

**A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG/
MATURE WOMAN IN *JUST KIDS*, *M TRAIN*, AND
YEAR OF THE MONKEY, BY PATTI SMITH**

**RETRATO DE LA ARTISTA JOVEN
Y MADURA EN *JUST KIDS*, *M TRAIN*
Y *YEAR OF DE MONKEY* DE PATTI SMITH**

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Abstract

Patti Smith and her 2010 National Book Award-winning *Just Kids* offers an autobiographical account of the artist's life with the photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. Smith also shows her involvement in New York City's bohemian downtown scene in the 1960s and 70s. In 2015, Smith published a second memoir, *M Train*, and a third one, *Year of the Monkey*, followed in 2019. These two books are more experimental works where linear chronology is altered. The narrator mixes dream and reality in her recollection of her life after the death of her husband Fred "Sonic" Smith, and pays homage to those beloved persons (writers, artists, family members, friends) who have made an emotional and artistic impact on her. As a significant number of critical articles and book chapters have been devoted to analysing gender issues and narrative strategies of life-writing in Smith's memoirs, my aim in this essay eschews those topics and explores the search for the artistic self as well as Smith's ideas of art and performance in *Just Kids*, *M Train* and *Year of the Monkey*.

Keywords: artistic memoir, artistic self, performance, creative partnership.

Resumen

Patti Smith, en su libro *Just Kids* (2010), premiado con el *National Book Award*, ofrece un relato autobiográfico de su vida con el fotógrafo Robert Mapplethorpe.

Smith también nos muestra su participación en el mundo bohemio de Nueva York en los años 60 y 70. En 2015, Smith publicó otro libro de memorias, *M Train*, seguido de un tercero, *Year of the Monkey*, en 2019. Ambos libros son obras más experimentales cuya cronología se ve alterada en su linealidad. La narradora mezcla sueños y realidades en su evocación de su vida después de la muerte de su marido, Fred “Sonic” Smith, y rinde homenaje a los seres queridos (escritores, artistas, familiares, amigos) que han ejercido una decisiva influencia artística y emocional sobre ella. Puesto que un número significativo de artículos y capítulos de libro ya han analizado elementos de género y estrategias narrativas de escritura autobiográfica en dichas obras de Smith, mi objetivo en este ensayo es explorar la búsqueda que realiza Smith de su yo artístico y sus ideas sobre el arte y la representación en *Just Kids*, *M Train* y *Year of the Monkey*.

Palabras clave: memoria artística, yo artístico, representación, relación creadora.

1. Introduction: Life Writing Genres and Patti Smith’s Legacy

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On May 22, 1989, Robert Mapplethorpe’s memorial service day, his mother told Patti Smith, “You’re a writer, she whispered with some effort. Write me a line” (Smith 2012: 288). The lady died three days later, so she never received Smith’s letter. Smith wrote a piece for Robert Mapplethorpe’s book *Flowers*, as well as the collection of poetry *The Coral Sea*, and she even made drawings in remembrance of him. But she felt she still had a mission to complete: to write their common story. She waited for twenty-one years before publishing the memoir *Just Kids* (2010) in order to convey Robert Mapplethorpe’s voice beyond the silence of the grave (Watson 2015: 136).

The genre of female rock memoir has attracted a great deal of attention in the past decade. Patti Smith’s memoir *Just Kids* (2010) was no pioneer in life writing but had much to do with the emergence of this literary phenomenon. In 2015, Smith published another autobiographical work, *M Train*, followed by *Year of the Monkey* in 2019, which has consolidated her reputation as a memoirist. As a significant number of critical articles and book chapters have been devoted to exploring gender issues and narrative strategies of life writing in Smith’s memoirs, my aim in this essay eschews those topics and focuses on the search for the artistic self as well as on her ideas of art and performance in *Just Kids*, *M Train* and *Year of the Monkey*. The sacralising function of art in these books alludes to the reverence and fascination that Patti Smith feels for creative activities, and for those who participate in this process. Art becomes a religion, which requires faith and sacrifices; in exchange, Patti Smith receives a mission she must fight to accomplish. The road to

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art is narrated in *Just Kids*, whereas in *M Train* and *Year of the Monkey*, the mature Patti Smith, now a consolidated multidisciplinary artist, shares her anxiety at losing this gift. She tries to retain it by writing incessantly, reading and rereading her favourite authors, and travelling to places where her beloved creators lived, died or dreamt about.

In their guide for interpreting life narratives, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson distinguish between life writing, life narrative and autobiography. Life writing refers to writing of diverse kinds that take life as its subject (biographical, novelistic, historical, etc.). Life narrative would be a narrower term that includes many kinds of self-referential writing, including autobiography. Autobiography emerged in the Enlightenment and is the most widely used term for life narrative. However, this issue has also been questioned because it celebrates the autonomous individual and the universalising life story. A number of postmodern and postcolonial theorists state that this term is not adequate to illustrate the diversity of genres and practices of life narratives (Smith and Watson 2001: 3-4).

Among the autobiographical practices that Smith and Watson mention, we can also find 'memoir', 'autothanatography', 'autotopography', 'autoethnography', and *Künstlerroman*. The terms autobiography and memoir are often used interchangeably, but there are also differences. Lee Quinby considers that in autobiography, the "I" examines an assumed interiority whereas memoirs are constituted in the reports of the utterances and proceedings of others (1992: 299). Julia Watson adds that voice in memoir needs not be monologic, narrating personal and collective stories (2015: 131). Autothanatography has been applied to autobiographical texts that deal with illness and death (Smith and Watson 2001: 188; Hernández Hellín 2019: 196). Jennifer González has defined autotopography as the transformation of a person's personal objects into autobiographical ones in a way that "these personal objects can be seen to form a syntagmatic array of physical signs in a spatial representation of identity" (1995: 133). Autoethnography focuses on how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other in the contact zone of cultural encounter (Pratt 1992: 7). The autoethnographer would serve as an insider-outsider observer, a historian of the moment who offers a mosaic of a cultural moment. Finally, *Künstlerroman* refers to the autobiographical narrative of artistic growth, the artistic coming-of-age story (Watson 2015: 138, 143).

In spite of this different classification, for Irene Kacandes what all life writing genres have in common is their reference to the "real world" (2012: 396). Dorrit Cohn has also explored the connections between texts and the world outside them. She mentions that in non-fiction writing there exists a referential level that can be confirmed with documents, a kind of "data base" beyond the text (Cohn

1999: 112). Furthermore, Matthew Sutton asserts that in recent studies of autobiography and life writing, the paratext (elements of a book outside the narrative such as photographs, prefaces, epilogues, appendices) has emerged as a significant object of examination. In particular, he finds it quite relevant in popular musicians' life writing because such material usually reinforces the protagonists' professional achievements, their cultural significance and their claims to authenticity, thus offering a parallel discourse to the narrative (Sutton 2015: 208). In keeping with this, according to Stein and Butler, musical autobiographies show the presence of interfaces between written autobiographical narrative and different musical and visual modes of self-performance (2015: 117). Besides, writing a musical autobiography means telling a life that has already been told in interviews, biographies, and in the musician's public image as portrayed in record covers, posters, ads, video clips, podcasts, online promotion, and live performances. These critics also highlight the intermedial and relational nature of musical autobiographies because the narrated musician's life story is linked to a whole network of people and institutions that have supported and promoted the writer in his/her musical and literary efforts. The musician's music becomes a part of the autobiography, together with its different forms of delivery (sound recording, video clip, interviews, magazine coverage). Musical autobiographies tend to be grouped under the label of star/celebrity autobiographies, which suggests lack of literary value and the promotion of mass entertainment. In addition, the majority of musical autobiographies are the result of processes of collaboration that include an "as told to" format and cases of ghost-writing.

The Western notion that the self-determined subject present in an autobiographical text endows cultural legitimacy and respectability is something many musician-writers long for when they start writing their autobiographies. But, as many autobiographies are collaboratively written, this may complicate any account of personal autonomy and individual genius (Stein and Butler 2015: 116-118). In his review of three memoirs by women musicians, *M Train* (2015) by Patti Smith, *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl* (2015) by Carrie Brownstein, and *I'll Never Write My Memories* (2015) by Grace Jones, Barry Shank shares Stein and Butler's reflection on the voice of memoir not being the product of a single core self (2016: 382). Similarly, Julia Watson suggests that in *Just Kids* we appreciate the centrality of a performing self that emerges interactively from relationships with others and an authorial voice which is shared and that recreates two lives (2015: 135). In *M Train* and *Year of the Monkey*, Smith pays homage to those beloved persons, writers and artists who have made an emotional and artistic impact on her. In *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl*, Carrie Brownstein acknowledges the partnerships in her band as central to the emerging self. Grace Jones's memories, *I'll Never Write My Memories*, display an elusive self, neither individualised nor particularly strong.

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Smith, Brownstein and Jones use these memoirs to make a claim about their artistic seriousness. They build their own selves through artistic creation in collaboration with others (Shank 2016: 382-383).

For Tomasz Sawczuk, female rock memoirs like the ones he discusses in his article (by Carrie Brownstein, Kim Gordon and Brix Smith Start) challenge the stereotypical image and place of women in the entertainment industry and show their way to empowerment and freedom through art (2016: 80). Also, the act of performing live contributes to these memoirists' independence and sense of value. Their vulnerability and anxiety become strengths (75-76). In this respect, critics Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron, in their book *Significant Others* (1993), question common generalisations about creativity being an extraordinary and usually male individual's solitary struggle for artistic self-expression. Both scholars delve into the complex elements that shape creative lives and present models of fluid, equitable and enriching partnerships. These artistic and personal portraits reveal stories of mutual respect and support which neither exclude conflict nor relegate the presence and influence of friends and lovers. Many of the couples depicted in the book transcend external and internal constraints and develop alternative creative and affective relationships that are not necessarily bound by the model of heterosexual union. Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe build one of these creative and personal partnerships, not free of conflict and estrangement, which threatens at times their personal link and their common artistic pursuit. However, *Just Kids* articulates an idea of creativity that transgresses the myths of artistic collaboration between men and women, defending exchange between partners as an unexpectedly strong and innovative experience.

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A brief reflection on multimodal literature is relevant before discussing Patti Smith's works because of the paratextual material the three books comprise, mainly photographs. Alison Gibbons states that multimodal literature refers to a body of texts that may include a variety of semiotic modes in the communication and progression of their narratives (2012: 420-421). Some of their features are a varied typography, unusual layouts and page design, the inclusion of images and facsimiles of documents (420-421). Critics often consider such hybrid works as low cultural artefacts, but the fact that images and word-image combinations can now be produced cheaply and easily has boosted the publication of multimodal works, both fictional and non-fictional. Consequently, multimodal texts can be highly sophisticated art forms where the process of reading is foregrounded and the physical act of engaging with the book is emphasized (420-421). Fiona J. Doloughan argues that when we read an unfolding narrative, we proceed from page to page and from moment to moment (2011: 34). This sequential experience is interrupted by the inclusion of images, whether they be photographs, stills,

diagrams, other memorabilia or realia. The taking in of the image requires a pause in the verbal story, thus disrupting narrative time. The meaning of these images is relative to the surrounding text in which they are embedded and relative to their place in the storyline of which they form a part (Doloughan 2011: 34). In this sense, Smith and Watson mention that, although we tend to think of autobiography as an extended narration in written form, self-representation can be carried out through many media (reference). In particular, photos seem to memorialise identity so they often accompany life narratives. Both scholars agree with Doloughan when they say that visual and verbal media are defined by different conventions. Photos tell an alternative story to verbal texts so that when the two forms are combined, the photos can produce an alternative system of meaning. Therefore, Smith and Watson conclude that the stories in photographs may support or even contradict the contents of the verbal text (2001: 74-75).

116 As will be illustrated below, Patti Smith's three memoirs share a number of features with other musicians' autobiographies; for example, the presence of paratextual material with a documentary function and the dialogic and relational narrative voice. However, Patti Smith's books do not aim to show her career accomplishments, or backstage stories of concerts, fans or incidents in the life of a celebrity. She is a highly skilled poet who is very much concerned with literary form and who transgresses the boundaries between popular culture and high literature (Masschelein 2020: 3). Moreover, the titles of her memoirs do not echo her well-known original compositions. On the contrary, the title *Just Kids* derives from intimate recollections while *M Train* and *Year of the Monkey* refer to private information about the author. Patti Smith does not lure the potential reader either with the revelation of secrets or with a chronological list of albums and singles. Furthermore, her narratives are not co-authored, but told by herself.

2. *Just Kids*: The Long and Winding Road to Art

Unlike some of the previously mentioned female rock stars (Carrie Brownstein, Kim Gordon and Brix Smith Start), who reclaim their own artistic self in opposition to the projections of the male and the medial other (Sawczuk 2016: 71-72), young Patti "dreamed of meeting an artist to love and support and work with side by side" (2012: 12). In fact, this is the stereotypical role of the (male) artist and the (female) muse, the woman as enabler of male genius (Chadwick and de Courtivron 1993). Instead, Patti met someone who would also love, support and work with her. The path to becoming an artist is tough, but she shares this burden and this dream with another human being, Robert Mapplethorpe. This is what distinguishes Smith's text from other female memoirs. Several passages in the book confirm the

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inseparability of the narrative of artistic growth from that of the relational story, “our work was our children” (2012: 274), “When I look at it [the cover picture of *Horses*, Smith’s debut album] now, I never see me. I see us” (251); “The creed we developed as artist and model was simple. I trust you, I trust in myself” (189), “With you I can’t miss” (192). By narrating a story that revolves around another character, Patti Smith creates an exceptional book in the sense that no other biographer can write their common story (Hernández Hellín 2019: 193-194).

The paratextual material comprises a “Foreword”, photographs and “A Note to the Reader”. The “Foreword” chronicles the night of 9 March 1989 when Smith is informed about Robert’s death in New York. The photographs evoke and parallel the voices of the “kids” throughout the narrative because Smith wishes to tell their common story verbally and photographically. The section “Note to the Reader” works as a fragmentary archive of moments of Patti’s and Robert’s young lives together, including memorial poems, photographs of Patti and Robert (separate), letter fragments, drawings, photographs of significant places for them, such as the Chelsea Hotel and Coney Island, and a handwritten poem by Smith entitled “Just Kids”.

To begin with the textual analysis, I will distinguish between “Patti” and “Robert”, the protagonists of *Just Kids*, and “Smith”, the author of this memoir. The first chapter opens with a mixture of verbal images and words associated with walks with her mother in Humboldt Park when Patti was a small girl. She is attracted towards the round shapes of a “circular band shell” (2012: 3), “an arched stone bridge” (3), “the narrows of the river” (3), and the “long curving neck” (3) of a big bird, named “swan” by her mother. However, the child Patti is not satisfied with this denomination and fights to find her own words to express her unique reaction to the swan’s colour, its graceful movements and the beating of its wings (3). She is experiencing the gap between reality and the words that represent it, which do not satisfy her. The result of bridging this gap is art, but the creation of art requires a persistent inner search and a curious look at the world.

Patti’s entrance into the world of words is marked by religion. The child Patti looks forward to the moment of reciting her prayers and is intrigued by the meaning of words like soul. Soon she asks her mother to create her own prayers and, in this way, Patti manages to escape from the monotony of traditional praying (2012: 5). Her imagination is heightened every time she falls ill, when she experiences “a new level of awareness” (5). The child artist perceives things in a way ordinary people do not, thus prefiguring ideas about the artist’s exceptionality, her sensitivity and her isolation.

In addition to this, the child Patti wants to experience herself her mother’s absorption when she reads a book. She wonders what it is in those objects that

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captures her mother's attention so deeply (2012: 6). In the narration of this passage, the reader senses Patti's sensitivity towards objects. Not only does she long to read, but she indulges in books' textures: their paper, the tissues from their frontispieces. The next step is Patti learning to read, which opens new possibilities for her creative mind. She admits that "the urge to express myself was my strongest desire" (6). These childhood memories can be interpreted retrospectively as signs of artistic sensibility (Watson 2015: 139).

In her growing up as a young woman, Patti finds consolation in books and objects, which anticipate her future as a writer and visual artist (2012: 7). Books offer her an escape against the pressures of the female condition, although, curiously enough, she first imagines herself as an artist's mistress. Her first visit to a museum exerts a physical and mental impression on her. Patti identifies herself with the figures in many of the paintings by Modigliani, Picasso, Dalí... She is smitten with art and feels grateful for sharing the key to the brotherhood of art, "that to be an artist was to see what others could not" (11).

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For her, being an artist evolves from a wish to a mission. Art is a religion, which demands faith, rituals, and sacrifices. Patti accepts them diligently and abandons family, jobs, education, even a child that she gives up for adoption, to pursue her dream. In the summer of 1967, she goes to New York and, as she says, "No one expected me: Everything awaited me" (2012: 25). Moreover, this chapter also includes the parallel story of Robert Mapplethorpe's birth and family background, very different from Patti's. Smith presents him as someone who was always an artist and had the determination and commitment to live for art alone, "He wasn't certain whether he was a good or bad person. [...]. But he was certain of one thing. He was an artist. And for that he would never apologize" (22). Patti did not think she was an artist, she dreamt of becoming one, whereas Robert was not associated with such a process, he already had the essence of artistry in him.

Smith's and Mapplethorpe's lives from 1967 to the early 1970s are presented as a shared artistic coming of age, a process of discovering their commitment to art as a vocation (Watson 2015: 139). Both will share and enter the brotherhood of art together. All the stereotypes about an artist's life are presented in Smith's narration. A young man and woman, who are poor, but persist in their dream of becoming artists. Despite their being in dire straits, they hold on to their mutual love and support and are ready to endure almost anything for the sake of art. Initially, Patti shows herself as less obsessive than Robert regarding the career of the artist and seems more ready to accept the economic difficulties of their lifestyle, "I had a more romantic view of the artist's life and sacrifices [...]. Robert fretted over not being able to provide for us. I told him not to worry, that committing to great art is its own reward" (2012: 57). But she also experiences moments of desperation in

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which she wonders whether creating art really matters, and whether what she does really matters to anybody.

Robert's conflicts regarding his artistic career and his sexuality jeopardise their relationship. They separate and start living apart. This is something that became a necessity for Patti because she felt that her physical space as an artist was being occupied by Robert's creations, and this situation could be a prelude to her exclusion from her artistic mission, "There came a time when Robert's aesthetic became so consuming that I felt it was no longer our world, but his. I believed in him, but he had transformed our home into a theater of his own design" (2012: 71). But their time apart is not artistically productive, according to Smith (80). They find each other again and renew their vows to art, "Robert and I pledged to work hard while we were apart, I to write poems for him and he to make drawings for me" (81). Patti's trip to Paris is artistically and personally enriching. She visits museums, she draws, she watches movies, she writes poems and for the first time, Patti composes poems devoted to Brian Jones after his death at twenty. This is the first time she represents her love for rock and roll in her artistic work (83). Her reencounter with Robert is shocking and Patti weakens about their shared pursuit of art. However, the vision of both their portfolios against the wall of Robert's apartment becomes an artistic epiphany (Watson 2015: 139). These portfolios become totemic objects that restore Patti's faith in their artistic career, "But as I untied the ribbons and looked at our work, I felt we were on the right path. We just needed a little luck" (87). Patti and Robert move to the Chelsea Hotel where they share a room. This place was the home of numerous writers, musicians, artists and actors. Both Patti and Robert found the support and sense of community they were seeking in order to eventually make a living out of art, "I felt the strength of community in the sleeping hotel" (97). Smith's narration adopts then the tone of the autoethnographer who describes the artistic, musical and literary atmosphere of the late 1960s and early 70s in Manhattan as well as Patti's and Robert's close link to this cultural context. Smith resists the clichés of the celebrity memoir and never indulges in sensational stories about Robert's or about her own road to artistic achievement. On the contrary, Smith insists on the exceptionality associated to the true artist, founded on a privileged vision and hard work.

Robert is the most faithful believer in the religion of art, he does not lose either drive or focus, and he thinks about himself and Patti, honouring the vow of mutual support they made to each other, "We were both dreamers, but Robert was the one who got things done. [...]. He had plans for himself but for me as well" (2012: 127). Smith admires his passion, his skill to transform a common object into an artistic one. Robert really sees what others do not, "Robert infused objects, whether for art or life, with his creative impulse" (136). Smith narrates Robert's

evolution towards photography, praising his artistic gift and vision. For her, Robert could see the familiar in the unfamiliar, and vice versa. This is the old idea of the true artist as a visionary, as someone who perceives something that others cannot or do not see.

With regard to Patti, Gregory Corso will become her mentor and major influence as well as the person who introduces her to the St. Mark's Poetry Project (a poet's collective at this church on East Tenth Street), where Patti will deliver her first poetry reading. She was attracted to a place where poetry could be an art-form that existed most vibrantly not on the page but on the democratic, anarchic stage. After all, poetry was traditionally understood as music, as lyric (Kane 2010). Patti's initial poetry performance was on February 10, 1971, when she opened for Gerard Malanga at St. Mark's. In her memory of this early performance, we observe how she foregrounds the image of the poet as a privileged but dissident seer:

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The Poetry Project, shepherded by Anne Waldman, was a desirable forum for even the most accomplished poets. Everyone from Robert Creeley to Allen Ginsberg to Ted Berrigan had read there. If I was ever going to perform my poems, this was the place to do it. My goal was not simply to do well, or hold my own. It was to make a mark at St Mark's. I did it for Poetry. I did it for Rimbaud, and I did it for Gregory. I wanted to infuse the written word with the immediacy and frontal attack of rock and roll. (Smith 2012: 180)

This passage expresses Patti's desire to rise above community by metaphorically damaging the building that houses the "Project". Patti wants "to make a mark at St Mark's", that is to say, to shock the audience. She identifies with Arthur Rimbaud and Gregory Corso, who are famous both for their poetry and their extreme lifestyles (Kane 2012: 108), thus reinforcing her affiliation not with the group but with solitary outcasts. Patti considered rock and roll as a primary influence for the composition of poetry as well as a model for performance poetry. She wanted to play in large venues and give poetry the theatrics of the rock and roll stage show; that is, performance taking precedence over poetry (Kane 2012: 115).

In 1978, Robert and Patti had their first and only show together at the Robert Miller gallery. They presented a body of work that emphasized their bond and the fact that they were artist and muse for each other. They prepared a short film together as part of the exhibition and they called it *Still Moving*. In it, Patti articulates ideas about art and being an artist that she had often discussed with Robert. For her, the artist explores and dives into an incorporeal realm but he/she cannot stay there very long. He/She can only complete his/her artistic mission by returning to the real world with whatever treasure he/she has found in those immaterial places, "I choose Earth" (Smith 2012: 256).

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In 1986, Robert Mapplethorpe is diagnosed with AIDS, precisely at the time when Smith is pregnant with her second child. They talk and meet again, and Robert takes the photographs for the cover of Smith's album *Dream of Life*. Robert had achieved what he wanted in life. He had succeeded as an artist, and had had the resources to carry out anything he envisioned (Smith 2012: 274). However, he is ill and Smith painfully regrets that neither her love for him nor his love for life are going to save him (275). He died on March 9, 1989. *Just Kids* is a homage to their friendship and an elegy for a man who, according to Smith, "shared with me the sacred mystery of what it is to be an artist" (276). In a letter she wrote after a visit to Robert in hospital, she painfully refers to the time they spent together as the most cherished source of her inspiration as a writer, singer and drawer. Before dying, Robert asked Patti to write their story. It took her twenty-one years, but she finally kept her vow, as all the others she and Robert made to each other.

3. *M Train*: Second Memoir

In *M Train* (2015), Patti Smith struggles to create her artist's voice through her rituals to honour those dead artists and writers who nurtured her and those beloved persons whose loss she mourns, such as her husband Fred, her brother Todd, and her parents. *M Train* is not *Just Kids II*, as many readers could expect. This is not a relational memoir in the style of *Just Kids*. *M Train* moves away from the conventions of memoir, being an experimental text which includes different autobiographical forms (journal, grief memoir, autotopography, travelogue, scrapbook) (Hernández Hellín 2019: 200-201). Self-construction in *M Train* is not related to backstage stories or domestic interiors, but to artistic creation in collaboration with others (Shank 2016: 383).

Hernández Hellín suggests that the concept of autotopography is essential in the understanding of *M Train* as a work of memory. In this volume, performance is closely linked to the creation of a museum of the self where Smith arranges photographs of personal objects, people and places which become inseparable from the stories they belong to (Hernández Hellín 2019: 203). Consequently, *M Train* becomes a kind of personal catalogue where Smith includes pictures, travel stories, invitations to conferences, dreams, intimate remembrances of her late husband and family, book and TV series reviews, reports on her daily goings-on. Words and images interact and work as paratexts, which blur the temporal and material boundaries between the living and the dead. In *Negotiating with the Dead*, Margaret Atwood says that "all writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality

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—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring back something or someone back from the dead” (2002: 156, emphasis in original). In *M Train*, Smith creates spaces to hear her beloved persons’ and her favourite writers’ voices beyond the grave.

Almost all the photographs of places and objects are connected to Smith’s admiration for writers and artists. Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni and Jean Genet, Roberto Bolaño’s chair, the Pasternak café in Berlin and Mikhail Bulgakov, the Dorotheenstadt Cemetery and Bertolt Brecht, Tolstoy’s bear in Moscow, Frida Kahlo’s bed, her crutches and dress in Casa Azul, Coyoacán (Mexico), Akutagawa’s gravesite in Japan, Sylvia Plath’s grave in England, Patti Smith and Paul Bowles in Tangier, Genet’s grave in Larache, (Morocco), Hermann Hesse’s typewriter in Montagnola, (Switzerland), Virginia Woolf’s walking stick. Moreover, other pictures show her husband Fred Smith as a child, or cherished personal objects. A third group of photographs displays the interiors of cafés (Café ‘Ino, New York; Café Collage, Venice Beach, California; Caffè Dante, Tangier, Morocco); in fact, *M Train*’s first picture reproduces an empty chair and table from the Café ‘Ino. We know about Smith’s addiction to coffee, but for her, cafés are sacred locations, the rooms of her own where she devotes herself to writing. Photographs testify to what is lost, so they are marked by absence but also by the presence of the observer-photographer (Masschelein 2020: 10).

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M Train articulates Smith’s anxieties about the writer’s role and her constant personal search for consolation through art and writing. The book opens with the sentence “It’s not so easy writing about nothing” (Smith 2016: 3). Smith has always wanted her work to be meaningful and has experienced what we can call a writer’s creative crisis. This would justify her obsession with the artists and writers of her life, those she has actually met (William Burroughs, Sam Shepard, Allen Ginsberg, Paul Bowles), and those whose works have become addictive for her (Jean Genet, Mikhail Bulgakov, Bertolt Brecht, Sylvia Plath, W.G. Sebald, Haruki Murakami, Yukio Mishima, Frida Kahlo, etc.). Smith tries to fill that inner void by evoking her secular pilgrimages throughout the world in order to perform some rituals to honour writers, artists and beloved people. For her, these rituals are required by the religion of art, of which she is a devout practitioner. Smith feels the need to be where they have been, or would have liked to be, to step on the ground where they are buried. She wishes to have a glimpse into these writers’ inner void, to touch their personal objects.

Her attraction towards derelict and abandoned places is evoked in the trip she and her husband Fred made to Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni in French Guiana. Smith longed to visit the remains of the French penal colony where dangerous criminals stayed before being transferred to Devil’s Island. She chooses this neglected place

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to pay homage to Jean Genet, who had fantasised about this prison and its inmates in his volume *The Thief's Journal* (1949). In his youth, because of a number of misdemeanours and petty thefts, Genet had been sentenced to prison, but before he could join the aristocracy of crime in Saint-Laurent, the prison was closed. Smith turns Genet's wish into a personal mission. She picks up some stones "that might have been pressed by the hard-calloused feet of the inmates or the soles of heavy boots worn by the guards" (2016: 17). Smith wraps them in a handkerchief and places them in a matchbox. This package would become sacred for her. Eventually, she will complete her homage to Genet when she buries the stones beside his grave at the Larache Christian Cemetery. Many years later, as a member of the Continental Drift Club, Smith is invited to a meeting in Berlin, where she delivers a lecture on the imagined lost/last moments of Alfred Wegener, who disappeared in a scientific expedition into Greenland in 1930. This confirms again her fascination for empty spaces and human beings confronting death, in this case in a wilderness that threatens to engulf them.

In her following trip, to Japan, Smith will visit the tombs of the Japanese writers Yukio Mishima, Ryunosuke Akutagawa and Osamu Dazai, all of whom took their own lives. Patti takes photographs of their tombs and the day before leaving Japan, she drinks sake to honour Akutagawa and Dazai, but she hears an internal voice that advises her to forget about them because "we are only bums" (2016: 193). This comic phrase is like a warning for Smith, maybe she is taking things too far and it is not necessary to keep on visiting writers' tombs. Probably they are not that important.

Nevertheless, her evocation of writers who committed suicide continues, "It occurred to me that I was on a run of suicides" (2016: 196), this time it is Sylvia Plath's turn. She misses the lost pictures she had taken of her grave in the past and mentions the impression that *Ariel* had on her when she was twenty. Smith admires Plath's courage to dissect herself. Some months later she comes back to England and visits Sylvia's tomb again. The desolation of the place in winter is difficult to bear and she experiences an intense gratitude for being alive. When she is about to leave the cemetery, she hears the words "Don't look back, don't look back" (200). But Smith insists and makes a third visit to Sylvia Plath's tomb, this time with her sister and in spring. She takes another picture of her tomb that resembles the ones she had lost, but it lacks something that was in the original. She concludes that "Nothing can be truly replicated. Not a love, not a jewel, not a single line" (202). Smith wonders whether these visits will enable her to absorb something of their favourite writers' talent, like when she sat in Roberto Bolaño's chair and asked herself whether sitting there would make her a better writer (35). It is a vain longing.

In her trip to Larache to visit Genet's grave and to bury there the small stones from St. Laurent-du-Maroni prison, kept in a matchbox for more than two decades, Smith has painful memories of her husband Fred and experiences an intense loneliness. After performing her ritual, a boy gives her the remnants of a rosebud, which she places inside the matchbox. This becomes an epiphany for Smith, as she concludes that beyond her pictures of Genet's grave, and the ritual words she pronounced in this visit to the cemetery, the faded rose she received from this unknown boy becomes a powerful symbol of life (2016: 228).

Overall, these ritual visits are serious and significant for Smith, but she manages to keep her distance from her heroes' attraction for extreme lifestyles and self-destruction (Masschelein 2020: 1). From the underworld, all of them tell her to look ahead and concentrate on the world of the living. This is a difficult task, and that is why Smith insists on the claim that "It's not so easy writing about nothing" (2016: 3). Fortunately, she chooses life.

4. *Year of the Monkey: The Survivor*

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Year of the Monkey (2019) unfolds over the course of twelve months, starting on January 1, 2016, two days after Smith's 69th birthday. Smith has been playing with her band at the Fillmore in San Francisco, finishing with a New Year's Eve concert. Nevertheless, on that same day she is informed about Sandy Pearlman's cerebral haemorrhage. Sandy has been her friend for four decades and an early influence on her. If *M Train* opens with an image of void, nothingness, *Year of the Monkey* starts with Sandy's physical collapse, which prefigures his eventual departure. This initial episode anticipates the tone and topics of Patti Smith's third memoir: reflections on death, time, suffering, physical decay of friends, painful memories of dead beloved persons, casual conversations and encounters with strangers, dreams. This is a hybrid text, like *Just Kids* and *M Train*, with paratextual material, mainly polaroids taken by Smith of places, people and everyday objects which become symbolic and special for her throughout the narration. I would define *Year of the Monkey* as a fictional and factual journal, where Smith continues the life she describes in *M Train*, that of the mature female writer living a solitary existence.

The term autotopography (González 1995: 133; Hernández Hellín 2019: 203) is useful for approaching this memoir. Smith's "autotopographical performance" is based on a loose chronological and personal account of her life during 2016. Smith's personal catalogue, her museum of the self, displays shows in San Francisco at the end of 2015, her wanderings in New York, her trips around the United States and to Europe. Sandy Pearlman and Sam

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Shepard, the latter a former partner and friend, become prominently present throughout the whole book. Smith also keeps casual conversations with strangers, which often lead to unexpected findings about literature and life, and offers information about her daily routines, which contributes to create a more accurate portrayal of who she is now (Sturges 2019: 27). The figures of those beloved ones she has lost remain close.

The paratextual material in this volume comprises photographs, all but two taken by Smith. As a multidisciplinary artist —musician, poet, photographer, visual artist—, the interaction of visual and verbal modes in the construction of her narrative comes naturally. Photographs texture the memoir's voice as its visual equivalent (Watson 2015: 142). The author's personal objects, such as her father's cup, her suitcase, her chair, her shoes, are traces of her ordinary existence. Other photographs attest to Smith's admiration for artists. This is the case of St. Jerome in his Study by Albrecht Dürer; the van Eyck Altarpiece in Ghent, Belgium; a detail of the Mystic Lamb by Hubert and Jan van Eyck. Additional pictures reproduce objects that belonged to writers (Roberto Bolaño's games; Sam Shepard's Stetson hat; Samuel Beckett's telephone). Smith's autotopography is completed by natural and urban landscapes from all over the world (Uluru, Ayers Rock, Australia; Kovilj Monastery, Serbia; Café A Brasileira, Lisbon; phone booth, Mexico City; Hie Shrine, Tokyo; WOW Café, OB Pier, California, etc.). Although she has not visited all these places, some of them appear in her dreams or work symbolically in the narration as empty spaces, evoking the absence of so many beloved figures (parents, husband, friends, artists, writers).

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The persistence of dreams and conversations with inanimate objects discloses Smith's restlessness about the passing of time, about mortality and uncertainty. According to Fiona Sturges, *Year of the Monkey* moves constantly between reverie and memory (2019: 27), between fact and fiction. On the one hand, Smith registers what she does in a realistic way, providing us with vivid details about the real, material world that surrounds her. But at the same time, Smith often slides towards a condition of forgetfulness, of unconsciousness, as if her dreams could rescue her from the suffering of being alive, "I wish I could sleep until it was over, a Rip Van Winkle kind of sleep" (2020: 149).

The tone of this book is more nostalgic and sadder than her previous memoirs. Smith feels distressed by her impending 70th birthday, "Seventy. Merely a number but one indicating the passing of a significant percentage of the allotted sand in an egg timer, with oneself the darn egg", "I am no longer a fast runner and that my sense of time seems to be accelerating" (2020: 79), "a sense of time lost forever" (65), "*Once I was seven, soon I will be seventy*" (140 emphasis in original). Moreover, the prominence of Sandy Pearlman and Sam Shepard in this book intensifies Smith's

sense of loss, her awareness that the days of her youth are over, those days when she believed she could do anything. These two persons are closely linked to her development as an artist, Sandy as her mentor, long-term friend and the man who invited her to create her own rock and roll band, and Sam as her former partner and inspiration. Sandy dies later in 2016, and Sam is afflicted by ALS. Again, as so many times in her life, Smith revisits the guilty feeling of being a survivor. She has survived those who died young, Robert Mapplethorpe, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Jimmy Hendrix. She has survived her husband, Fred, and her brother, Todd, who died prematurely. And now those who were her life mates, who aged with her, are dead (Sandy) or very close to death (Sam). Smith turns 70, a new year starts and 2017 becomes the Year of the Rat, defined as a cunning survivor.

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The vast number of references to writers, artists, musicians, works of art and literary pieces (*Alice in Wonderland*, Roberto Bolaño, William Faulkner, Marcel Proust, Bruno Schultz, Allen Ginsberg, Joseph Beuys, Fernando Pessoa, Robert Mapplethorpe, Herman Broch, Frank Zappa, the van Eyck Brothers, the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, etc.) vindicate the essential role literature and art play in Smith's everyday life and her psychological survival. She evokes how much books meant to her as a child living in a rural community (2020: 131). When she visits Sam Shepard, she helps him with his last book. Sam is close to death but he longs to complete his "manuscript, destined to be his last, an unsentimental love letter to life" (147). Significantly, Smith becomes his amanuensis in order to convey her friend's mystery, as she also believes that the artistic drive makes a life worth living even in the direst circumstances, like Sam's.

Smith's last personal performance has to do with art and with Sam Shepard. On her way to California to visit Sam, she takes a book on the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* or Ghent Altarpiece with her. Some months later, in February 2017, she decides to admire this work of art in person. The book is not enough. Like in *M Train*, Smith wishes to be physically present in the land where those artists (the brothers Jan and Hubert van Eyck) lived and created this masterpiece. Smith had already been there a decade ago, with her sister Linda, and mentions "the strong connection I felt in that brief encounter was not a religious one, more a physical sense of the artist. I felt the aura of his concentration and the sharp gaze of his prismatic eyes" (2020: 192). This 2017 visit includes a private viewing of the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* at St. Bavo's church. This activity excludes passivity and resembles a musical performance where the artist moves around on stage. Smith experiences an epiphany while at St. Bavo, feeling a privileged participant of the mysteries of this artistic creation. Her beliefs in the power of art to create new meanings, and her admiration for the "turbulent spirits" (144) of the artists who make it possible, are confirmed.

5. Conclusion: The Mystery of Art

In these volumes, Patti Smith shares with the reader the sacralising function of art for her existence. As a girl, she always developed a particular aesthetic sensitivity towards her surroundings and was attracted to beautiful objects. She was an early reader and, as a young worker, she tried to escape her monotonous job in a factory through her obsessive reading of poetry, Rimbaud in particular. She arrives in New York with the idea of being a poet and of making a living out of art. The road to art is difficult, but she will travel that path in the company and friendship of Robert Mapplethorpe. The driving force in *Just Kids* is to tell their common coming-of-age story as artists. Sometimes their paths run parallel, other times they diverge, but their commitment to art and to each other endows them with the strength to pursue their artistic dreams, despite depression, desperation, and dire straits. In her public performances, initially Patti will join poetry and music, then she will write songs and have a rock and roll band. She always kept her personal bond with Robert, and it took her 21 years to write their common story.

M Train insists on the sacralising function of art. With an introspective look, Smith reveals the writer's crises and her constant search for consolation in the works of the writers and artists that have inspired her throughout her life. Her performance is not linked to concerts or public shows, but to intimate rituals, totemic objects, photographs, which compose the so-called museum of the self, all of which Smith shares with the reader. Smith visits the land of the dead, where she finds her parents, her husband, the writers and artists of her life. But, as Atwood suggests, she enters it but she must leave, since she cannot live there. This journey is worthwhile because Smith brings back her findings into the land of the living, "How does one make one's work a living thing? How can a writer place a living thing in the hands of the reader? Lost for words I travel backwards" (2016: 275).

Year of the Monkey continues with the autotopographical performance Smith started in *M Train*. This is a personal yearbook written with a sense of immediacy which includes paratextual material such as polaroids of people, places and objects, as well as conversations with strangers, dreams, travel descriptions, memories of beloved ones and reports on her everyday wanderings in New York. More than ever, Smith is aware that art cannot stop time, illness or death. That was a lesson learnt a long time ago and revisited in this memoir. The vicarious worlds of art and literature offer a temporary refuge against the tedium and void of life, but that shelter never becomes a permanent dwelling, "The act of writing in real time in order to deflect, escape or slow it down is obviously futile yet not entirely fruitless" (2020: 201). Art does not give answers, but as it lives on people's longing to learn and express themselves, its sources never become exhausted. Artistic creation resembles a stream of water. It may be interrupted by a mountain or may evaporate,

but it flows again. Smith is moderately optimistic because writing promises her a connection with those who left. She holds on to writing to resist the death drive, the voices from the underworld, the siren songs that call and call, urging her to stay there forever. In her visits to the underworld, Smith always comes back with a meaningful story, “I am compelled to write, with or without true destination, lacing fact, fiction, and dream with fervent hopes”, “being dogged by the incessant urge to write, whether it goes anywhere or not” (201).

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