about later in this chapter has precisely the same function of giving people a form of validation. Finally there is a last social reward inherent to the discovery of being helpful and meaningful for someone else, caused from the contribution put into play for the maintenance of the collectivity (Stebbins 2001). The notion of validation Anmol told me about, and that I'll expose in the next section, seems to subsume together all those benefits.

Serious leisure has however not just benefits but costs too. Very often those are the same for all those engaging wit the same serious leisure activity (Stebbins 2002). Those usually however tend to emerge on the long run. When people are involved in the same activity for a long time span it is often the case that at a certain point some conflicts might arise with other members of the group, or there could be small sets of displeasures that partially spoil the possible benefits, also giving the individual a partial sense of disenchantment towards her/his passion (Stebbins 2001). After the initial phase of acquaintance with the serious leisure activity people should become more conscious of the various pro and contra entailed in that specific activity (Stebbins 2001). Costs however still do not prevent people from holding on to serious leisure. This happens because the rewards are still present and still more powerful than any negative effect they could experience (Stebbins 2011).

People are thus brought to serious leisure activities in order to contrast the anonymity and lack of point of reference caused from late modern living conditions, looking for a community of practice on which ground their values and ontologies. Indeed, as Stebbins (2001) argues, serious leisure can offer to its practitioners a communitarian belonging that would help them to mould their identities, since exactly the feeling of shared belonging and connection to other individuals is one of the biggest rewards of serious leisure. "[E]very serious leisure activity offers a major lifestyle and identity for its enthusiasts" (Stebbins 2001:56). This assumption is the point I will try to make in chapter 5. In that section serious leisure proves to be an alternative to the disappearance in late modernity of former social categories used from individuals to orient their lives and identities. Serious leisure works as a technology of the imagination (Sneath, Holbraad & Pedersen 2009). Of course there might be different such technologies at work simultaneously. A person might be a boxer, a chess player and violinist and still don't perceive her/his self and identity as fractured. On the contrary the complexification of society has implied every individual assumes a polyphony of different ascriptions, endorsing an identity as assemblage of different ascriptions to different statuses and activities, serious leisure or not, and that is shaped to perfectly fit him/her in a way no

other individual could claim to occupy the same position in society (Beck, Giddens & Lash 1997; Bauman 2000; Vendel 2018).

Finally, there is one point on which I disagree with Stebbins (2001). He stated in fact how difficult it was to extend his conclusions to liberal arts hobbies. In his vision, since those are mainly brought forth in solitude, they do not offer the possibility of social rewards but marginally. Writing as a form of serious leisure would thus be an evidence of the intimist involution of late modern selves derived from the fragmentation of social life and the impossibility to reach universally valid understandings of the world but only personal and individual ones (Bauman 2013). Trapez and Uni-Verse prove this claim wrong. Just like Wulff (2017) outlined the existence of a pendulum between solitude and social occasions as a central rhythm of writing, so my associations stood to represent its social side from which people could obtain plenty of social rewards. This does not mean anyway that all of the people who enjoy writing ends up in associations of any kind. It is however reasonably arguable that most writing aficionados should be likely to look for some platform of exchange in the long run, because here they can exactly obtain a form of validation from engaging that specific activity; that is a sense of self-worth, of belonging and of lacking anonymity, as explained below. I have however to recognise here one of the possible limits of my thesis motivated from interacting primarily with "regular" members of the associations. Ethnographic research after all was not originally meant to produce generalisable data, but describe a specific setting, and those reflections march with the context I have observed. It is furthermore arguable if more fleeting writing experiences should be regarded as serious or casual leisure.

Disagreeing about the isolation of writers I also disagree with Rampley, Reynolds & Cordingley (2019), the only text that to my knowledge considered writing under a serious leisure perspective. The authors concluded their work criticising the volatile nature of one's definition as writer and the isolation it should cause to the people involved with it as serious leisure. It appears however at least contradictory to adopt a Facebook group joining together amateur writers to recruit people for interviews, knowing social networks are places where people can construct meaningful ties and communities, and snow-ball sampling, a method based on the mutual acquaintance of the interviewees, and to argue for an isolation of writers. Opposite to their conclusion writing should be maybe regarded even as one of the strongest forms of serious leisure. Indeed here people have the added benefit to adopt storytelling to construct their self and their identities, choosing the way they would like to be seen from others (Freeman 2015; Vendel 2018; Lane 2019), their Goffmanian (1990 [1956]) "face" we could say. And this way they could maybe even give space to those sides of themselves that would be judged as socially unacceptable in an everyday setting (Rampley, Reynolds & Cordingley 2019), Through the consequent participation in activities of serious leisure,

like the ones staged from my associations, it is also furthermore possible for individuals to translate those narratives from an individual to a shared dimension making them the foundation of the community (Vendel 2018) as it will be evident in chapter 5.

Texts, just like any other object, are thus embedded in webs of relations that should make us anthropologists very careful with claims about social isolation of people engaging them. A relation with an object after all is always a relation of some kind and it can be very meaningful for the individuals involved in it, as Reed (2004) showed for the members of the Henry Williamson Society. Moreover, as anthropologists we shouldn't limit our focus to that singular connection of a person and a group of written words but expand it to consider the layered webs of relations in which texts are embedded. Rosen (2019) defined this as "reading nearby—that is, to take literate activity as a point of entry rather than as an object or unit of analysis" (Rosen 2019:73), to depart from the text to abstract meaningful information about its surrounding social world. Focussing on writing becomes thus a foothold to start exploring all the webs of relations in which the practice of writing was embedded in 2020 Vienna, opening up a window to investigate a specific configuration of late modernity. Anthropological studies sounding out the social life of texts as a matter of fact should not limit their focus to texts themselves but consider how those extend outside their medium influencing and being influenced from their surrounding social environment. In this sense the assumption that writing is a solitary activity is one more time unsustainable as long as communities and societies coagulate around the activities of writing and reading and texts and actions connected to them are laden with social meanings and values.

Focussing on serious leisure I finally also depart from previous anthropological scholarship on literature. Most of those was in fact oriented towards writing as an activity made from professionals, even when considering supposedly non-professional environments. Taylor (2017) investigation of the City Romance Writers was indeed aiming at proving how people were created and socialised as creative workers for the creative industry, while in Wulff's (2017) ethnography there was only one chapter about creative writing workshops, and here too mainly seen from the perspective of the teachers and the question whether writing could be taught or not.

Most of my interlocutors on the contrary identified writing as just a form of leisure, even if a very important one for their self-esteem and self-definition. A sign of that was that many of them wrote just when they felt an inspiration, and as soon as that was gone they could just put the pen down. A lack of continuity was also stressed for many works that were brought for feedback but never really became anything since the author stopped working on those thereafter, even though this seemed mainly to be valid for smaller projects, while bigger projects tended to be further exposed to reworking even after feedback sessions.

"When I write, I write only in the moment I know it goes and now it works good. For this reason, when I notice I'm not inspired or it doesn't work, than I very often just don't write, because I too would not like what I wrote, I just don't write" (Charlotte, my translation[10])

Here we can notice a difference with Wulff's (2017) Irish writers who stated how they spent every day a part of their day sitting at the table writing just to let it flow and possibly avoid writer's block. Most of my research partners wrote occasionally and some had a very strong confidence writer's blocks were just fleeting and they would have come back writing sooner or later.

"And- (faster) I think for me, it's, it's **important** to let it go, # because I think if it's really important it'll **come back** to you. (R: mm) And- so sort of trying to keep it caged in and be like "No! (fast) I have to write even though right now I don't feel like writing **anything**, and I **hate it**". I don't think that's a good approach. I mean ## (R: ok) Yeah, at least for me." (Marie)

Exactly the freedom to withdraw one's participation to the activity is what I think might mark writing as serious leisure for my participants. Work and university obligations among others all affected the perseverance in this activity. Of course there were people who had different opinions. Stefan for instance was very explicit in stating writing was by no mean a form of hobby for him, exactly because he could not quit it. Writing was understood from him as a basic need, like eating or sleeping, which he could renounce for a more or less long amount of time but not for ever. And even in that time span the quality of his life would have worsened. In this aspect of necessity we can recognise aspects of compulsion and textual agency that will be topics of chapter six. Here we can notice how writing in his understanding didn't fit with work either. Art was the word he used to describe it. This is a quite slippery category because it doesn't really fit in Stebbins (2001) formulation of serious leisure. In Stebbins' (2001) frame art could be both work and leisure according to the monetary retribution one obtains from it, but also the amount of pleasure and satisfaction involved in creation. Here we see a major blind spot of serious leisure formulation: it's incapacity to make sense of situations blurring the boundaries of work and leisure and stressing the dimension of work instead of that of leisure.

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10  "wenn ich schreibe, dann schreibe nur dann, wenn ich weiß, jetzt geht's, und jetzt funktioniert's auch gut und jetzt wird es auch gut (Pause) Deswegen, wenn ich merke, ich bin nicht inspiriert oder es funktioniert nicht, (Pause) dann schreib ich auch meistens nicht, weil dann mag ich auch nicht selber, was ich geschrieben hab (Pause) ehmmm, und dann schreibe ich einfach nicht." (Charlotte)

## 4.2. Validation and Career

As shown in the previous section living in a later modern society should imply people deal with a feeling of anonymity that marks their daily lives. Late modernity should have given to individuals a widespread sense of uncertainty which clothed their identities and self-definitions too. This form of insecurity might get expressed in the feeling of not being fully appreciated or understood from the people making up one's immediate social surrounding, like if a part of one's inner self, its true core, remained somehow concealed. In order to counter those sensations people might resort to serious leisure activities. Here they can finally gain validation.

"when I think about [asking someone if s/he is a writer] now. (louder) I think that's also like (pause) a way (punctuating) to get like **validation** and feel validated, right? Because everything else, let's say- any of the stereotypical jobs, let's say, (listing voice) **doctor,** lawyer (short pause) they're like very specific things that you're doing (pause) and you're getting validated from them- (listing voice) whether society, or money, or (pause) whatever it is, right? Differences. (pause) [...] if you grow up like in a very rigid like schooling system, or each one around you understands (fading) that, and you like go across the water or whatever you do, not just writing (pause) ehmm, (punctuating) and you [are] kind of the only one out, and then suddenly you find something that kind of (pause) (louder) **makes you** feel understood and validates you, [you] kind of like (pause) (slower) embrace it with a lot more fervour (pause) and it's also like (pause) "Oh! This like makes me feel like I belong, like this makes me feel validated (pause) or whatever" (pause) you kind of have your own tribe- (louder) as with anything- again, (faster) we're talking about writing, but this (punctuating) goes **across** the border for **everything** comparable. **So I think** it's a way also of like (pause) being validated." (Anmol)

Validation means in the first place that people obtain recognition from others for their efforts in a specific activity. It implies furthermore that they are legitimised as individuals, as not being the umpteenth member of a crowd, but subjects with unique characteristics esteemed and considered special and valuable from others. In the moment the fatigue invested in a specific activity is recognised to a person so to is recognised his/her identity as practitioner of that field with a consequent increase of the feeling of individual self-worth this activity is associated to. Legitimation might be a cognate word, but the two notions are not identical. It is not in fact just the empowerment to exercise a specific activity that the notion of validation stresses, but the psychological benefits derived from it and the feeling of putting one's human capital at work and

seeing it bear fruits and being recognised: it's the confirmation of the identity one has chosen for herself/himself.

This need of validation is especially true for people engaging with writing as serious leisure. Rampley, Reynolds & Cordingley (2019) already noted how the identity as writer is particularly vulnerable because primarily dependent upon others' individual judgement for its confirmation and the possibility those might not recognise it as legitimate. To counter that the belonging to a community of like-minded peers as it is encouraged form late modern settings establishes a virtuous circle of mutual recognition facilitating the attainment of validation. Being validated within Trapez and Uni-Verse exactly means that one's identity as writer is recognised as the proper way to define oneself. The associations became this way the cardinal points offering orientation to my interlocutors in their everyday life exactly because they offered them the validation it was impossible for them to get elsewhere in their daily routines.

Serious leisure represents indeed one of the most appropriate places to find validation. As Stebbins (2001) noted one of the social rewards people can enjoy here is exactly the possibility to see confirmed by others the identity and self-definition people have arbitrarily chosen for themselves. In chapter 5 I'll show how this identity is also exactly constructed through the participation at the associations' activities.

For the attainment of validation it is thus necessary the active engagement of other individuals. Writing alone is also not enough for it. As much as it can offer a more or less stronger therapeutic and cathartic effect for those involved in it (see chapter 6), there is still the need for other people to see oneself recognised. Communities contrast the feeling of uncertainty and isolation that are proper to late modern settings following the atomisation, individualisation and personalisation of social life[11].

> "It sounds a bit strange, but I just keep on making the same experience even after so much time, that when I am by one of the two associations I feel like I am totally myself and I don't have to hide myself, and the people just understand me, because they share this passion for writing, and many years I did it alone and I didn't have any kind of exchange, because I didn't know anybody who [wrote] too, or that looked for an exchange about it. And it is a very strange feeling when people think they have to hide something, or that they are alone, and they are the only strange people that write stories, or that talk to themselves and invent strange worlds. And suddenly you have this "ahah!" moment when you realise "Oh! There are other nutties, still others". And yes, this is a bit like coming home." (Charlotte, my translation[12])

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11  See previous section.

12  "Es klingt ein bisschen komisch, aber ich hab schon (Long Pause) immer wieder (Pause) auch nach so lange Zeit (faster) jetzt (Pause) die Erfahrung mache ich immer wieder (Long Pause), ehmm, dass ich (Pause) wenn ich bei

The degree of validation one could get indeed changes depending on who is offering it. The most powerful one is probably that given from loved ones. Other members engaging the same serious leisure activity and regarded as esteemed peers can also offer a quite powerful one too, not only because they are cherished, and very often friends, but also because they can truly appreciate the depth and width of the effort involved in creating that specific piece of writing. In this sense relying on a community of practice is a fundamental facilitator and assurance of validation.

A key element holding together the community of practice is the fact that everybody feels s/he and his/her work is taken seriously. Seriousness implied for my interlocutors to receive feedbacks that were honest and if possible neutral. Feeling someone else was judging one's work superficially or carelessly implied for the individual that the opinion of the judging person had less value because of the scarce effort put in the evaluation. Consequently praises coming from that source did not really satisfy one's hunger for validation because they were not engaging one's work with the right disposition: somehow they were underplaying the writer's effort with a direct effect on his/her self-perception. Seriousness means indeed to accept and sustain the definition a person has chosen for herself/himself and that is enacted and represented in his/her work. Finding a place to be taken seriously, where one's self and identity of which the text were imbued with was taken as the valid ascription to define oneself was thus fundamental for my research partners. For many that was precisely the reason that persuaded them to attend the meetings.

"[my first time] I sent innn three texts, three poems anonymously, soo no one knew that it was me # who sent in those texts. And they were the last texts at the meeting, annd, ehmm, (slow) I just remember how (listing voice) everyone was really interested and wanted to know who was anonymous, annd, ehmm, they said very interesting things about my text, and, # I just remember howw, ehmm, [a member] noticed something about my poems that I did intentionally (faster) and I really wanted to know if readers might see what I did there. Annd once he saw that, and (listing voice) he said that it was very well done and very clever, something like that, I said that I'm anonymous [both laugh], (smiling) annd, and they were really surprised, and said it was the first time that someone

einem beiden Vereinen bin, (Pause) ist das Gefühl, hier bin ich total bei mir und ich muss und ich muss überhaupt nicht (Pause) mich verstellen, und die Leute (langsamer) verstehen mich einfach, weil, weil diese, diese Leidenschaft des Schreibens teilen (Pause) und (Pause) viele Jahre war ich immer allein damit, (schneller) und hatte keinen Austausch darüber, weil ich niemand gekannt hab (Pause) ehmm, der das auch gemacht hat, oder der diesen einen Austausch gesucht hätte (Long Pause) Undd, das ist irgendwie ein so komisches Gefühl, wenn man irgendwie denkt, man muss das verstecken, oderr (Pause) man ist damit allein, (kurze Pause) und ist der einzige merkwürdige Mensch, der irgendwie so Geschichten schreibt, ehm, oder mit sich selber (Pause) redet und sich irgendwelche Welten, ehmmm, erspinnt. Und dannn hat man plötzlich (Pause) diesen „ahah"-Moment, wo man darauf kommt (lächelnd) „Oh! (Kurze Pause) Es gibt noch solche Spinner, noch andere" [C lacht, R lächelt] Undd, ja, das ist irgendwie, irgendwie echt ein bisschen wie nach Hause kommen." (Charlotte)

kind of outed themselves as anonymous […] I sent in something immediately, because I just really wanted to know, what it's like to get feedbaack- […] Iii # didn't just want to join, because I # (faster) like stories and reading and everything, but also to get feedback on my stuff" (Claudia)

In this excerpt from Claudia's interview it is possible to notice how she precisely tested the seriousness of Uni-Verse before joining in, because she wanted to understand if that was the right place for her. If this setting had turned out not to be of her liking it is likely she would have opted out attendance. Very similar stories were counted me in other interviews. Marie for instance told me how she was a bit sceptical at first about the actual possibilities for improvement this kind of associations might have offered her, and it was only when she finally was made go there that the quality of comments impressed her and made her want to share her texts. Again we see here how serious feedback is what convince people to return to the associations. It is the serious aspect of serious leisure at work. Just like Stefan meant writing to be an art, so other interlocutors recognised in their work fundamental features of craft and fatigue that required proper peers to be shared with, peers that shared their same seriousness in engaging such activity and could thus value them appropriately. Being a fellow writer within the associations indeed implied the mastery of a set of skills the allowed for a better appreciation and esteem of other people works making her/his judgement more grounded and so more validatory. Validation is thus possible only in the moment when people see their selected identity and self-definition taken seriously.

But validation wasn't only obtainable in the associations' setting and people were actively looking for it in places different from Trapez and Uni-Verse too. For example Stefan, and I assume other people too, had a blog[13] where he posted all his short stories and poems, and even though he would disagree, I assume this was a way to see his effort recognised from others. I also played my part in offering this validation. Being asked for an interview concerning one's passion can be as a matter of fact considered as a form of validation, where people are engaged seriously on the basis of their passion. I assume this is one of the reasons there were so many people willing to engage in it and everybody was so much excited when I announced them I was conducting research about their associations. The most vivid example of alternative forms of validation was anyway given me from Marie. I remember as I was interviewing here how she stopped counting the story of her relationship with writing to look for a tin candy box she won in her first literary contest. Later on she would get stored there all other relevant prizes and literary accomplishments gathered over the years. When she presented it to me it was stuffed to the brim and almost impossible to close any more. Prizes and awards are an excellent examples of validatory objects. They give their winner a

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13  https://seitzgeschichten.com  (last checked: 11/02/2021)

tangible sign of validation; the opportunity to be shown to others and say "Look! I'm a writer!". In this sense getting published by a major editor was maybe the strongest and most evident form of validation my research partners could get. Indeed, "[i]t goes without saying that breaking through is regarded as desirable, and when it happens it is experienced as a major confidence booster and confirmation of the quality of one's work" (Wulff 2017:19).

Anthologies exactly accomplish this same goal within the associations. They suck in the time and the energies of the members, especially committee ones, which engage on a colossal effort to let those see the light, a gigantic effort precisely motivated from the final validation people could get. Throughout my summer and early autumn months of fieldwork the anthology was a steady topic of discussion at Uni-Verse with constant updates about the progress of works. Finally by early November the day came when it could be officially presented to the public. Unfortunately, because of the health situation of Austria at that time the event could only take place in an on-line form. This notwithstanding the association achieved gathering a quite impressive amount of spectators and even organise two live music performances. Focus of all the event were some contributors to the book that were invited to read their texts. After each lecture the audience was dragged in by asking writers all possible questions ranging from concrete feature of the text, to general questions about writing to other more trivial ones, like opinions about fantasy video-games or travelling in the USA. In this process to the writers were granted some 15 minutes of fame; that is people addressing them on the basis of one of their literary accomplishments.

> "[L]ike, the first time that I heard about [the anthology] (fast) from the Aberdeen creative writing society I was like (louder) "Whaaat? (punctuating) You get authors together and y*ou have your own* thing, you publish it? And they're published? Wheee"[M laughs]. It's just- yeah, it's just a really cool opportunity, to get people excited about writing and tooo, ehmm, show them- (louder) again, their words matter and they can be published somewhere" (Marie)

When I concluded my fieldwork Trapez project for publication was still in progress. The original plan had a series of delays due to the pandemic situation. The final publication date by the time of writing was planned for January 2021. This notwithstanding I assume the presentation would look similar to that staged from Uni-Verse, as it was already the case with former anthologies of both associations.

Anthologies are also relevant because through them, through the individual participation in their making or featuring in them, it was possible for the people to state their belonging to the community. I will keep for the next chapter the description of how the groups were actively formed

and the importance they had for the life of their members. The participation in the production of the anthology can anyway already be seen as a signifier of one's engagement with the community, showing this was more than just a place for fun and leisure but somewhere one got values and meanings to frame one's life experience. This willingness to actively become part of the group and engage in its activities is precisely motivated from the validation individuals could get from there.

Validation was the propulsive force moving people to engage with the anthologies. Adopting a perspective that equals a writer's career with his/her publications the anthology had the added value of representing an initial step, a starting point to collect experiences and publications before the "big leap" and breakthrough with a big publishing house. Most of my interlocutors however negated this kind of interpretation. The publication of the anthology was seen mainly as an end in itself. The publishing market was indeed considered as a way too big and competitive world for them to just enter it and make themselves a name with the anthologies. The majority of the possible readers were at the end of the day identified in relatives, friends and friends of those belonging to the first two categories. I don't reject the possibility, just like my research partners did, that somehow someday this experience would have turned out to be their launching pad for the publishing world, but due to the way that was structured by the time of research it was rather unlikely. The interest seemed to be much more short-sighted and focussed on obtaining a form of recognition here and now.

This is not to say people didn't have a career with writing at all. As Stebbins (2001) noted while involved in activities of serious leisure a person gets the sense s/he is pursuing a career of some kind. This kind of career might be identified as a "moral career", as Goffman (1959) would have defined that, that is, the transformations over time of an individual's self in its different definitions and perceptions as seen from the individual and the people surrounding her/him. Similarly Hannerz (2004) too offered a notion of career that might be applied to those pursued within serious leisure activities.

"A career, as I use the notion here, is a path through life; but I do not assume that it can be entirely planned or predicted or that it always moves in some sense upward. It involves intentions as well as contingencies. We may be inclined to associate the idea of career mostly with working life, but the concept can be extended to other domains of life, as well, such as domesticity: being single, teaming up with a partner or a succession of them, rearing children, perhaps being single again. And careers in different domains have a way of becoming entangled with one another. One fact, however, is basic to a concept of career: it entails passages, shift s, changes, discontinuities, phases." (Hannerz 2004:72)

Both Hannerz (2004) and Goffman (1959) ideas offer the advantage of not presenting a teleology: a career is a sequence of steps embedded in time but doesn't have a final destination, it follows the growth of an individual's life path in a specific area. It is thus possible to apply the notion of career to describe the different steps marking the relationship of my research partners with writing. Sociographically and demographically speaking all my interlocutors careers stems from the same source. They all had indeed a quite similar profile before even beginning their careers. Not only they were all similarly belonging to the middle class and formed a local and translocal intelligentsia, formed from a relevant amount of people coming to Austria from other countries, mainly English speaking ones but not exclusively, with academic degrees comparably higher than the average of their equals in age, even though those were still being pursued, but they were also undergoing through approximately the same life phase: that of emerging adulthood. This specific time frame of an individual's life was defined from Arnett (2000) as "a period that is in some ways adolescence and in some ways young adulthood yet not strictly either one, a period in which adult commitments and responsibilities are delayed while the role experimentation that began in adolescence continues and in fact intensifies" (Arnett 2000: 470). Getting involved in serious leisure is precisely part and parcel of the experimentation emerging adulthood offers to people in highly industrialised societies (Arnett 2000). In this life phase people can in fact experiment with their identities and life choices trying to figure out who they would like to be in the future and moulding a personal identity based on that (Arnett 2000). The story of the way Philipp got in touch with Uni-Verse exemplifies the way in which emerging adulthood represented a fundamental step in letting people approach the associations and creative writing became an activity defining one's identity.

"Ehmm, I think I was always interested in, ehmm, telling stories, ehmm, entertaining people, ehmm. ## I think foor- # I think I remember back in elementary school, we had like lot of assignments to do creative writing, and I always had a lot of fun doing that, ehmm. But then, when I was like a teenager, eh, #, ehmm, I had few of those assignments, aand I didn't do as much writing any more. Ehmm, but then when Iii- I always knew I wanted to write. I always knew I wanted to do it like # professionally. ## But I kinda stop just doing it. Ehmm, until at some point, ehmm, I was # at the English department, and I was just sitting outside, ehm, in like this little green area, I was reading, ehmm, a book # for one of my literature seminars- I think I was reading a "Midsummer night's dream" and, ehmm, Marie, the former president of Uni-Verse, ehmm, (smiling) came up to me and asked me "ohh, I see you reading something. Do you also like to write?" [R & P laugh hard] Aaand, I was kind of awaare that this- the Uni-Verse # society already existed, (faster) I've seen poster for it, but I was like, too nervous to go there about myself. But then there was this, ehmm, ## poetry picnic, just, just happening right over

there, soo. (Listing voice) I joined, I had a lot of fun, aand, that was about three years ago and since then I, ehmm, have gotten back into writing # somewhat regularly." (Philipp)

Marie's addressing was the fuse which brought Philipp back to writing: it re-awoke him to a part of himself he had forgotten or kept aside under other interests. For this reason I have called "re-awokens" the people who shared a similar story to that of Philipp among my interlocutors. In their narratives the passion and enjoyment for creative writing was something that characterised them during primary schools. Growing up however they gave up this activity following school's orientation to train pupils in other kind of writings less concerned with self-expression. In a later life stage, everyone for a different reason, they re-discover that forgotten passion, an epiphany described as a feeling of coming back to one's real self. Interestingly this moment of revelation tended to happen in the first university years. This perfectly matches with the idea of research of self and experimentation Arnett (2000) associated with emerging adulthood. It is likely that the approach to the group happened initially because of the experimentation involved in this life phase and it settled once people felt a form of validation in the activity. This might also help explain the demographic composition of the associations mainly featuring people in their twenties. In other life phases the time that can get devoted to serious leisure and other volitional activities is significantly less (Arnett 2000).

The second possible career trajectory is that of the "endurers". Those are the ones that never stopped writing all along their school career. Exactly for that reason the contact with the association represented for them a very powerful enlightenment, maybe even stronger than for the "re-awokens". They were indeed used to a specific habitus connected to writing and were convinced this was primarily possible in the solitude of their small bedrooms, as Charlotte said [in [ihren] kleinen Zimmerchen]. Understanding that it might be an activity shared with others is a revelation that positively shook most of them transforming the way they looked at writing.

> "[My friend] was like "Oh! I wanna go, wanna go, wanna go, do you wanna come with me?" and I was like "Mm, nooo, (laughing) not for me". And she kept going on about it, and then at some point I was (monotone) "Ok, fine, I guess. Let- let's go". Ehmm, I wasn't- I really wasn't into it, I was like, (sight) (distressed) "Meh, for heer I guess I'll try". ## And then we went there, ## and I was blown away- I- I just went into it, (listing voice) and there were so many people, and they were all into literature, they were **discussing** it **honestly**, and t- that with **so much passion,** and I was like (amazed) "Oh god! (smiling) There are other people like that out there" (Marie)

I believe it is possible to analyse the relation my research partners had with writing using Gergen (1994) scheme for the study of autobiographic narratives. In the graphic is represented the evolution of the relation of the protagonist with his/her object of desire. One axis should represent the progress of time while the other the intensity of the conjunction with the object of desire. Following this formulation I have displayed on the x-axis the time of my interlocutors lifespan so far, while on the y-axis is represented their proximity to their object of desire, that is the possibility to write. The results show two different trajectories for the "re-awokens" and the "endurers".
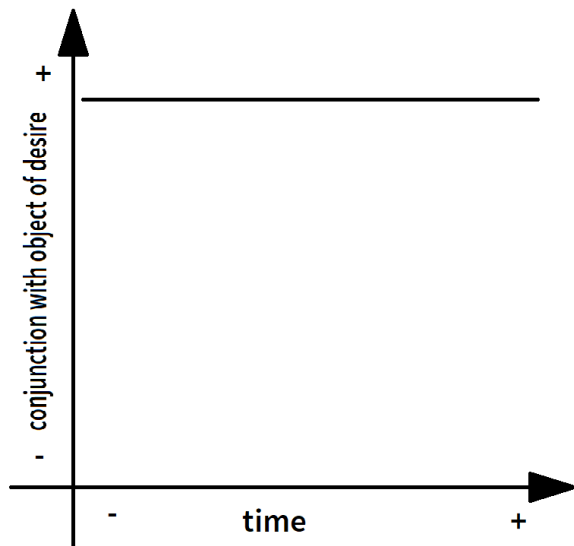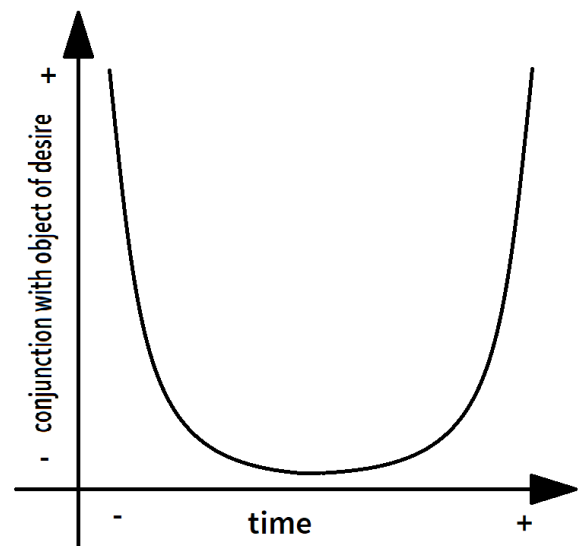


Fig. 1: "endurers'" career

Fig.2: "re-awokens'" career

Those two trajectories belong to two different types of rudimentary forms of narrative according to Gergen (1994). The "endurers" in fact exhibit all the time a narration of stability, while that of the "re-awokens" match together a regressive and progressive narrative closely resembling what Gergen (1994) has identified as the comedy-romance scheme, with the union with the object of desire at the beginning, followed by its loss till a new conjunction with it is reached by the end of the story. If we however consider the possibility to share their passion with others and not the possibility to write we encounter a similar scheme for both groups, something similar to what Gergen (1994) defined as the happily-ever-after scheme. The name hints at the stability at a high level of conjunction following a constant rise of proximity to the object of desire that characterise this graphic.
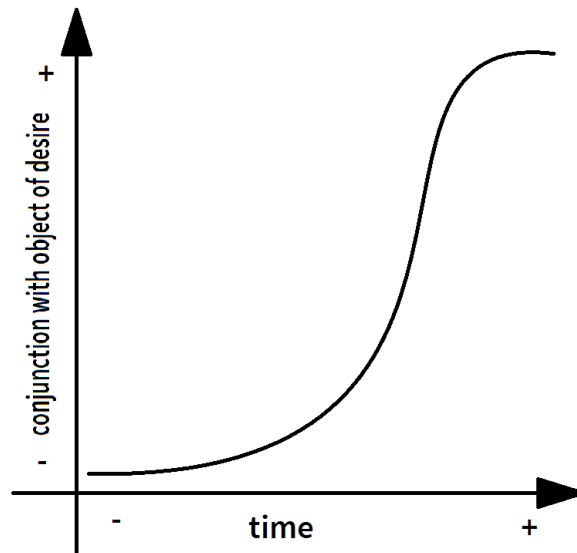
*Fig. 3: members' career in relation to the associations*

How all of those graphics will evolve in the future is an open question. The majority of my inter-locutors were emerging adults in their twenties and it is likely the unfolding of their lives will change their relations with writing. Most of them were however firmly convinced their future direc-tion will have coincided with the pursue writing as a working career. That was especially true for the male participants in the interviews. Women tended to have a more nuanced understanding of their self and admitted how they saw themselves embodying multiple professional and leisure iden-tities in the future, even though they still wanted to publish at some point. Male interviewees on the contrary seemed more selective in identifying writing as goal. But highly selective was also the market. By the end of my fieldwork none of my interlocutors really had the possibility to have the breakthrough most of them were working for, even though they might have already attempted send-ing some manuscripts to editors and agents. If and how they will ever succeed in that is material for another research. How their passion for writing might reverberate in the future is instead part of the next chapter especially regarding technologies of the imagination and the orientation they give to individuals.

# 5.  Writers as Products

The social institutions one interacts with have the power to orient her/his behaviours towards horizons of desirable ends. In this section I'll try to show how the associations had the capacity to orient the goals and future perspectives of their members just like they created them as writers. This is especially the topic of the second part of this chapter. In the first section I'll investigate instead how the associations configured themselves as communities creating a sense of belonging and bonding among its members that later on allowed them to be taken as point of reference for one's life project.

## 5.1.  Creation of a Community

Imagine. It is your first time at Uni-Verse or Trapez. You might have been writing for a few years now, maybe you even started as a young kid in your first school years, or maybe you never cared about it and then suddenly one morning a few weeks ago you woke up with a text in mind and the urge to put it down on paper. It doesn't matter. What's important here is that somehow you stumbled upon the association. Maybe it was a friend who introduced you to it, or maybe some advertisement you saw on the university corridors, or perhaps you just typed for "creative writing in Vienna" in your browser. Either ways you decided to give it a go.  Just to test the waters and see how it's like.

Even though the paths that might have led you to this point are the most diverse albeit similar, the course of action for the next minutes is likely to look identical for all newcomers: you have to face gatekeeping. The word sounds much more impressive than what actually goes on. Marie, Charlotte, Anmol or any other people attending the meeting as host that day would come to you to inquire about your name, what brought you to the association and, most importantly, what do you write. Your interlocutor will be very kind and make all s/he can to make you feel comfortable and explain all the main features of the association and routine of the meetings.

Congratulations! Your socialisation to the group has officially started.

The introduction represents as a matter of fact the first brick on the building of the association as a community of writers. According to my research partners, people interested in writing come indeed to a point where they have to choose "whether they would like to keep on writing alone in their small rooms where no one sees them, or they would like to start an exchange with others" (Charlotte) ["eigentlich entscheiden müssen, (slow, punctuated) ob siee (long pause)(faster) weiter für sich alleine in ihrem kleinen Zimmerchen, wo sie niemand sieht (pause) ehmm, Texte schreiben (long pause) oder, ob siee (faster) in dem Austausch miteinander treten" (Charlotte)].

Such a dilemma is not only an expression of the search for validation in serious leisure activities, but also resonates with Wulff's (2017) observations concerning Irish writers. The pendular movement between solitary hours spent writing and those devoted to sociability and self-promotion were in her research a central rhythm of writing marking the activity of authors. Sociability was in her context furthermore crystallized in the sticking together of writers who tended to form their own circles of peers, mainly following patterns moulded around their level of fame and editorial success. The homogeneity and homophily[14] of my research interlocutors, which all counted on minor publications without major breakthroughs, if not for a few exceptions, comes thus as no surprise. I have already treated above why people feel the need to join like-minded peers for one's own passion. Here I would like to focus on the very own idea of community that writers share when they meet in those circles and clubs. Community is indeed a term that is widely used in the world of creative writing associations. During her investigation with[15] the City Romance Writers Taylor (2013) too run into this label which permeated the discourses and the activities of her research partners and the public discourse about them. Specifically the kind of community people were referring to was a *community of practice*: "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour" (Eckert and McConell-Ginet 1992: 464).

I find this label as the best-fitting to describe my associations as well. Indeed, I would like to take Taylor's (2013) ethnography as point of departure for this chapter. However, I am a bit wary of generalising her conclusions. It might be in fact that some market institutions appropriate the feeling of attachment and enthusiasm people feel for a communitarian belonging, as well as notions connected to creativity and writing, in order to discipline writers as creative workers (Taylor 2013), but I think it's a conclusion hard to apply to writing circles that are only loosely connected to the publishing world. In fact, as Wulff (2017) noted: "this [workshop] was like a laboratory where imagination and personal transformation matter more than public consumption" (Wulff 2017:10), that is, there are many other dimensions involved in writing workshops and clubs that might be more prominent than an actual entry into the market. Taylor's (2013) notion that community give orientations to their members, be it a market one or of another kind, remains a fundamental cornerstone in my understanding of the two associations. For instance, if it's true that the reliance of the City Romance Writers on a community structured around publishing houses oriented them towards the commodification of their work, the grass-root inspiration animating Uni-Verse and

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14  With this term I mean the preference for the members of a group to bond together with people belonging to the same group or category.

15  I willingly decided to use "with" here and not "of", because I prefer the idea of investigating with someone than investigation someone.

Trapez represented a different kind of orientation, that is an orientation towards life and future, as I will explain later on in this chapter.

In this first part I instead follow Taylor's (2013) footsteps on tracing the key mechanisms and "rites" that create the community as such, and investigating the consequent feelings of belonging and emotional attachment that those moments engender. Such undertaking resonates with a constructivist perspective. I believe in fact that a social fact such a "community" doesn't exist per se as a Leibnizian monad, but it's the outcome of processes of social interaction and mutual meaning construction from people who choose to engage and involve themselves in social exchanges related to it. The members of Trapez and Uni-Verse share partially this understanding with me, and believe a communitarian feeling is not innate in their activity, but the outcome of concrete action, something positive they wish to reach.

> "I think **what** we really wanted to be like (long pause) just enhance, and make it **more** of a community, that's not just (long pause) ehmm, a group that come to write, but we're also just (pause) want to- (slow) be more friendly, and casual, and informal, and- and we wanna know what happens, you know? Like, we wanna be there for people." (Anmol)

In this excerpt from Anmol's interview it's not just possible to recognise the construction intent and projectuality of the community, but also the way it was defined from its members: as a place of belonging, mutual recognition and emotional attachment, creating a bond of trust grounded on the sharing of individual intimacies. Thinking back to the way Tönnies (1887) first defined the community by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it is possible to identify some conjunctions as well as dissimilarities between his and the members understanding of the concept. After more than a century since the publication of *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1987) the notions that communities are formed around small groups of people that establish direct non-mediated[16] interactions based on personal relationships and mutual knowledge is still an acceptable and valid observation. At the same time elements such as the orientation a community make available for its members, because of the shared norms that ground the emotional bonds and feelings of loyalty and belonging, as well as shared world-views and the homogeneity of the in-group members were all present in my research settings as well. Less agreeable are on the other hand reflections concerning the alleged immobilism

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16  In this definition we could still insert phenomena akin to on-line communities, since in there we can still recognise a place where it is possible for the individuals to get to know the other people they are talking to and attach them a specific profile and identity, even if under a nickname.

of communities, especially their fixity over time and space and the lacking opening towards outgroup members[17].

Other definitions of the notion were proposed over time, but most of those elements still remain fundamental in the definition of the concept. A special challenge for the notion was to make sense of communities not based on face-to-face activities, like those forming around internet blogs or social networks. In this light the most valuable contribution to the re-shaping of the concept might be ascribed to Anderson's (1983) work on "imagined communities" as groups of largely unknown individuals sharing a common sense of belonging through collective adhesion to shared symbols. In the next paragraph I will focus exactly on the work of the imagination in establishing a community of writers.

At the end of the day, the way my research partners actually understood community can be seen as a mix of both concrete interactions and abstract resorting to symbols. On one hand face-to-face social exchange was in fact a grounding element of group belonging and people didn't just feel to be part of an abstract group but experienced a personal knowledge of other members with whom established profound connections. This didn't have to be limited to face-to-face interactions. The use of social networks and WhatsApp groups, even if not taking place physically, also represented one of the main stages where the group interaction happened. A space of uttermost importance since it was not subject to the limitations of time and space and allowed for everybody to take part to the discussion, if not directly making them the protagonists of it. The possibility to have a saying and interact with others, independently from mediated or unmediated form, was one of the pillars around which the community was built. Feeling to be at the centre of interaction was also extremely validatory, the way it has been described in the previous chapter. Community was indeed a validating setting where people felt validated from being recognised and appreciated as fully fledged people from others they deemed as esteemed peers and equals. At the same time the group provided the members an identity and reference symbols those could use in coping with their everyday lives keeping at the same time at bay the negative sides of late modern living conditions.

But how was the community concretely formed? The key concept here is "sharing": sharing of a passion, sharing of time, sharing of experiences, sharing of intimacies, sharing of an identity. As Vietti (2018) argues referring to Russell Belk "'sharing' concerns all those practices where a sense of 'we' prevails over, and at least partially and temporarily, dissolves the 'Is'" ["la "condivisione" riguarda tutte quelle pratiche in cui prevale un senso del "noi" che, almeno in parte e temporaneamente, dissolve gli "io"] (Vietti 2018:135, my translation). It is thus through active

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17  Which is not say people are not homogeneous inside: they are made homogeneous, but still they have contact with other people, something also necessary if they wish to expand the group.

practices of sharing that people come to perceive a sense of belonging and attachment. This is evident if we consider the core moment of the meetings: the feedback sessions. Texts' sharing is the focus around which the associations are organised and is exactly the petrol that make the meetings run. The importance of reading and feedback however doesn't just reside in the sharing of the text, but in the way this is accomplished. There are specific rules, times and figures accompanying such practice giving it a ritualistic aspect.

Let's get back to our imaginative exercise. After chatting a bit with the other attendants the host will decide it is finally time to get the meeting going. S/he will open the floor presenting to the newcomers the various steps and phases of the encounter, reminding this way older members too about them, present any relevant news like concerning the anthology or future planned events, and introduce the first reader and her/his text. It will be time for the reader to speak next and introduce the text and the kind of feedback s/he would like to receive. After the reading, which s/he will make aloud, it's time for comments. At Uni-Verse this time is also codified and the host will check her/his clock not to let it wander off too much, while at Trapez there are no specific time limitations. Time limits are often trespassed anyway. And it also happens that the discussion polarises around two interlocutors or textual elements. In those situations it is the host's duty to bring back the unfolding of the event to an adequate schedule, offering everybody the possibility to intervene and scaling down too heathen up confrontations stopping the discussants and suggesting another topic. Once the time is up the host will make a final wrap up before introducing the next author and text. This scheme is repeated till the end of the meeting where the host will make a small final discourse repeating important news, inviting everybody to join the next time too and send new materials for revision.

In the repetition encounter after encounter of this same scheme we might recognise a ritualistic aspect, with the host figuring as a "master of ceremony" in charge of the proper execution of the event. It is in fact possible to argue texts and people are engaged during feedback sessions in ways that set those aside from daily reading activity, especially if we consider that reading is for most of my research partners a solitary activity while it turns to a prominently social one once at the meetings, following a very specific rhythm of writing (Wulff 2017). Adopting the framework of meetings as rituals implies necessarily a confrontation with Turner (1995) and his conceptualisation of those social facts. Especially I believe communitas is of central importance here, mainly because it is during liminal moments that people feel a major inclination towards one another and it is in this enhanced state that a sense of solidarity and belonging is stronger. The viability of the application of this notion to the meetings came to me from a similar analysis Lane (2019) undertook to describe a storytelling event in Belfast. Here she believes to recognise communitas because "[c]ommunitas

occurs when a temporary, often unstructured, group of people experience a shared feeling and a strong sense of bonding" (Lane 2019:70) like I have witnessed in my research contexts, except for the unstructured part. Turner (1995) himself recognise furthermore communitas can actually assume three different forms -ideological, normative and spontaneous-, all of which were to be found at Tenx9, the Belfast storytelling event investigated from Lane (2019).

During the event pub customers were invited to enter the stage and count a personal story to the audience. In order to do so the organisers invested time and energy in creating a trusting and safe atmosphere, but it was the repetition of the event in time that made this kind of communitas normative, "when the feelings of togetherness become what Turner calls a perduring social system. […] [T]his relies on the intermittent reinforcement of spontaneous communitas, when feelings of specialness and bonding emerge unbidden" (Lane 2019:70). The atmosphere that resulted in such undertaking created a special connection between the bystanders making them all feel at the same time a special feeling of closeness.

I argue that is exactly what happened at my associations when texts got read. Indeed, the similarities with the event studied from Lane are manifold. The focus of both is the telling of someone's story. It might be orally, as in Lane's case, or it might be immersed in written artistry and literary canons, as I have witnessed. In both cases however the sharing of personal experiences forms the raw material for the establishment of a connection. In the section about writers as producers I will explore further the connection between personal history and texts. It suffices here to say that "I can relate to that" was an utterance usually expressing appreciation for a text, that is to to say, the possibility of a listener/reader to put oneself in the narrator's shoes, to identify with him/her was considered as one of the main features of a good text. Furthermore, my associations too put a lot of efforts in creating a trusting and safe atmosphere where people could expose the products of their literary work feeling at ease in doing that. As exposed in the next section this is necessary because of the degree of disclosure and exposure of one's own self involved in presenting a text to an audience.

But there are differences too, of course. Lane (2019) argues for instance that such communitas was enhanced from the co-presence of strangers and that it would have lost its exceptionality if shared with friends or acquaintances. I am not so sure about that. Of course it is possible to argue at which level of relationship people stop being strangers, but this limit was already far behind among the people I met. The "regulars" at least had a very strong bond and the judgment given to texts was very often expressed considering the unique peculiarities of that individual and his/her life history. Not to mention that most of those actually met outside of the meeting context to hang out together establishing friendship bonds calling forth multiple layers of one's own identity. Interpersonal

acquaintance was thus perceived as an enrichment in text commentary and didn't diminished by any mean the feeling of communitas.

A very evident hint of its presence could be inferred from the behaviours toward waiters. As I have highlighted in the introduction, Uni-Verse used to gather in a pub basement. It was common that waiters entered now and then to take orders or bring provisions, often disrupting a reading or a feedback session. What followed their entrance onstage was usually embarrassed silence and muffled chuckles. During the interviews my interlocutors often tried to rationalise this happening:

> "[I] mean, we are at a pub, (laughing) it's kind of normal that [...] a waiters, waitresses, could come. I mean, if we wouldn't want that at all, we sh- we would make it somewhere else" (Claudia).

However, I couldn't help but perceive their presence as a kind of intrusion. As I will explain in the following section texts have the power to abstract a reader from the immediate surrounding, in a way close to what Reed (2002; 2004; 2018) defined as "enraptured reading", and the coming of waiters felt as a kind violent throw back to the here-and-now. I guess this feeling was also shared from other participants. I couldn't explain the silence and the nervous smiles otherwise. Sometimes it even happened that people started joking around this situation, especially in the interviews. Jokes and laughters are anyway a form of reducing to normality extra-normal features. Laughter has the power to minimise the disrupting effects such an unexpected happening might have on the social composition of the groups and its norms. Laughing about it implies proving it to be unharmful and it's a common behaviour towards socially deviating behaviours and happenings. But the presence of waiters was also problematic because it could have implied a decrease of the validation one could get:

> "I- I know those people, I know this- this is my community, and they- they listen to your text and they will give you (listing voice) feedback, and I will think about it, ehmm, but thee- the waiting staff it's just sort of # you know, an involuntary audience. (smiling) They're not here to hear my text, they'rre- they just hear two sentences and then they'rre ## out again, andd ## ehmm, so it feels kind of strange to read it, sort of # **to them,** or with them in the room" (Philipp)

The waiter is an accidental presence in the feedback session and s/he carries with that a feeling of estrangement among the community members. In addition to this they capture their attention preventing them to focus on the reading or the comments implying a person cannot get all the

validation that is due to her/him, which in turn implies a reduction on the amount of validation one can get. Waiters count thus as a non-validating, communitas-breaking presence, which in turn explains the behaviour towards them. We have to consider furthermore that a text is often the outcome of a solitary and intimate effort which requires a high degree of intimacy and trust to be shared. People just dropping by do not have the necessary feature to configure as proper audience.

While the communitas formed around feedback session helped certifying the validity of the community and its norms over time, representing the cyclical recreation and confirmation of the social order as Durkheim (2015 [1912]) would have it in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, or the reintegration of liminality in a Turnerian (1995) fashion, it was by no means the only tool employed to construct "community" as a source of identification, commitment, belonging and emotional attachment. A second very important one was moments of free and spontaneous social interaction, gossiping and chit-chatting, something that at Uni-Verse was termed as "banter". Such notion was so fundamental for the association's members that it even got written down in Uni-Verse constitution: "7.8. There shall be banter" is precisely its concluding clause. Such aspect wasn't anyway just an abstract declaration of intent but was formalised within the organising committee in the figure of the "social convener" which task was precisely to care for all the socialisation activities that extended outside of the regular meetings such as poetry picnics, shut-up-and-write! sessions or open mic evenings. At the same time Trapez, which didn't have such formalisations was still based on the possibilities offered from sociability. For example during my fieldwork I have experienced meetings where people didn't bring any text to comment upon. Being a smaller association which counted on around three regular attendees it wasn't in fact always possible for people to show up with new texts. People met anyway and just made the best out of the situation discussing, chatting and doing writing exercises together. I would argue that was another form of sharing enacted within the association.

The relatively scarce presence of writing as a topic of discussion manifest an interest to investigate the other person as more than just a writer or an association's mate. It implies a willingness to share one's own personality, self and identity to a broader extent than just the scope that brought people together. People are drawn to associations exactly for the communitarian aspect they identify in such activity. Communities are indeed a powerful form of validation in a time where older forms of that show their shortcomings and can't guarantee it any more. It is thus fundamental for individuals to be recognised in their own uniqueness as people in addition to the construction of significant bonds. The negation of late modern anonymity is what people obtain by engaging in serious leisure. But serious leisure here, through its extensions to forms of sociability, becomes a form of conviviality. This notion suggests the intimacy shared from the people engaging in the activity, an

intimacy which is also shaped from communitas, and it is through the sharing of intimacy(ies) that a group (that is, a community) is formed in an emotional way. As Richard Sennett argues "informal discussions can become binding rituals; [they] just need to happen regularly" (Sennett 2012:152). COVID-19 struck a sharp overturning on this side of the associations. The displacement of encounters to their on-line form implied a severe limitation on interaction possibilities, and while before people used to gather in small groups according to what they felt like talking about, on ZOOM and other videocall programmes it is just possible to have a singular discussion, whether one would like to participate in it or not. This notwithstanding chit-chat and banter are still present at every meeting and plenty of comments wander off from concrete textual features of the text under scrutiny to open parenthesis for socialisations. Newcomers kept joining in even under lock-down restrictions and they were welcomed the old way with free talk before and after meetings. It is a too central part of the associations to be completely erased. It even conquered new spaces through instant messages and other affordances made available from the programmes.

What are thus the features of a community created with such tools and understandings in mind?

The first striking element, as I have said above is the emotional attachment of the members and a feeling of personal bonding and belonging to the group.

> "due to the fact that it is a small group, it is a totally different group dynamics, there's for sure a stronger community feeling inside Trapez. But at the moment, since it is so small, and everybody knows everybody, and they inspire each other, is much more than what we did at the uni [with a writing class]. I didn't have anything similar in mind, and it's nice to have such community to read literature, write and adjust literature, most of all the adjustments, that is so much appreciated" (Stefan, my translation[18])

This excerpt from Stefan's interview is already a valid hint of that. Florentina's poem introducing this thesis is however a still stronger expression of the emotional state I am talking about. Having a quick look at its genesis might help delineate this sense of attachment and belonging. Florentina wrote it in a time when she was abroad for her Erasmus study period, far away from Vienna and

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18 "dadurch, dass ess # dass es eine kleinere Gruppe ist, ehmm, dass eine ganz andere Gruppendynamik- es ist mehr ein- ist eine größere Gemei- steckt ein Gemeinschaftsgefühl jedenfalls (R: mm) innerhalb von Trapez # [...] (langsam) Aber im Moment # jaa, dadurch dass es so klein ist, (schneller) und sich alle gut kennen, und gegenseitig inspirieren, ehmm, ist es viel mehr als das was wir auf der Uni [für einen Kurs] gemacht haben, und ess- ich hatte sowas auf jeden Fall nicht so vor, und es ist, ehmm, es ist schön, so eine Gemeinschaft zu haben in der Literatur # lesen, (schneller) Literatur schreiben und überarbeiten- vor Allem das überarbeiten ## und, ehmm, so geschätzt wird."(Stefan)

without a similar serious leisure net. It was a way to put on paper her longing for attending Uni-Verse meetings once again. She brought it to her first meeting once again back in town and it sparked big waves of emotions and moved and excited comments among the listeners. It expressed a shared feeling among the audience.

Another way to put this emotional dimension is considering a predominant metaphor employed during the interviews. Community was there very often described as "returning back home" [nach Hause kommen] (Charlotte), or "like a family" (Anmol). The idea behind that was that members ascribe to the associations features that they would expect to similarly find among their relatives and other significant others. This might be not so surprising. Tönnies (1987) himself recognised in the family the perfect model of community and it might be that my interlocutors similarly used the notion in an idealtypical way as a prototype to explain similar realities. Indeed, a community for my interlocutors wasn't just a matter of possibly establishing intimate relationships with others, but also other features generally associated with family like protection and care were necessary elements of such a description. Some specific people and situations were in fact recognised from the members as particularly vulnerable. Sometimes people were very anxious when reading and insecure about the feedback they could get, being afraid of getting wounded, especially when texts were still quite fresh and dealt with personal issues. Considering such situations the members of the association displayed a high degree of tact towards each other.

I still recall very vividly the day I brought my second text to a Uni-Verse meeting. As usual before starting there was a chatting phase where people slowly joined the venture. Methodologically I tried to make the best out of this and collect as much relevant information as possible for my research. Using my text as an excuse I addressed Marie to ask why it was scheduled as the first of the evening, trying to figure out which criteria were employed to establish the texts' order. She went pale. She slowed down her usually ultra-rapid speaking pace and started choosing words with extreme caution and moderately long intra-words pauses. My questions were taken as showing reluctance with the evening schedule, begging for my text to be postponed. I was actually totally fine with that, but the flood of worried questions it gave rise to made manifest the attention and care I was talking about in the lines above. When I explained my interest she finally took a big sigh of relief and got back to the usual chit-chat after answering me.

This search to establish a safe environment resonates once again with Lane's (2019) observations concerning communitas. In order to stage Tenx9 event in Belfast it was necessary to create an inclusive environment free from sectarian symbols, where people felt at ease telling intimate stories. In order to achieve this goal people had to show commitment and interest, but most of all the

avoidance of commentary should have allowed for people to open up in front of an audience of strangers. Uni-Verse and Trapez share these same premises too, even though a judgment on the texts is exactly what they aim for. However, very specific rules concerning feedbacks had been put in place in order to redirect comments from the persons to texts. It was a full implicit etiquette concerning proper behaviour during feedback session, carefully defining speaking times, form and content. Some of those rules were inherited from other contexts. The maybe most important one, the sandwich technique, was indeed an importation from school and university settings and it generally stated that criticism should be the middle part of a feedback, preceded and followed by praises. Of course this model was purely abstract and many times people just outed their observations. In doing so however there was a key recurring element: impersonality. A good feedback didn't just have to be propositional and assertive, but to objectively refer to text's features allegedly without considering the history of personal relations that united two people and their personal preferences. This was however only marginally possible, even though it helped to give people the fundamental impression of not being a direct target of criticism, which was directed to their text instead. Personally it reminded me of a common formula I have heard many times at school and university: an exam grading shouldn't be taken personally, because the evaluation is not directed at the person but at his/her performance. This decoupling of people and their activity was indeed one of the elements that reassured people when receiving feedback.

Another possibility offered to protect vulnerable members was to send a text to a meeting in anonymous form. As I explained for validation, Claudia was the only person I know who actually took advantage of this opportunity. The path leading to the presentation of a text to the other members can indeed be quite windy. Many people would hesitate before doing it waiting a time span of few meetings or few months after joining the association before taking that step. It happens because the first meetings were usually used to get acquainted with the functioning and development of the encounters, getting assured of the goodness and good will of the other people participating in the interaction. Such initial observation time was necessary because, as explained above, people were going to expose themselves when presenting a text. In talking about self and text in the next chapter I'll get back to this point, but it is fundamental to mention already the exposure and disclosure inherent in reading the outcome of one's writerly production in front of a judging audience. In this simple action there are many dimensions at stake which might affect badly on one's self perception, evaluation and esteem as well as the very fabric of the associations' social life. Using Goffman's (1990 [1956]) glossary it is possible to argue that through these sessions readers were inviting other people to look at their personal backstage, which is something that needs

high levels of trust, as Anmol highlighted in the quote above[19], and can't really be happening with strangers differently from what Lane (2019) observed.

I suggest thus the existence of an "emotional threshold" that people have to pass before becoming complete members. For some this could be quite easy to step across and they might bring a text even to their first meeting, but for most of the people I met it was a limit crossed over time with the help of others. Marie for instance would take advantage of any opportunity she had to invite newcomers to bring a text. In her opinion this was mainly done:

> "because I know for my own experience # how **shy** you can be in the beginning, where it's like "Ahh, you know, these people (listing voice) they already have their own community, I don't want interrupt that, I don't wanna seem like, ehm, (sighing) assuming too much, like I'm one of them or something", sooo- by giving people the impression "No, you are (smiling) anyone of us, ehm, please please send something in", I think people have a lot of their fears and anxieties taken away straight away." (Marie)

As I have explained above this disposition is inherent to attempting creating the community itself. But many others are willing to help whenever they notice someone struggling with issues regarding shyness or anxiety. Such common help is embedded in the very notion of community as a family. People wish to be at disposal of each other in a reciprocating effort: they are now there for others because others were once there for them too. Feedback too can be similarly understood as an investment of time and energy, motivated from the expectation that other members would similarly be there for them when it will be them who'll need help refining a text. It can be understood as forming a kind of investment deferred over time, where people are sharing their resources engaging texts as a common task to ameliorate them. This aspect highlights how the climate within the associations was strongly marked from mutual help and collaboration clearly showing a preference for the group than for the market in contrast to Taylor (2013) argumentations. If they wished to publish, members were indeed faced with an incredibly choosy market which access was highly selective and it is arguable whether they might actually benefit from cooperation. Altruism is a key constitutive element of how members intended the association and show the orientation towards the community per se.

But altruism and care towards newcomers and vulnerable members, while appearing as enforcing the feeling of community are at the same time constructing the community itself as a homogeneous

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19  See page 49.

group. Indeed altruism can be seen as grounded on the notion of helping like-minded people, that is in-group members due to the specificity of the help they are required to offer. Describing the demographic profile and the careers of the members in the former section I have noticed how most of them are emerging adults and how this affects and its intertwined with validation. It is however not just demographic similarity that brings people to take part in the association, but the characteristics of the practice[20] around which the community is built too already define from the beginning what kind of people can have access to it, namely highly educated individuals. The strategy put in place to recruit new members is furthermore targeting primarily university spaces where extremely similar people to the ones already members are to be found. We are thus confronted with a vicious circle, a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1968) where the homophile tendencies of the group create inner-group homogeneity. People are aware of that as Anmol states:

> "I think the one piece we do lack in is in diversity. [Member's name] is (short pause) the only non-white person over there, right? Like just honestly. So I think that does make sense, if (pause) a lot of people come from like (pause) similar background, but like a very very similar kind of story, again, I guess like the kind of texts we produce most times (long pause) I don't think they're the same, (pause) (punctuating) but in comparison to what **can** be produced and **can** be done, with writing is still kind of (pause) very like westernised and anglicised-" (Anmol)

What's interesting to note here is that the diversity she is talking about at the end of the day doesn't really imply different conceptions or world-views. While diversity concerning geographical and ethnic origins is actively sought, class origin represented a fundamental watershed. Thinking about Uni-Verse the use of the English language was a major access barrier for people not properly versed for foreign languages or non-native English speakers.

In making such observations I have no peculiar interest in criticising such attitude. When people start an activity centred around a specific practice and with a specific goal in mind there are people that will be left out of it. Tolerant people can't tolerate intolerant ones, as Popper (2020 [1945]) would have argued, that is: all kind of groups necessarily need to leave someone out, even the most open ones. There are thus different values attributed to different dimensions of diversity, and there are fault lines that create an unbridgeable gap and others that can be crossed. Each community decide where to put its own boundaries. In a Saussurrian (2011[1916]) sense is indeed possible to argue that definitions are mainly given in a negative way and a community mainly define itself by

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20  The practice meant here is writing.

setting limits identified with "what-is-not-us". Moreover, in the associations one's companions are also selected very carefully, especially because they have to become important sources of validation: being validated from someone not kept in high consideration would minder the positive effects of recognition. An emblematic example of that is identifiable in the story Marie told me about an "unsavoury" newcomer:

"Somebody brought something in, that was (stretched) rather # (slow, laughing) unsavoury (R: ok…). Ehm, soo- that's, that's (punctuating) why is so hard to draw the line between- you know, I'm exploring this **as the author**, or I'm exploring this **as a person.** And we had put it in the booklet because we were like "Oh! Well, that's interesting to see like # how a racist (laughing, drawled) asshole (laughing) presenting a story". Ehmm, but then it turned out that the author behind that was # (punctuating) not as fun. (R: ok) Ehmm, so that was the moment wheree we sort of had to be like "Ok! Now # (smiling) can we not do that here? That's not happening"" (Marie)

This episode represented a clear moment of crisis, one of those where the norms that sustain the community are exposed as Buroway (1991) argued. But it's not just a matter of how the lines were drawn. Following the constructivist spirit I already adopted above my argument is that the community is not homogeneous in its foundational elements, but that it is made homogeneous once people enter it. Taylor (2013) argued in her thesis about the normative character of feedbacks and their orientation towards market. I maintain those also orient towards the community itself. It is a socialisation running on a double track. Always in Marie's words "sometimes you get people who come for the first time and (slow) they don't really know how things work just yet (Marie)". The initial interview, banter and the communitas of feedback sessions have the (probably) unintended effect to create the homogeneity that will found the community as a group of people where members can identify and empathise with one another. The self-confirming outcome of such practices resides in the incitement people feel to write.

"[I]t # encourages me to write more, and, I'm definitely writing more # by being a part of Uni-Verse" (Claudia)

which in turn implies more texts are going to be brought for feedback and a self-sustaining system is put in place, reaffirming the community around the central practice that constitute the shared identity. The constant encouragement one get from the host to bring a text next time, especially if a newcomer, can also be read in this light. As much it is a mechanism used to help people surpass the emotional threshold, it also has the consequence of confirming the group in its guiding activity.

A side effect of this homogeneity is the perceived equality of the community members. All members are equally empowered to suggest textual improvements or feedbacks. As a matter of fact extrovert people tend to be more present and sometimes the host has to actively compensate caring for those who are temperamentally more shy. In this light, also considering the unfolding of feedback sessions I have described above, the host appear as the only power position during the meeting. Members of the committee are of course confronted with other responsibilities. In a serious leisure fashion I would argue however that for most of them it is not only a pleasure to assume them, but at the end of the day the power they have in steering community activities is quite limited to organisation and everybody else wanting to participate in that too is more than welcome.

## 5.2. Creation of an Identity

I opened this thesis describing that day by the end of June when Anmol and Scott[21] had that discussion about how to define a writer. In Wulff's (2017) ethnography the answer to that query was given stressing the two dimensions of artistry and technical mastery. When Irish writers discussed about the possibility for writing to be taught they highlighted exactly those two dimensions as the fundamental ones, using them also as validatory frames to explain why some literary works could have been better than others. In addition those concepts might have worked programmatically in legitimising judgements that would have influenced the future careers of writers and could thus be interpreted as an attempt at defining who can be considered as such and who cannot.

During the months of research I also made up my mind on how to answer that conundrum: for me it was primarily the community who created the writers. And this didn't happen only because through mutual exchange of tips and suggestions about writing people could technically ameliorate their writing production, but mostly because through those very same community practices the members were made resemble more and more the idea of writers that was widespread within the group. That's precisely the normative and orientational aspect of belonging to a group, as Taylor (2013) claimed it. Feedbacks work in this sense as a sort of gatekeeping mechanism defining not only what

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21  Anonymised.

the specific elements of the texts should be, but also what kind of aspirations and behaviours are deemed as legitimate for writers as elements of the collective. Romance City Writers stressed in this sense the integration into the publishing market as the most validatory outcome for one's own writing activity. Uni-Verse and Trapez put the focus on other features. For that reason I believe when we speak of an orientation given from a group the focus should lie in the identity that ascribes to people and how they use it to dive in their everyday life.

I do not only dissociate with Taylor (2013), but partially also with the most widespread opinion among my interlocutors. Nearly all of them assumed in fact that the activity of writing was enough for someone to claim the title of "writer". I suggest instead that people entering the community found a ready-made definition, which was attached to them through their participation at the association's activities. If you join "us" you are by definition a writer somehow, at the very least one on the making.

To better show what I mean I would like to get back once again to our imaginative exercise.

You have just presented yourself and the host asks you the famous question: "what do you write". You blush. That's only one of the many reactions possible, but suppose that's yours. You have in fact written a few texts but still don't consider yourself "A WRITER". Following the care and tact inherent to the community s/he would reassure you and certify you that this is enough to be considered as such and s/he will be looking forward for you to share your texts with the others. Voilà! You have been legitimised as a writer just because of your presence at the group activities.

Imagination aside the excerpt from Marie's interview already quoted above[22] shows very well the approach the host has in confronting newcomers and the interest in confirming and validating those as writers. In this first introductory interview the mechanisms that will form individual and group identity are as a matter of fact already fully at work. Indeed, inherent to the questions "do you write?" and "what do you write?" is the assumption of a positive answer to the first one and the listing of several different writing attempts for the second. After all writing was exactly the main reason why people were expected to show up, as Philipp told me in his interview:

> "[I]t's a small-talk about some- a topic thaat # we'reee, you know, ehm, that's the reason why we're gathering […]." (Philipp)

which means if people hadn't an original interest in writing they wouldn't had come in the first place. But on the other hand what those two simple questions are making is to cut out all other aspects of one's individual personality and identity to focus on only a specific one.

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22  See page 58.

> "(fast) I mean, not only, I think, does [the introductory interview] convey to people, again, that this is (ascending tone) a group of writers. Like (smiling) "You've come to the right place. Hello! Let's talk about your writing" (Marie)

And so the stage is set for future interactions, all taking place from the starting point that everybody coming is a writer. Indeed, later on in our imaginative experiment, as you start getting to know all the other participants the introductory questions keep popping up again and again. It even happens sometimes that people tell you what they like to read and write even before telling you their names. The identity as a writer is used as a kind of visiting card to identify people and insert them into the in-group social geography of the interlocutors, a Goffmanesque (1990 [1956]) "face" staged with the help of the other community members, which through mutual recognition help one another to sustain and confirm their role and identity as writers. Without this extension of the definition of writers to all the people coming validation would be much reduced if not impossible, exactly because of the need for equal peers to recognise one's role and worth. In this sense the invitation newcomers constantly get for bringing texts, especially at Uni-Verse, is not only a way for the community to keep confirming it's existence through the ritual repetition of the central practice defining it[23], but is also a way to enhance and confirm the status of the new members to that of writers, factually recognising them as such.

But defining somebody as a writer has implications. My research partners didn't move in the void and carried with them a socially inherited complete baggage of symbols and meanings regarding behaviours, attitudes and appearances ascribed to "writers". Since very young they were indeed socialised towards specific topoi and clichés concerning writers, like the images of the "troubled genial rebel" and the "solitary introvert", which in turn formed their horizon of expectations for those figures, besides an already existent orientation towards life. Partially it could be thus argued that it is the exposure to such models that motivated people to opt for writing as serious leisure. Confirmations of that hypothesis weren't anyway straightforward in my research, and I think that might have been at most a very small incentive. People didn't just conform to those images, but tended much more to engage them creatively and dynamically in an either refusing:

> "[…] [B]ut I think that's- that's also like problematic, right? The way like a text and writers specifically are portrayed- and I know like a lot of generations of writers were like that, (Pause) wheree (pause) only like all the misery was written about and, you know like (pause) like hor-

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23   The central practice meant here is the feedback session.

like horrible drug abuse, or super like alcoholics or just horrible mental and emotional states, and you know like, like those stereotypes are there for a reason, that was actually (pause) a big plan of writers and artists that used to do that, but I (pause) but I don't think that's like always required-"

(Anmol)

or accepting way:

"I mean first (unintelligible) [the members of a Scottish creative society] *were* just like the **setting**, ehmmm, (R: mm) because they had it in this # dim-lighted pub, and I knew, that when I went back to Vienna I was like "Ok! We need to have a pub. (laughing) It needs to be in a pub." [both laugh] Because it immediately it gave it that airr, like # young artists gathering somewhere (R: mm) (smiling) that's like semi-respectable, ehmm, and a sort of an exchange of mind in dim light- I- I liked the atmosphere a lot"

(Marie)

In this two excerpts we can see how people actually interacted with imaginations engaging them, questioning them and reshaping them through their behaviours, adapting them to fit their present condition. In turn the imaginations re-shaped the people that had chosen to engage with them. Individuals started adopting behaviours that would have made them fit within the condition of writers, among which the attending of the associations was a key one. But the associations too would work to form their members as writers as I have just explained. Important is however that there is a mutual exchange of imaginations coming at play where how one person imagine writers to be is presented to others through feedback and chit-chat and discussed if valid or not for the members of the group in a process of constant exchange and changing. Individual imaginations are indeed always to be confronted with those of others getting formed and shaping the world in a discursive way and through mutual exchange. "[I]magination is [in fact] to be appreciated anthropologically as an outcome not a condition, a relational object" (Rapport 2015:7). In the next lines I will thus consider how writers imagine other writers, taking a different path than Taylor's (2013) reflections on imagination which considered how writers imagined their audience.

First of all we have to say that other writers can't just be reduced only to an abstract symbolic construct: in the minds of my interlocutors other writers represented a concrete and actual group of

people, that they took as inspiration for their everyday life. In order to make sense of this aspect I believe the reflections of Merton and Kitt (1950) are a quite appealing explanatory framework. The scholars departed from the notion of "relative deprivation" to formulate a theory of "reference groups" which helped them explain why highly-graded American soldiers expressed a feeling of dissatisfaction towards their careers independent from grades and rankings. This happened according to the scholars because every individual is constantly in relation with at least two different groups: one of belonging and one of reference. The first one represents the social group to which one is ascribed and socially belongs framing the social possibilities of action s/he has in his/her everyday life, while the second is the one one would like to belong to and whose lifestyle aspires to emulate. The two might well be the same, but do not always match and when this happens people feel relative deprivation, that is a dissatisfaction for not being able to fulfil the needs the reference group suggests, being unable to access its same lifestyle in one's own social positioning (Merton & Kitt 1950).

I suggest that "writers" represented for my interlocutors a reference group as exposed from the two scholars. Indeed, people tried to engage in the practices that for them were representative of showing a specific belonging to that group and they passed through everyday activities with that frame of reference in mind.

> "I was in Oxford, in England, annd, (listing voice) I did a tour there and, (punctuating) and there they also said that like, these writers, like, ehm, C. S. Lewis, annd **Tolkien**, also had this writers circles and they regularly meet- met at Oxford, and, discussed their stories (R: mm). Annd I still remember that, when I've (drawled) being (faster) one of my first times at Uni-Verse, I kind of came to think of thee- these writers" (Claudia)

Differently from the officials Merton and Kitt (1950) studied however I didn't find any sign of "relative deprivation". A fast explication for that might lie in the careers of my interlocutors as explained in chapter 4. Most of them were indeed emerging adults (Arnett 2000) which still had an open perspective on what their future might have looked like, partially also dependant upon the extended insecurity inherent to late modernity, while Merton's officials were mostly already accomplished men. The publishing market is thus a quite closed difficult-to-access environment as suggested from my interlocutors and observed in other ethnographies (Taylor 2013, Wulff 2017) but still a possibility. It was definitely much too early to speak of relative deprivation since the narrow openings to access it were still open. On the other hand when facing Merton's work we have to consider multiplicity. People have several different groups of belonging (family, work, serious

leisure, and so on) and different groups of reference, which creates an interplay between different models of behaviours and consume between aspired, possible and prescribed ones. Many of my research partners during the interview highlighted how their identity was indeed irreducible to only the writing dimension:

> "I don't just define myself that way. I mean, my self-definition is also related to writing, but not exclusively."
> (Charoltte, my translation[24])

This notwithstanding, imagining the figure of writers still played a central role for my research partners. I believe the origin of the importance of that imagination is to be traced back to the serious leisure characteristics of their writerly activity. The publishing world represented for most of my research partners one of their ultimate goal, a leap from their present condition, and nearly all of them[25] "dreamed" about finally entering it, and fantasised about writers that already achieved establishing themselves in it. The huge enthusiasm that accompanied discussions within the associations, bust especially Uni-Verse, about personally known published writers, that is, writer who could earn a living out of their writings or at least had a major publishing achievement, was astounding.

I remember for instance very vividly how one day I started chatting with Sabrina[26] about a trip to the Lainzer Tiergarten she had organised. Talking about the people that would have joined us she couldn't hide her enthusiasm for the attendance of an Estonian guy who already published a book in his home country. Of all the people she listed this was the only one that wasn't just named but received a full presentation complete with big smiles, thrills of excitement and frequently repeated "Oh my gosh".

The main example of such attitude might however be identified in behaviours towards Scott. Scott was a borderline figure to the Uni-Verse group. Socially and demographically he was almost an outsider to it. He was a Scottish expat in his early 40s with already a quite impressive history of publications behind him. Furthermore, with his kindness and accuracy in feedbacks he emanated a very strong charisma that conjoined with his experience in publishing to make his comments among the most cherished ones (even if not always accepted). Charlotte resumes very well the attitude members had towards him recounting her first encounter with him:

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24  "ich- ich (skandiert) definiere mich nicht nur darüber, also ich, ehmm, (Pause) ja- meineee Selbstdefinition hat auch damit zu tun, dass ich schreibe, aber nicht ausschließlich."  (Charlotte)

25  Interestingly the projection of oneself as professional writer and the concomitant wish to focus exclusively on this as career was a perspective mainly endorsed from male interviewees.

26  Anonymised.

"[…] I remember the first time Scott came to a meeting, it was my first time too. And I had no idea who he was, I didn't know him. And only because of the way he talks, the way his voice sounds, I thought to myself "Wow! He has such a presence, he is really cool". And later on I have also noticed "ok, fine, [unintelligible] many books published, and he's just, just a very amazing nice person". This makes of course already a lot, he just has this charm" (Charlotte, my translation[27]).

I assume part of the respect and fascination "regular" members had towards him strongly depended from his writing outcomes, that contributed in creating his charismatic aura. Interesting to note here is the interplay between fantasy and its realisation; when the abstraction is fixed to a concrete reference. Scott kind of embodied the model of writer many members likely aspired to become. He incarnated the "accomplished writer" in a form that was for many tangible and subject to interaction, becoming an instantiation of the category. In this process of trivialisation however he didn't lose fascination and their imagination wasn't spoiled at all. On the contrary I guess it was exactly the personal acquaintance to him, having the possibility to listen one more time to the way the publishing industry works and what are the events that punctuate the life of an accomplished writer that reinforced people imagination and fantasising. At the same time those discussions also helped them to ground their reveries on the here and now, changing the very own nature of their thoughts. As Crapanzano (2004) argued for instance, imagination remains such only as far as it remains unattainable and fuzzy, like a horizon always moving further as people try to come closer. Interacting with Scott was a way of fixing the horizon, a way of delineating the traits of concrete actions and projects.

Another landmark in that concretisation process, and also a hint to the existence of "writers" as reference group, was an event organised from the Sundays Writers' Club, a sister association of Uni-Verse which started organising meetings with professional writers, editors and agents, as the name of the event "Meet The Professional" self-evidently suggests. To attend them during my fieldwork it was required to make a reservation. Uni-Verse always had a few spots booked and applied a lottery method to assign them to any of its interested members. This closely resembles the accolades and raffles Taylor (2013) talks about and how those reflected an orientation of the City Romance Writers towards the market. An orientation which wasn't anyway an assurance of success,

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27 "[…] ich erinnere mich an das erste Treffen, woo [Scott] dabei war, wo ich auch dabei war (Pause) Undd, ich hatte, ich hatte keine Ahnung wer er ist noch, ich habe ihn nicht gekannt. Unddd (long Pause) allein (drawled) der Art und Weise, wie er spricht, und wie seine Stimme klingt, habe ich mir gedacht „Woa! (drawled) Dass der hat s- soo einee (Pause) eine Präsenz, eben wie- der ist richtig cool" Und dann später habe ich dann auch noch gemerkt, „ok, ja (unintelligible) viele Bücher veröffentlicht, und der ist einfach, einfach ein sehr toller netter Mensch". Ehmm, (fast) aber das ist, dass, dass, das macht natürlich schon auch viel aus, er hat schon diesee (Pause) ja, einfach so eine Ausstrahlung." (Charlotte)

as she hints. The same reasoning applies to my interlocutors. "Meet The Professionals" was exactly an event that might have helped them to concretise their desire for publication, just like meeting and chatting with Scott helped them to acquire more insights into the functioning of life as writers. But it was also an event used to steer the imagination of its participants, of putting it to work in casting in one's mind the own self as a future writer. In this activity we can notice a generative power where imagination of a status is actively used to move people to act in a specific direction. There's an instrumental agency and an empowering effect at play. So, as far as it is true that such an event was motivated from a specific projection of oneself over time, namely as future writer, it has also to be recognised that it is the existence and the attendance of the event itself that created such projection and established the range of meanings that made "writers" a reference group for the individual. If a relative deprivation (Meton & Kitt 1950) was ever felt from my research partner was for sure after starting attending the meetings, because it was there that meanings and symbols of "what does it mean to be a writer" were transmitted.

Such disposition was however only possible in a serious leisure environment. In fact, as Crapanzano (2004) argued with the notion of "imaginative horizon" mentioned above, in the moment when a specific imagination is reached it is not an imagination any more because the imagination itself, its content, as already moved a bit further retaining its fundamental characteristic of unreachability. I consider thus that the use of the label of writers to describe one's own engagement with texts was an attempt at entering this social category, this reference group. At the same time once obtained that status people would no longer consider such group with the same fascination as before. This notwithstanding a "reference group" in the form of imagination still has an agency of its own, because it retains the ability to influence the people exposed to it, to guide them in their daily activities forming the frames of references to interpret the world in their mind, as I have exposed above. That's exactly how a "technology of the imagination" works according to Sneath, Holbraad & Pedersen (2009) as follow:

"[…] 'technologies of the imagination' are any objects and practices that bring about imaginative effects – that is, 'outcomes that they do not fully condition (Sneath, Holbraad & Pedersen2009: 25)" (Rapport 2015:7)

In my understanding of Trapez and Uni-Verse that is exactly what they accomplish for their members.  When they are constructing a community they are not only creating a place where people can obtain validation, but are also creating the preconditions to obtain that. When a writer is defined

in a specific way, as somebody who writes, or as somebody who has published, or anything else, they are also establishing the premises for the individual to reach in order to obtain that validation.

Technologies of the imagination are anyway characterised from their indirectness. According to the originators of the concept anti-determinism and anti-holism should be the main features defining them. Even though those are in fact the enablers of the way social actors will act in the future, they do not affect directly the situations they have precipitated and the kind of influence they had remains undetermined. Trapez and Uni-Verse work as technologies of the imagination because they provide to their members a specific image of writers, be it contested or not, but have no direct causality on influencing the future actual possibilities of any of their members. The imagination is widely shared and all the members coming to the associations commit themselves to it and propagate it to their peers through feedback and chit-chat, while at the same time no-one of them can really be said to have directly affected the way a person wrote her/his next text or his/her decision to send it to an agency or for a contest.

This process is even stronger for individuals passing through emerging adulthood. Among all different life stages that should be the one where people are confronted the most with an effort to define their identity, something that is accomplished very often in an experimental and experiential way (Arnett 2000). Interacting with an identity as writers could thus be traced back to an attempt at following a specific path for one's self-definition associated with this demographic pool.

The community is thus constructing through its activities an imagination for the individuals making them able to project their life project in the future, giving them an orientation which serves as contrastive strategy against the insecurity given from late modern "freedom" and inserting them in a meaning-laden environment, which will in turn construct the meaning frames upon which they will ground their future actions. In this sense I argue the associations are giving their members an orientation towards life instead that one towards market as Taylor (2013) argued. Feedback, contest, editor, publication, agent, flow, relatability and many other words are likely to become central axis to interpret the own life experience and accompany them along their life paths. Part of this interpretation results in the attainment of an identity. People start in fact conceiving of themselves as writers and shortly after fit themselves with the attributes deemed as characteristic of this social group. When presenting to others endorse therefore that specific side of oneself letting people address them for that short interaction through the characteristics that are stereotypically recognised as proper to that social group. Again we see here a Goffmanesque (1990 [1956]) mechanic of everyday life in action. Thinking back at the moment when people presented themselves to other within the associations they usually started by enunciating what they were reading and their writing preferences. Identity was here selectively chosen and within the group only the one related to

writing was seen as the relevant and interesting. The group, the community, plays thus a fundamental role in defining the identity of its members, both through imagination and interaction styles.

But the community it's not just giving a ready-made, free-to-wear identity to its members: it's also forging an identity for itself as a collective. For instance all the practices aimed at focussing on, if not reducing, the identity of the individuals on their writerly dimension have the effect of creating an in-group homogeneity used to reinforce collective belonging. All the practices[28] that I have described as forming a community in the former section have indeed a side effect of imbuing that community with a shared and collective self-awareness. The community as a technology of the imagination (Sneath, Holbraad & Pedersen 2009) turns up to be an imagined community too (Anderson 1983).

As Anderson (1983) stated:

> "[…] all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined". (Anderson 1983:6)

All human groups, even the face-to-face ones Anderson talks about, are thus formed arbitrarily and in the course of their creation they engage with symbols and meanings in order to define who they are, what makes them unique and what are the univocal characteristics of their members. Speaking of imagined communities implies exactly that there are specific practices and symbols which are sounded out as the univocal markers of the group (Anderson 1983). Identities are based on symbols; key elements regarded as true core define something or somebody for what it/she/he is. In group identities those elements are shared as point of reference for common identification.

Trapez and Uni-Verse of course made no exception in putting up processes and technologies to establish a common shared imagination of who they are. Some of those procedures were identical to those used to form a community. Communitas moments are for instance especially powerful tools where a multilayered act of sharing enhances a feeling of bonding associated with a shared identity definition. Repetition of that made it attainable. Through the reiteration of feedback sessions there was a constant confirmation of the central element that kept the community together assuring that texts were kept centre-stage and that the identities, individual but most of all collective, centred around those were re-enacted and confirmed. Communitas and its ritualism were essential to obtain such a goal. But "sharing" was already antecedent to those moments. As I have already highlighted

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28 The practices meant here are communitas and banter.

in the former section. People already shared a common career and a common background which are already a quite powerful starting point to help people recognise the others as peers with whom they can relate. Homogeneity and homophily[29] are indeed a complex mix of constructed and previous features. My interest here is anyway to stress that a common sense of bonding would not be possible without the stress on homogeneity and the socialisation to the group people are constantly subject to. When we speak of imagination for imagined communities we are in fact also referring to the projectuality behind those, that is the envisioning of a specific course of action for the time being and coming.

To conclude this section I would thus like to highlight briefly, what are the symbols around which the identity of the community is set for Uni-Verse and Trapez. The first one is without any doubt writing and reading. In the next chapter I will focus extensively on the relation people have with texts. Here it suffices to stress how texts were for my interlocutors a relational object used to establish bonds with others, as it might be expected from a "community of practice" centring around a specific activity. "Being a writer", any way one would define it, was thus a fundamental feature for everyone coming to the events. I have already shown at the beginning of this section how this was achieved within the associations.

A second fundamental symbol is the notion of community itself. That was used as a rhetorical discursive tool; it was a goal that the members of the group set themselves to accomplish and so talks about how to improve the community feeling permeated and defined the activities of the association.

In the case of Uni-Verse there was a further powerful symbol for their shared identity: language. The use of English as lingua franca implied a pre-selection of the people who might have had access to the group, namely native speakers or well-educated individuals at ease in writing and reading in a foreign language. Making such choice the association enforced one more time its class boundaries. Since Bourdieu (2010 [1979]) it's in fact common knowledge within social sciences that forms of consumption are an expression of class belonging and it could be argued that serious leisure is nothing but a dematerialised form of consumption, and investing social, human and time forms of capital instead of money. Adopting such language people are thus making a step further in the definition of who they are, not just writers, but writers writing in English, creating an even smaller niche of belonging.

But the use of English is also strictly connected to imagination. For most of my participants writing in this language wasn't a compulsory choice, like for people living in a foreign country and looking for a literary exchange without having the possibility to use their mother tongue for that. Instead I

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29  See page 48.

believe the choice to adopt it was also motivated from the prestige and the exoticism the foreign idiom carried along: it was a tool to enter in contact with an imagined elsewhere. As Marie said:

> "I also think we are a sort of ## (punctuating) exactly at the right moment in the history of time. *Why* I think we sort of grew up with English, ## (R: mm) ehhh, but it is still a little bit **exotic**. [...] So it's something where people can sayy ## "Ohh, I'm familiar with this- (faster) I can sort of fall back on it. It **has** the added prestige of being the world language." **And** at the same time though, it's not writing in your mother tongue" (Marie)

This wasn't however the predominant explanation among my research partners, which mainly referred to the textual affordances given from English in relation to German as main motivation for choosing to write in that specific idiom. It is however fundamental to keep in mind that there are many other writers in Austria that do not have the possibility to choose the language they would like to write in.

I would like to conclude this section stressing that even tough the groups are aiming for a general homogeneity there are still differences anyway and the two quotations from Marie and Anmol above[30], as well as the discussion between Anmol and Scott that inspired this thesis show how the definition of identity can be a quite debated topic. The idea that people have of what does it mean to be a writer is constantly created during the meetings through discussion and feedbacks. As Rapport (2015) highlighted imagination is always a debate among different subjectivities and never a straightforward imposition and one individual's worldview has to deal with those of the people around her/him. When however those imaginations are consonant with one another a multiplying and mutually reinforcing effect arises. It might come to a point when it starts assuming normative strength for all newcomers to the group and might even get naturalised making its origin invisible. The work of many of the technology of the imagination I have exposed above is exactly that. But this is just a temporally snap-shot and I assume much of both Trapez, Uni-Verse and their members is likely to change in the coming years and I would be really curious to see in which direction they will be transformed.

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30 See pages 63 and 64.

# 6.   Writers as Producers

Inasmuch it is true that people are subject to the influences of the social institutions they interact with and are moulded from them, it is also true that they are also the ones enacting those same institutions, thus not just being passively influenced from them but active agents in their construction and modification. In this chapter I try consequently to switch the perspective of former chapter and consider the members of the associations as active agents. Especially I will try to answer the question "what writers do when they write?". Leaving aside the immediate answer that they are tracing sings on paper or typing on a keyboard, I will attempt highlighting how this activity helped my research partners to frame their sense of self inasmuch as bring into focus and make sense of their life experiences in a late modern context.

## 6.1.   Self and Text

What is so special about writing that makes so many people choose it as a form of serious leisure?

In order to answer this question I believe it fundamental to start considering the interplay between the text as a material object and the author, specifically his/her self.

A relevant precedent in this analytical direction was set from Reed (2004) as he tried to make sense of the phenomenon of "enraptured reading" as it has been described to him from the members of the Henry Williamson Society. Those claimed a sense of alienation from themselves, a feeling of losing their own sense of self, as they read their favourite author Henry Williamson. The reading experience was so immersive that they felt they detached from who and where they were and could perceive the world as through the eyes of the writer, totally identifying with him.

Following those statements the author returned to Gell's (1998) theory of art production suggesting its extension to literary artefacts. When considering a piece of art anthropologically according to Gell (1998) the researcher should pay attention to the kind of relations that exist around it. Specifically Gell (1998) recognises four elements that are involved in the net of relations in which pieces of art are embedded: "the *index*, or artifact (usually the art object itself); the *artist*, or assigned creator of that object; the *recipient*, or audience of the object; and the *prototype*, or entity depicted or represented by the object (such as the sitter for a sculpture or the location for a landscape painting)" (Reed 2004:112, italics in the original). All those different elements intersect differently with each other establishing a unique set of relations for any art object. The concern of Gell (1998) resides mainly in understanding the ways through which a resemblance between an index and a prototype is established. Fundamental in the unfolding of my thesis is his acknowledgement that "indexes (whether portrait paintings, holy icons, war shields, or nail fetish

figures) are rarely credited with their own will or intention (Gell 1998:36). Instead, they are usually understood to obtain agency from an external source; the art object mediates between actors (artist, prototype, or recipient), allowing one to exercise influence on the other" (Reed 2004:112). In this chapter I will focus exactly on one possible configuration of the relationship between an index and the artist, investigating where the agency lies in their relation.

Reed (2004) departs from Gell's theory in order to investigate the recipient side. He tries to understand in what kind of relations the reader is involved and where does s/he perceive agency in the fruition of the art object. This second question is answered by the above mentioned notion of "enraptured reading", where the readers precisely state to immerse themselves so much in reading to lose cognition of themselves and perceive the world as through the eyes of the writer. It follows that a book might be esteemed as a substitute for the author as a person, especially in relation to her/his consciousness, ascribing to the physical artefacts the ability to think and feel (Reed 2004). This understanding is only possible inasmuch it is sustained from "a theory of authorship in which the writer is a figure that successfully detaches a part of him or herself and externalizes it in material form. [The writer] literally trans-forms himself into books" (Reed 2004:114): a worldview where the self of the writer is seen as externalised, crystallised and instantiated in the pieces of writing s/he produces. This conception brings to light a notion of individual personhood that differs from the typically assumed standard in North Atlantic contexts. Indeed, according to Gell (1998) "the person whose thoughts and feelings exist in material form is an expanded and disseminated being, present at different historical moments and in more than one place" (Reed 2004:115).

A final point to touch when speaking of Reed's (2004) text is the matter of activation. In order for books to exert agency on readers they need to be open and read, which implies the reader is actually using her/his agency to be in turn acted upon from the writer's one seeping out of the book. To immerse themselves even more in the texts members of the Henry Williamson Society even embarked in forms of pilgrimage to the books' settings claiming a form of acquaintance with those places because of living them through the narrating pages. In this it is possible to recognise a further form of agency that the author is able to exert on the world: through his writing Henry Williamson was actually able to move people around giving them the input to travel. We can see here a form of Gellian (1998) agency at work, that is, an agency that the author has detached from himself and imbued his writings with (Reed 2004). This observation was very interesting because the understanding of writing as a way to act on the world was nearly absent among my interlocutors. Nearly nobody expected to write a book that would have brought people "to the streets", highlighting instead other aspects much more connected to their intimacies. I shall touch upon them in the next section.

Reed's (2004) text remains however a fundamental starting point for this chapter and many of the notions exposed there will appear later on in the progress of this thesis. This is mainly due to a similar focus I have in analysing the relationship between texts and people, but instead of focussing on index and recipients, as Reed (2004) did, I will rather address the relationship between indexes and artists.

Inspired from Reed (2004) my first approach in this endeavour was to look for forms of non-individual personhood as they have been presented from authors such as Fowler (2004) and Strathern (1988), mainly in connection to non-European contexts. Specifically I tried to sound out whether writers were enacting some kind of dividual personhood (Fowler 2004) actually crystallizing a detached piece of their self in their writings. I have however come to the conclusion that I didn't find any evidence of that. Most of my interlocutors stressed in fact how a text was perceived as an alien entity once completed, something that didn't belong to them any more once it was out in the world:

> "it's kind of strange- I mean, ## especially like if longer time, ehmm, has- (faster) if it's been a longer time, since I've written the text, and I'm reading the text now out loud, I feeel more detached from it, andd, ehmm, (faster) I think I did this like the other week, when I read a poem, that Iii- I think I have written like a year ago, and I just found it again. Ehmm, andd when I find # older texts, ehm, sometimes I, I see lines on there that I just don't remember writing, so (faster) I feel like somebody else wrote it. So the feedback is a lot easier tooo, ehmm, take in, because (drawling) it feels less, ehmm, ### It feels like it is not about ### (drawling) mee" (Philipp)

In this excerpt it is possible to recognise how the decoupling between the author and his/her texts is perceived as so strong that the individual can't recognise any more her/his texts as an actual product of his/her own textual activity. But it also shed light on another constitutive dimension of this detachment process: time. Fresh texts were more likely to be taken as direct expressions of one's own inner reality from my interlocutors, while as older and sedimented they got the weaker got the initial connection with their writer, making statements such as that from Philipp possible. A text becomes in this sense a snap-shot of the writer in a specific moment in time, making future rereadings like "watching a movie of your past" (Marie). Older texts work like pictures. Browsing through an older text, knowing it is connected to one's own life experience, makes possible for the authors to recognise what was going through their minds and their lives as they wrote it. It is a mnemonic aid, which doesn't assume the text to be a part of the writer's personhood.

This was possible because texts were considered from my interlocutors as an expression of their selves, like clothing or the furnishing of one's own apartment. Just like consumption of specific goods is connected to class (Bourdieu2010 [1979]), so the individual's identity was put on display through specific objects that had a univocal and indexical reference to the person marking him/her as a unique individual. Those objects were consequently usually associated with emotional attachment. There is still however an enormous gap between assuming the personhood of an individual is extending outside his/her body and the affection felt for specific items.

To better understand the connection of people and their texts I first started my investigation exactly looking at the emotional dimension, especially I focussed on how people reacted to feedback: to what extent people felt stung, hurt or offended when listening to criticism to their text. "To take something personally" is indeed a very interesting expression that seems to hint at a connection between the individual and other objects which are deemed as inalienable parts of her/his self, and that once removed would provoke a feeling of loss and the need for the individual to answer once again to the question "who am I?". If we consider the centrality of such items for the individual's self-definition we can well comprehend the reactions to their loss, destruction or any other form of their preclusion for the person without needing to resort to the notion of personhood.

People reacted as a matter of fact in all the ways I have described above, but receiving a criticism wasn't the same for different kind of texts, different people and in different times. Interestingly Marie still relates individual reactions to a specific socialisation to the group and feedback dynamics:

> "some of [the people bringing a text for the first time] are just very very sensitive, and some of theem (slow) are just like- you know, like they # (fast) they bring something for the first time, it's the first time they share something and they really feel like they're *baring their soul*, and (punctuating) some people don't actually want feedback yet, and they don't know it." (Marie

People were exposing themselves when reading a text. It wasn't only a matter of receiving judgment from others but of letting someone have a glimpse of their intimate thoughts and deep inner realities. It was like inviting someone home in the Austrian context and decide s/he was trusted enough not to have to close the toilet door when going there. It meant letting someone look at one's own backstage where people prepared themselves to confront daily interactions (Goffman 1990 [1956]), and people needed to be prepared for the implications of exposing their selves to others. As I have already noted in the former chapter this had consequences on the interactions within the community, especially on behaviours of care and protection towards community

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members perceived as vulnerable. It follows that people were not always ready to consider comments neutrally especially for texts that were strongly infused with their everyday life. But even people who commented on texts were actually exposing themselves and might have tended to emotional reactions. Just like Rapport (2015) sustained imagination to be confronted with that of others, so feedbacks too were always the meeting point of different individualities. They were the outcome of a discursive interactional practice.

Indeed, texts themselves should actually be regarded primarily as a form of communication. Gell's (1998) theorization touches upon this point considering the net of relations that surrounds art objects, Jakobson's (1960) formulation of communicative exchanges however stresses exactly how texts work as communicative objects. Jakobson (1960) recognize several elements coming together in communicative exchanges: context, addresser, addressee, message, contact and code. Each one of those accomplishes a specific communicative function. As anthropologists analysing the feedback sessions our interest should lie in the contextual elements that define what communicative function is going to prevail over the others in that specific situations. Most of those definitory elements are established discursively. Assuming that a text is always a form of communication with a fixed addresser (the author) and a changing addressee (the readers) we have in fact to assume a variability of meaning attributed to the texts:

> "what is kind of funny at Uni-Verse is that, ehmm, there are always people who have (punctuating) the exact opposite opinion than so- someone else, so ehmm (laughing) so for example if someone says, says something about like my poem, that **I didn't mean at all**, or- that I didn't like at all, then there is **immediately** someone else who says the exact opposite [C laughs]" (Claudia)

Most of those meanings are context related, where context is also to be understood as cultural context, that is all the assumptions and worldviews a person put into play in an interaction (Lazzarotti 2020). Once again we notice here how the communicative reach of a text is the spark for the relational feature of the feedback session, exactly characterised from the interaction of different people and different selves. For members of the associations texts were indeed relational objects used to connect with other people.

The notion of "circuit of narration" as it has been expressed from Lazzarotti (2020) can maybe help us frame this situation better. Departing from the notion of "contractual realism" as expressed from Eco (1997) the scholar assumes a narrative event is always a kind of negotiation and the context where this takes place can be envisioned as a circuit connecting a narrator and an audience. All the

people involved in the interaction are also furthermore interpreting the situation and the content of the narration with the cultural frames they have been socialised to. Through the interaction and negotiation of narrators and audiences the world is created as a narrative locus. The listeners are especially putting in place a process of abduction to infer from the text, narration or art object a specific quality concerning the agency of the author or elements composing a speech act (Gell 1998). "The story is, thus, a sort of negotiation between the will -the creativity- of the storyteller, and the acceptance and the interpretation made by the audience" (Lazzarotti 2020:23). In so far as Lazzarotti (2020) speaks of narration we can easily assume his conclusions to be expandable to written texts inasmuch many written texts, including essays and poetry, are built in a narrative form "which transpire in time and have something roughly akin to beginning-middle-end structure, [and where] the retrospective dimension remains key" (Freeman 2015:27).

A text is thus a negotiation to which participates a wide range of individuals and where everybody put something into play and has own stakes. For writers that "something" is their own self in as much it is instilled in their texts. The projection those have of themselves as writers is part of it[31]. Texts are the physical instantiation of their message and as such can exist only in the moment they establish a connection between readers and writers. A writer is always writing with a specific addressee in mind. Even for texts that are not meant to be read by living human beings exist audiences like posterity, ancestors or other immaterial figures. Writing and reading are thus extricable only at the moment of analysis. The addressees, commentators at feedback sessions and readers, on their side put into play a part of themselves, literally and metaphorically exposing their judgments of value of good texts and good writers. Both groups of people engage in a process of mutual re-shaping as exposed in the former chapter. Texts are the medium around with their interaction is structured. Those have specific affordances, and one of those is to define the communication as intimate because aimed at sharing a deeper truth concerning one's inner reality: the glance into the backstage exposed above.

But communication, especially for its negotiation character exposed from Lazzarotti (2020), implies also that we are faced with a creative situation. Sawyer (2003) would probably ascribe a feedback session to a moment of group creativity, that is a moment where different individuals come together activating a mechanism of problem solving for a specific creative situation. Process, unpredictability, intersubjectivity, complex communication and emergence are the cornerstone of that interaction, all of them to be found in feedback sessions. They are processual and emergent because they usually have a specific unfolding and later comments are based on former ones, also making the coming together of more people more than the sum of individual comments: there is an

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31   See technologies of the imagination in chapter 5.

exponential effect. But this unfolding is also unpredictable leading to an artistic result unattainable for the individual in her/his solitude. The intersubjective character of feedback sessions allows this and it also establishes a complex form of communication, based upon the negotiation of individual representations (Sawyer 2003).

The kind of self people embodied when writing is also characterised from this creative aspect. Using the terminology from Ingold & Hallam (2014) it could be argued that it is a self in a state of making and growing. The two concepts are according to the authors strictly connected to each other and identify a process of creation where "making is to growing as being to becoming" (Ingold & Hallam 2014:4). In their view making should identify a process with beginnings and endings similar to "a rite of passage, and […] the maker as one who stands at the threshold, easing the persons and materials in his or her charge across from one phase of life and growth to the next" (Ingold & Hallam 2014:4). But growing is also a very similar concept. Ingold & Hallam state for instance: "[t]he predicate of making, let us say, is nominal in form. It is an entity or an event. But the predicate of growing is verbal; it is a 'going on'" (Ingold & Hallam 2014:4). The concept of growing in the making of an individual bring forth all the potentialities that are ascribed to the idea of self as creative and processual, or "anthropo-genic"; a word that "describe[s] how form, rather than being applied to the material [that is, to a person in our case], is emergent within the field of human relations. This is neither making nor growing, but a kind of making-in- growing, or growing-in-making" (Ingold & Hallam 2014:5).

The kind of personhood enacted from the members of the associations is precisely formed around this idea of openness. Thinking back to the careers of my interlocutors most of them admitted writing was something that has always been with them in a more or less conscious way, and looking at the future they stated how they were in a constant process of growing and evolution which wasn't perceived as having any kind of predictable end:

> Marie- It's really more about you are constructing something and then through that construction, people are sort of shedding light on ## (ascending tone) your ability to construct. But then by doing so, also you sort of this- yeah, a- a bit of both.
> Riccardo- Ok, so it's like kind of # constant evolution of persons- of people and texts?
> Marie- Yeah
> Riccardo- And like, is there any endpoint in this? [both laugh]
> Marie- (laughing) I don't think so. (R: ok) I mean, just based on everything I've seen from, from artists that have lived and died # I think (punctuating) very few of them reached a point, where they were like # "I'm done now, [M laughs] (R: ok) I don't have anything to say any more." Ehmm, I think, # if that point comes, we might have reached the apex of humanity.

The individual self was thus understood from the associations' members as a perfectible element of themselves, something not given in a fixed moment in time but continuously growing. In this sense it was also open and externalised, because such growth was only possible inasmuch other people were exposed to the self and allowed to make suggestions on the direction this self might have gone.

This understanding of personhood is consonant with the way Arnett (2000) portrayed emerging adults, but it also resonates with the way Wilf (2011) described present day individuality derived from Romantic and Sentimentalist models. Those two ways of thinking stressed the importance of self-expression, assumed as a way of exploring a self that was still partially unknown to its owner. Differently from the ideology stressing sincerity according to which the individual already knows himself/herself and a statement about oneself can be either true or false, there is here a stress on authenticity. Art and material and bodily experiences are a primary location where such disposition comes to the fore. The goal in art performance isn't thus any more the manifestation of one's self but its discovery, assuming the consonance between the produced piece of art and a positive sensation as hint of one's real self (Wilf 2011).

The text can be thus regarded as a mirror of its author, with the feature of constant development and research as key element joining them. Feedback works exactly on the premises that a text still has elements that might be made better. And a feedback is nothing but letting someone else propose a change that would happen in the Goffmanian backstage (1990 [1956]), a very sensitive spot for the individual as I have argued above. Those incursions inside the backstage by extension touches the front stage too changing an individual and sustaining her/him along a process of coming and becoming. Writers, as long as they frequent the associations, and maybe even later on, are never complete individuals and are constantly subject to a process of socialisation and anthropopoiesis (Remotti 1999). The person is not seen as an enclosed entity but something in flux where experiences and discourses pass through to find an output on the written page. In this sense the writer as it was understood from my research partners challenges the notion of personhood as a fixed entity inclining towards a processual understanding of it. The growth isn't anyway to be understood only as a sequence of changing, but as directed towards a goal. Like a tree getting higher and thicker so in their process of evolution my interlocutors aimed at becoming better writers. This is not surprising. As I have exposed in the former chapter the advantage of serious leisure and community resides precisely in giving individuals orientation. If the people were flowing like a river, serious leisure and community formed their dykes.

The concrete proves of that evolution were evident in the text. Inasmuch that represents a snapshot in time, it also mirrors its writer, especially because both are characterised from perfectibility.

> "because I feel like my interests have shifted- like (pause) the same things that I would have written about like a year and half ago I don't feel lik- I don't like writing them anymore. ## So, is also perh- as like **you growing, you** evolve, so does your writing". (Anmol)

In this we can see a semiotic dimension. As I have already explained texts are a form of communication and convey a lot to the readers about their authors. According to Lazzarotti (2020) narrations, or texts in our cases, are always conveying a kind of information to their addressees. It might be concretely a plain information clearly stated from the author, like about how fantastic is Uni-Verse in Florentina's poem, but it could also be an indirect information.

> "This also happens of course. Not only because of the content. It can happen that somebody really writes something autobiographical, but most often I get to know through the way a person writes, or the style, also the person better. Because just in the way a person considers something, or think about something, how exactly one person handles a topic it is possible to note differences [among different individuals]." (Charlotte, my translation[32])

People, especially "regulars" through their attendance of the meetings learned to disentangle the lives of the writers from their writerly production. Knowing each other was a powerful tool not only in refusing late modern anonymity[33], but also in understanding texts and the writer they mirrored better.

Anyway, limiting the value of a text only to the information it revealed about the author was perceived from many of my research partners as a limitation. Stefan in particular had a very negative feeling towards the connection of an individual's life and her/his literary production. In his view people were doing art when writing and so they should be able to communicate with people without any explicatory connection with the writer's personal life. I think we can see in this understanding the process of decoupling and momentarily obliteration of all extra-contextual sides of one's identity outside of the writing interest that sustained part of the association's relation with

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32  "Das passiert schon auch, weil, ehmm, (Pause) nicht nur unbedingt wegen dem Inhalt, (schneller) das kann natürlich sein, das man manchmal wirklich jemand autobiographische Dinge schreibt, das ist mir auch schon passiert, ehmmm, aber häufigeer, ehmm, (lange Pause) lerne ich durch die (langsamer) Art und Weise, wiee man schreibt, oder (skandiert) durch den Stil einer Person die Person auch besser kennen. (R: ok) Weil allein durch die Art und Weise, wie jemand, ehmm, etwas betrachtet, odeer, ehmm, über etwas nachdenkt- wie genau jemand sich mit einem Thema befasst, ehmmm, merkt man Unterschiede." (Charlotte)

33  See chapter 5.

texts[34]. A good feedback was indeed seen as based on the assumption of the equality of all community members which entitled them all at a good feedback sessions regardless of the content of the text, personal taste of feedback givers and relationships among people. So too the relationship between the self of the writer, her/his personal history and the path that lead him/her to write that specific text was considered as only marginally relevant.

This notwithstanding authors and their text were profoundly connected to each other, and for many writing basically meant to transfigure one's own daily experiences restructuring them in textual forms, be they prose-fictional or poetical. This is evident in Stefan's idea that only that specific author might have come to produce that specific text.

> "It could be only me who could have written my texts. No one else could have written them. You need my experiences, my childhood, my knowledge, everything I care about, my interests. There is no one else that could have written those that way but me. So of course it is inseparably connected with me, with the identity I have" (Stefan, my translation[35])

The positionality of the individuals is thus fundamental to conceive of the texts they write and the kind of relationship they established with them. As Wulff (2017) too stated fiction and reality are never too far apart from each other. The kind of relationship between the content of the text and the real life of the person isn't anyway that obvious.

> "I wouldn't even say it's an expression of myself, I would say it's an expression of my (drawled) thoughts. Because I cann # **think** about things that are't meee, and express them. # But that- but they're not strictly mee again. [...] *Like*, if I sayy, I'm gonna write as aa, ehmm, (punctuating) an alien in the year (laughing) 5200s, ehmm, than that's # meee, (R: ok) but not [me]" (Marie)

It is fundamental to distinguish between the writer as person and the writer as persona because the two do not always correspond. The "unsavoury" episode[36] Marie recalled in the former chapter happened exactly because of a misjudging of that boundary: expecting the narrator to embody a persona the members of the association were puzzled in ascertaining his actual mirroring of the person. Generally speaking however my research partners were all self-aware of the degree of their

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34  See chapter 5  and the flattening of an individual's identity on the writing dimension.

35  "meine Textee # h- hätte auch nur ich schreiben können, (schneller) niemand andere hätte meine Texte schreiben können. Also man braucht (Listenstimme) meine Erfahrungen, (Listenstimme, langsamer) meine Kindheit, mein Wissen, # (schneller) alles was mich interessiert, meine Interessen. Es gibt niemand (drawled) derrr # das so hätte schreiben können außer ich. So natürlich, insofern ist es natürlich # (drawled) unzertrennnlich verbunden # mit mir # mit, mit, mit (drawled) der Identität, die ich habe." (Stefan)

36  See page 60.

inner reality they were imbuing their texts with, and this permitted them to have a playful relations with those, deciding what to show and what to conceal of themselves. But writing was often a limitating activity that compelled them to make specific choices. A text has indeed agency not only for the readers when s/he's exposed to the self of the author but for the writer too inasmuch the physical support on which s/he writes has specific affordances and the writing represents a kind of compulsion, immersing the writer in a Csikszentmihalyan (1991) flow and detaching her/him from his/her surroundings (Rampley, Reynolds & Cordingley 2019). As I noted discussing with Stefan there is an interplay between the agency of the text and that of the author, that just like a reader is acting and acted upon at the same time.

> Riccardo- […] I find it really interesting, when you think that there is this compulsion to write, and at the same time there is a total control on [what is written on] the page.
>
> Stefan- Yes, […] I have the control over my text- absolute control, this is right. And at the same time I am forced to write the text. I don't know if this is necessarily a contradiction- let's say I am forced to exercise control over a text. [37]

A text was seen from my interlocutors as characterised from stylistic and narrative coherence which meant that the longer it became the narrower were the actual choices a writer might have made in steering the story or the poem. Even tough a writer might have approached a text treating it like s/he has supreme power over it, coherence and uniformity represented big limitations one has to consider, unless one would like to fall on surreal or nonsensical writings, which anyway still are genres with specific rules a writer needs to respect.

A second form of textual agency is the one that compels the writer to write, as a form of unload of overwhelming thoughts. In the next section talking about therapy I'll have the chance to treat it extensively.

## 6.2. Therapy and Catharsis

I still remember very clearly the first text I've listen to at Uni-Verse. It was written from Scott and it was a fictionalised retelling of his daughter's birth with plenty of details about his soon-to-be-father

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37  Riccardo- [...] ich finde das sehr interessant, wenn man denkt, dass # ehmm, dass man so ein Zwang zum Schreiben hat, (langsam) und gleichzeitig man die ganze Kontrolle auf die Seite hat.
Stefan- ## Mm, ## Ja, [...] Ich habe Kontrolle über mein Text- (schneller) absolute Kontrolle über mein Text, es stimmt schon, ja. Und bin gleichzeitig gezwungen # diesen Text zu schreiben. (Schneller) Ich weiß nicht, ob es notwendigerweise ein Widerspruch ist- alsoo, ich- ich bin gezwungen Kontrolle, auf einen Text auszuüben. [S lacht] (Stefan)

toughs and discussions with his wife. On that same day another girl presented another extremely intimate text. She addressed her former partner to unravel all the main happenings of their now ended love story. It was very moving. And this was just the beginning. In the weeks to come I would have listened to many other poems and stories grounded on the life experiences of their writers.

Telling a story is a way people have to deal with specific life situations (Vendel 2018). As Vendel (2018) argues in a context where general frames for explicating one's own life experience fail, people resort to new forms of storytelling in order to make sense of their vicissitudes. In the possibility to create an autonomous narration for one's life precisely lied for many of my interlocutors the strength of writing as a form of serious leisure. When writing people were not only choosing a way to spend they're free time but were actually involved in an effort that was reality-engendering as far as it not only helped them sustain their presented selves and justify their position in society (Goffman 1990 [1956]; Vendel 2018), but it also allowed them for an interactive engagement with their past (hi)stories and their future possibilities giving them the opportunity to retell themselves.

Writing assumed thus for my research partner an added value that differentiated it from other forms of serious leisure. It was its soothing quality, something my interlocutors defined as either therapeutic or cathartic, that marked out this activity.

> "I think a lot of those times I was like going through a lot of **really** hard stuff and that was like when I like- (pause) not just cope, but also like therapeutic (long pause) Ahmmm. Well like in 8th grade I kind of changed school, **out of nowhere.** Like my parents like (A mimic an excited person) "Oh! Let's see if she gets into this school!" (A speaks normally again) and then changed. Ahmm. Or like 12th grade going through really really tough time with a lot of things...**I think like definitely like- (pause) maybe not so much **now**, (pause) but like before I kind have (pause) (A select words carefully) learnt how to deal with emotions better (pause) That was definitely like (pause) a way to understand better, like a more therapeutic, like letting it out." (Anmol)

This understanding is not so original. Indeed, in the North Atlantic world this was a widely shared assumption ever since the inception of "creative writing classes". Outlining the history of creative writing teaching Ruf (2016) notes how that label found first applications in the early 20th century USA to describe a pedagogical approach to writing inspired from Dewey's philosophy that aimed at offering pupils a way to make sense of their emotions and life experiences. Later one it will be the

interconnected ideas of pedagogy and therapy that would steer the diffusion of creative writing courses to US-American colleges, before actual job opportunities are acknowledged for people undergoing that training and full creative writing degrees started being taught (Ruf 2016).

Writing is thus diffusely recognised as a "mode of understanding" (Freeman 2015). This is possible because in that there are many elements that are ascribable to a narrative dimension. As explained above[38] writing often follows a narrative scheme which imply many features of the latter also belong to the former. One of those is precisely the explicative power for the individual teller/writer:

> "the core of the idea of narrative as a mode of understanding is its retrospective dimension, that is, the fact that narratives always and necessarily entail looking backward, from some present moment, and seeing in the movement of events episodes that are part of some larger whole" (Freeman 2015:27).

Here we can start understand why writing has such a strong therapeutic power. Narratives, just like writing, offer individuals the opportunity to display a specific self of their choice: there is a constant interplay between their person and their persona, also depending upon the open evolving self described in the previous section. Even tough texts are in fact overwhelmed from personal elements, being grounded on the personality and the life experience of their writers, there are still high levels of crafting that allows people to choose how they want to present to others. Indeed a therapeutic effect also resides in the possibility to impersonate someone who is partially perceived as "not me". A total disguise is however never possible. What my research partners could instead do was to concentrate on specific sides of themselves instead of others, retaining the fundamental mirroring of authors and texts.

> "a side of the personality it's there. (R: ok) ## You- because you cannot **not** be there, you know- but sometimes # very deliberately youu **cut out** a lot of your sides, and you (punctuating) only play with one side." (Marie)

The infusion of one's self in the text was the activating mechanism for the therapeutic quality of my interlocutors' writerly activity. Through that action and process people had the possibility to engage in a play of distancing with the events and the emotions that drove their writing. Sometimes this happened through a fictional disguise while other times it was an explicit reflection of a specific life experience. In both cases the original inspiration often came from something that has overwhelmed

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38  See page 77.

the writer's thoughts, suddenly or for a while, and that now s/he felt like needing to make sense or get rid of. In such cases people felt emptied and relieved when putting the concluding dot at their piece of writing.

> "[It] feels like my brain is hyper-**charged**, and I need to get the charge out. (R: mm) Like I need to ground myself. Like when # (slow) you are actually electrically charged and then you need to touch the ground. It's that sort of thing. And through doing this Iii- I feel like (slow) my brain can put ## **concepts** intoo # **a framework,** (slow) that than makes it work. Annd- yeah, it's just a way of tackling overwhelming ## ehmm, life experiences, I would say- (faster) good and bad, ehm, either way" (Marie)

In Marie's utterance we can see how writing was often used to confront and cope with life experiences. But we can also notice the compulsion to write and how the text exerted agency over the writer almost forcing him/her to write and how this happened in an outbursting form. In other situation the confrontation wasn't incidental but actively sought. Knowing one tackles personal life experiences when writing brought some of my interlocutors to seek the face-off actively. They knew they could have avoided to deal with specific situations, but they also knew those would have remained lingering around in their heads and their lives. Writing compelled them to face them head on stopping them from beating around the bush any longer.

> "I just (listing voice) have to sit down and ehm, put them on, on (listing voice) paper, or on the screen, ehm, because # maybe the reason that I don't know how to express them is because I, ehmm, haven't really **thought** about them and reflected on them, and writing is a very reflective process, ehmmm, and I think writing, ehm, can rev- reveal things about yourself to yourself, that you didn't know" (Philipp)

In this last excerpt from Philipp we can see how the open self interlocks with the therapeutic aspect: very often the discoveries one makes about oneself and one's life accomplished through writing depend on the perceived mirroring of author and text and the kind of artistic production envisioned as self discovery as outlined from Wilf (2011). Writing was indeed seen from some of my interlocutors as a form of investigation, or a method to discover something more about oneself and the world they lived in. For Stefan it was precisely the possibility to investigate the world that moved him to write.

"I just don't understand the world. I basically don't. I don't understand people. I often don't understand myself and my texts are interpretations of the world and of myself, you could say. […] They are an attempt- I mean, I want that absolutely, I want to understand the world. I want to understand myself better. Even when I know this won't really work, I mean, this is a never-ending process" (Stefan, my translation[39])

In the play of distancing writing thus also represented a method to come closer to one's self or something else troubling her/him. There was a double movement were the distancing from something was actually a way to put it under focus, which implied people could reconcile with it and so be actually closer than at the beginning. Just like Remotti (1990) defined anthropology as the longest journey home quoting Clyde Kluckhohn (Remotti 1990:) so too worked writing. Writing could in fact be recognised as a form of anthropology and in this direction it has been investigated from many scholars (Wiles 2018; Brandel 2020a). What I would like to stress here is how texts themselves represented actors in that play of distancing and not just mere receiver of writing actions. Indeed, sometimes it was them which were too close to the writer representing one of the overwhelming experiences Marie talks about[40] making the authors blind towards them, preventing them from see possible lacks and shortcomings in their own writings. Feedback sessions helped writers re-establish the adequate distance through the listening to other people comments and the confrontation about the texts.

Finally, English was for Austrian members of Uni-Verse another help in attaining distance. Having the possibility to express one thoughts in a foreign idiom permitted to consider them under another light, helping feeling less involved in those.

"To write in German always means that the texts are closer to me, because they get written in my mother tongue, and when I write about something sometimes I notice that I don't have enough distance. In German. But when I write in English I have also a footstep more distance and this is enough to succeed in writing" (Charlotte, my translation[41])

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39  "ich versteheee die Welt einfach nicht. [S laughs] Grundgehend nicht. [...] Ich verstehe Menschen grundlegend nicht. Ehmm, mir selbst oft grundlegend nicht, mein Verstand grundlegend oft nicht. […] unnd # sozusagen, meine Texte sind # Interpretationen der Welt # und von mir selbst, kann man sagen. (R: mm) […] es ist eben ein Versuch-also, ich will, dass unbedingt- ich will die Welt verstehen. Ich will mich b- besser verstehen. Ehmm, ## das (unverständlich) auch wenn ich weiß, dass es nicht ganz gehen wird- also, das ist ein unabschließbarer Prozess." (Stefan)

40  See page 86.

41  "auf Deutsch, ehmm, zu schreiben, bedeutet auch immer (Long Pause) dass mir dieee (Long Pause) ehm, die Texte sehr viel näher sind, weil sie halt in meiner Muttersprache geschrieben werden, und wenn ich über ihnen etwas schreibe, ehmm, manchmal merke ich, dann ist es ok, das ist jetzt d- da habe ich zu wenig Distanz. Auf Deutsch (R: Ok). Aber wenn ich jetzt auf Englisch schreibe habe ich irgendwie (Pause) daann einne Schritt mehr Distanz und das reicht dann aus, um das Schreiben (unintelligible, durch?) zu kommen" (Charlotte)

Most of my research partners however still didn't feel like the therapeutic aspect was so relevant for their writing activity. The presented texts were considered as art works, meaning the craft involved in writing them should have made the referentiality to the actual life of the individual more opaque if not invisible and irrelevant at all. This consideration was especially relevant for prose, because it was believed to always be somehow fictionalised while poetry should have hols a bigger transparency in mirroring its author's life. However, "fiction is not detached from reality. Both writing and reading fiction build on memory and imagination. The recognition of sensorial experiences is vital for an appreciation of fiction. Literary accounts of the senses can bring back the memory of certain situations for the reader, and this is why such sections tend to stick in our memory" (Wulff 2017:55). To that I would add this is also why texts have therapeutic power when read and reread, because they connect to the lived experience of their readers.

Both prose and poetry were thus charged with therapeutic power but worked in two different ways. While poetry directly mirrored the lived experiences and inner realities of the individual, fiction allowed for the exploration of the fantastic; all the possibilities that are not here and now. While poetry looked back at the past, prose, especially fiction, stared forward to the future. Both however were grounded in the present and obtained meaning from their connections with the present conditions of writers, readers and their surroundings.

Prose, but especially fiction, in its exploration of the fantastic had another feature that enabled its therapeutic power: the freedom the writer has in steering the events at will inside her/his text. In a world that seems to disempower more and more the individual, depriving her/him of the possibility to influence his/her surrounding, the writer can find comfort in the page creating a world that not only resembles and mirrors her/him, but that is also subject to her/his total will and control. Writing is a process of reducing the "real" to something manageable, totally subjected to the writer's will and where s/he can easily find orientation. It is a place set to contrast a daily life experience marked from uncertainty.

This control is sometimes challenged from the agency of the text, when a specific development of the story forces the author in writing in a specific way. As I told Stefan in the interview, and explained above[42], the members of the associations feel like trapped between the possibility to control their writing and the compulsion and affordances of the text upon which they have no power. The therapeutic aspect resides exactly in the interplay of those two dimensions retaining control when order is needed and letting things go when overwhelmed from current situations.

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42  See page 83.

But this is also a place for testing possible alternatives. Grounding most of the stories on the "what if…?" people can explore their personas giving spaces to sides of themselves that would have otherwise remained covered in their daily interactions. In writing my interlocutors were not just mimicking their life but transfiguring it, giving it other nuances and converting this way what could have been a simple account in an artistic product. This still does not imply however that people would only write about beautiful utopias. Exploring darker fantasies also had for them a relieving effect:

> "hopefully have a good time with them. (sights) And I think good time can also mean a bad time. #
> You know, like # specifically going into something (ascending tone) to experience negative emotions
> in a safe environment" (Marie)

It was not just a matter of unloading repressed feelings but also of distancing from them, knowing they are on the page only and cannot affect one's life, or exploring unacceptable sides of themselves in everyday interactions (Rampley, Reynolds & Cordingley 2019). In this sense writing was also a form of tragic catharsis in an Aristotelian (1996) sense. According to the Greek philosopher a tragedy staged an imitation of reality reproducing its bloody, grievous and dramatic features. Through their staging it was thus possible to sublimate those feelings emptying the spirit of the spectators from destructive passions (Aristotle 1996). In anthropology we can revise here a similarity with the way Frazer (1994 [1915]) thought of the working of magic, especially the principle of similarity that might have permitted a transition of features from objects resembling each other. Paraphrasing this idea it could be argued that writing fiction works as a kind of cathartic magic, where acting on the page works for the author as a "transferred" form of action coming to same results for an individual's inner reality.

The same cathartic and therapeutic effect can also be identified in the act of reading. Already written texts, especially books, were in fact approached from my interlocutors through a similar play of distancing, that is, trying to get closer or away from daily experiences. A good read was indeed read in connection to the reader's present day vicissitudes and interpreted sometimes as a way to escape from them and other times as a way to understand them better. In addition people could actually engage texts in order to live again some specific situations of their past, just like they looked for an active confrontation with overwhelming thoughts in writing. This is especially true for the texts that the author herself/himself has written.

"sometimes when I'm in a particular situation that # reminds me of a poem that I have once # written, then I go for it again" (Claudia)

The benefits of this coming back to older texts in situations similar to those that originated them was possible because texts represent fixed instantiations of former experiences (see previous section). Through cathartic magic it was like people were enhancing their experience of that situation (re)living it multiple times at multiple levels. Especially for poems for instance people could improve the intensity of the experience they were living because texts worked as a kind of button that activated a waterfall of feelings and memories that were stored somewhere within their minds.

In addition to this there was a second therapeutic effect. Just like the community they belonged to offered them a specific orientation towards life, so too my interlocutors looked for further ones in the text they read, both theirs and of other authors. Texts worked in this sense like the traditional narratives Cruishank observed among Yukon native elders:

"narratives […] provided pivotal philosophical, literary and social frameworks essential for providing young and not so young people with ways of thinking about how to live life appropriately" (Cruikshank 1999:100).

We can see here a continuity between the oral narratives and myths and written texts, which might bring us to argue the latter work as a kind of *modern myths*, in the measure it gives people guidance and advice for daily activities. A sign of that might be recognised in the way enraptured reading moved around people across Great Britain in Reed's (2004) investigation, bringing them to settings of novels.

Enraptured reading as defined from Reed (2004) has furthermore a very strong therapeutic power, also connected to the play of distancing. In the moment when readers get totally absorbed from a text it is possible for them to leave all their present day anxieties and worries to engage a pleasant activity that distances them from the here-and-now. The same can be said for writing. Indeed, writing is a process that involves a high degree of reflection and concentration filling up for a certain time span with different thoughts one's mind.

Enrapture reading is however only possible in the moment when people can "relate" to characters. One of the most often outed comment and requested feedback during feedback sessions was if listeners/readers could have actually empathised with the content and the characters of the presented texts. "I can relate to that", or, "ich kann das nachvollziehen" were sentences that permeated all the

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feedback sessions I took part into. In the moment when people could immerse themselves in what they were reading and felt it "real", that is, close to their life experience, they could actually use the text to interpret their present and past vicissitudes. Having to read about characters that acted inconsistently, not understanding what moved them to action or why a poet was interpreting a situation in a specific way could have been thrilling at first, but in the end resulted in an alienating effect turning the reader away from the content. I assume the specific moment of their lives my research partners influenced if they felt more or less attracted from those kind of texts,, but this fact only stresses how texts, even read ones, actually reflect the personality and the self of individuals.

To conclude this chapter I would like to mention that belonging to a community also had a therapeutic power. When my interlocutors were recognised as members of the group this also had a soothing effect on their psyche. In this sense therapy and catharsis are two fundamental features of validation that actually lump together what validation does on the lives of individuals. Writing as a form of serious leisure is thus a stronger form of validation because it can already count on a pre-existing form of therapeutic effect that writing can exert even when done by individuals alone.

# 7. Conclusion

It happened again towards the end of January. The number of lock-downs increased from one to three and nearly all autumn and the begging of winter had to be spent home, accessing Uni-Verse and Trapez only via VoIP[43] software. It was inside this frame that I attended my last meeting at Uni-Verse so far. It wasn't anyway just a regular meeting, but a very special one. Not only because it was the last one hosted from Marie, officially ending the transition period that would have brought to Anmol's presidency over the association, but also because we went back talking about what makes a writer. It wasn't however really spontaneous, I have to admit. Few days before as a matter of fact I sent in the introduction to the thesis to receive feedbacks on it and hoping to engage my research partners in backtalk practices (Cardano, Venturini & Manocchi 2011) and to listen to their opinions about my research outcomes. I also invited people from Trapez to join in, but unfortunately the end of the semester also coincided with the exams period and other obligations preventing all of them to come. Generally the amount of people and texts at the meeting was rather small. This notwithstanding I was happy I could share it with Claudia, Marie and a bunch of other fellow writers. I was rather scared too, afraid my insights might have not been accepted or that they might have been rejected because judged as an inadequate portrait of the association and its members. Fortunately this didn't happen and the descriptions I offered in those few lines were recognised as quite fitting.

Only Jaimie[44], currently a PhD student in history at the University of Vienna, reacted a bit sceptically towards the notion of late modernity. Concretely his puzzlement was that its theorists were presuming to have fully understood the features of the time they were living in and could clearly mark its boundaries. Generally however feedbacks were quite positive. Marie reacted with extreme excitement stating her surprise in seeing me giving so much space to the dimension of banter and how proud she was she achieved making it one of the lynchpins of Uni-Verse during her mandate as president. This and other comments seemed all to mirror the excitement that granted validation might engender in individuals. Wiring about the associations indeed implies to recognise them, confirm their existence and validity as such. Consequently the thing that struck and excited Marie the most was to think that a work considering Uni-Verse from a "scientific" standpoint could even exist. She fantasised how this could have brought fame to the association and declared me as the first historian of Uni-Verse.

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43  VoIP is the acronym for "Voice over Internet Protocol". It is the name of a software technology that trough video calls and video chats tries to reproduce the features of actual face-to-face communication.
44  Anonymised.

This expression of validation fits very well with what I have tried to argue in this thesis about validation and its lack in late modern living conditions. Feelings of anonymity and powerlessness compelled my research partners to look for a space where they could exert relative control, feel they were engaging in something meaningful and by that being recognised as fully-fledged individuals by others they thought very highly of. Writing as a form of serious leisure (Stebbins 2001) represented for my interlocutors a space where this all could happen. Writing was indeed a space where people had the opportunity to tell the stories they wanted and by doing that retell themselves and exert control over the events happening on the page. This way it was possible to get rid of overwhelming personal vicissitudes that occupied the mind of the writer just like it was possible to actively think about and confront one's life experiences. Therapy and catharsis were the expressions used to define that relieving outcome. A similar result was not limited to the writings of my research partners. Reading texts from others offered to my research partners too the possibility to lose themselves in them and find frames to understand their life experiences. But my very master thesis had also a similar distancing effect for them. Interestingly during the feedback sessions Marie indeed thematised the estranging sensation resulting from framing one's everyday life under the defamiliarising gaze of anthropology. She defined it as being like in a laboratory under scrutiny and combined her observation with the gesture of putting her hands one in front of the other and slowly pulling back the one behind towards herself, the farthest hand representing how she experienced the association and the closest one how I described it.

It wasn't however writing alone that offered to my research partners a shelter from late modernity but also the opportunity to share it with others. Having a community of peers established around a shared practice indeed offered them the possibility to see one's effort recognised from people cherished for their judgement because involved in the same activity and thus aware of the stakes and hurdles connected to it. This recognition was part and parcel of the process of community building involving the members of the associations. Through sharing of activities, time, banter and chit-chat it was indeed possible to create a group that gave to its members a strong sense of identification and belonging, creating a collective shared identity as writers. This latter phenomenon wasn't just connected to the validation such label as writers would have given to the individuals, but also to the establishment of the parameters that qualified what kind of validation was the most desirable. The group indeed offered to its member "the writers" as a reference group (Merton & Kitt 1950) which lifestyle, accomplishments and self-definition were considered as goals to aim for. In this sense it offered them an imaginative horizon (Crapanzano 2004) that would have oriented individuals towards values and objectives to pursue for the rest of their lives. Emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000), a time frame in which people are more subject to look for a self-definition and that characterised

most of the associations members, helped the communities in their work as technologies of the imagination (Sneath, Holbraad & Pedersen 2009).

Emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000) might be thus understood as the driving force that pushed individuals to look for a definition of their identity and their self. This definition wasn't however conceived as a conclusive, but rather as a temporary state. The kind of self envisioned from my research partners was in fact an open one in a constant process of redefinition, growing and making (Ingold and Hallam 2014), just like Wilf (2011) had recognised to be the case for people engaged in creative processes. Writing was a way to look for and experiment different possibilities of self within the texts. The latter were so not so much envisioned as a raw matter subject to the moulding force of the writer but as a partner in a dialogue that had the power to mutually define the two entities involved in it. Writers through writing (re)defined themselves as much as their writings.

This last fact invites us to think that the definition of writers might similarly be best placed at the intersection of two different axis: the definition people give of themselves and that others give of them. Through this thesis I have tried to consider both those dimensions. That last evening at Uni-Verse we also discussed them. Mainly pondering whether the grammatical structure of the title really offered a possible double interpretation of it, letting so both those two different understandings emerge. Both those two readings hint to a common underlying notion of identity and its definition, and it was very satisfactory for me that evening to see people recognise spontaneously this and the question as a very central ones for their lives judging it as a very appropriate title for the thesis.

Unfortunately I couldn't gather the opinions of the members of Trapez on that, just like I couldn't engage them in a similar practice of backtalk. Even though I invited them to the Uni-Verse meeting they were all too busy and couldn't attend. Time management prevented me to arrange another meeting to discuss with them the thesis before its conclusion. I imagine however their perspective might be similar to the one I encountered at Uni-Verse, even though I can't be totally sure about it. I still plan to send to all my research partners the completed work and we'll have the possibility to discuss it if they like. After all the focus of the associations is precisely that of commenting texts.

Concerning the future of both associations it looked quite rosy. During my months of research Trapez has been steadily increasing in numbers and I guess it will soon became one of the major meeting places for emerging adults (Arnett 2000) willing to engage writing in German. As for Uni-Verse the wind was already blowing strong in their sails. It would be interesting to come back in ten or fifteen yeas and observe if and how the members changed their approach to writing, how did their career (Goffman 1959; Hannerz 2004) unfold in the future and if they changed their opinion about what makes a writer. It would also be interesting for me to undertake original research directions for the anthropological study of literature like the shifting of focus from North Atlantic con-

texts and English speaking academia that have been predominant so far to ethnographically expand and multiply our perspectives on the topic. Libraries and bookstores are also two settings that might help refresh the take on the matter. The recent burgeoning of scholarship in this area of study[45] seems to promise interesting developments in a not so far future: this story has just started.

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[45] See the conclusion of Chapter 3.

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# Online Resources

Uni-Verse website: http://universe.univie.org/ (last checked 13/02/2021)

Uni-Verse constitution: http://universe.univie.org/uni-verse-constitution-english/ (last checked 13/02/2021)

Trapez website: http://literaturverein-trapez.com/ (last checked 13/02/2021)

# Abstract (English)

This thesis is the outcome of an ethnographic exploration of creative writing associations in the city of Vienna. Focussing on a German and an English speaking one I suggest writing was here mainly pursued as a form of serious leisure (Stebbins 2001) that allowed the participants to come to terms with the uncertainties and anonymity characterising late modern societies. My main focus of attention was how the identity of writers was created within those settings, and how this offered to the associations' members a community of reference and belonging, an orientation for their life projects and the recognition as fully-fledged individuals. I argue in this sense that the associations worked as technologies of the imagination (Sneath, Holbraad & Pedersen 2009). I furthermore sustain that the soothing effect resulting from individual validation wasn't only depending on the attendance of the associations but was also a property of writing per se. Writing was indeed for my interlocutors an instrument to explore the possibilities of their selves, helping them to understand themselves and their life experiences by framing and bringing into focus their vicissitudes. Those became more clear in the moment the individuals distanced themselves from them and observed them from far away. This revealed writing to be a process of detachment.

# Abstract (Deutsch)

Die vorliegende Masterarbeit ist das Ergebnis einer ethnographischen Untersuchung von Vereinen für kreatives Schreiben in Wien, bei der mein Fokus auf einem deutschsprachigen und einem englischsprachigen Verein lag. Aufgrund dieser Forschung behaupte ich, dass das Schreiben in diesen Vereinen hauptsächlich als eine Art „serious leisure" (Stebbins 2001) betrieben wurde, dass den Mitgliedern das Verkraften der Ungewissheit und Anonymität spätmoderner Gesellschaften ermöglichte. Mein Hauptinteresse in diesen Vereinen lag hierbei darin zu verstehen, wie eine Identität als SchriftstellerIn innerhalb dieses Umfelds geschaffen wurde. Weiters beschäftigte ich mich damit, wie diese Vereine den Mitgliedern eine Stütze und Hilfe für ihre Lebensprojekte bot, darüber hinaus als Referenzgemeinschaft fungierte und den Schreibenden Zugehörigkeit und Anerkennung als vollständige Individuen vermittelte. Ich argumentiere hierbei damit, dass die Vereine den Mitgliedern als „technologies of the imagination" (Sneath, Holbraad & Pedersen 2009) gedient haben. Ich behaupte ferner, dass der heilende bzw. beruhigende Effekt, der sich durch die individuelle Bestätigung in diesem kreativen Umfeld ergibt, nicht nur von den Vereinen an sich abhängt, sondern auch durch das Schreiben per se resultiert. Schreiben stellte für meine GesprächspartnerInnen eine Möglichkeit dar, mit der sie sich selbst erforschen konnten indem sie die Unbeständigkeiten ihres eige-

nen Lebens umrissten beziehungswiese fokussierten und dadurch sich selbst und ihre Lebenserfahrungen zu verstehen lernten. Dies wurde besonders dann deutlich, wenn sie sich durch das Schreiben von ihren Lebenserfahrungen entfernten und diese aus der dadurch entstandenen Distanz betrachteten. Diese Tatsache offenbart das Schreiben als einen Prozess des Loslösens.