

Autobiography (*trad. de l'article « Autobiographie »*)

To what does the word 'autobiography' refer?

The word 'autobiography', composed from the Greek words αὐτός (oneself), βίος (life), and γράφειν (to write), came into being in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century ('Selbst-biographie') before being attested for the first time in 1797 in England in the form 'self-biography', which, having failed to catch on, would evolve into 'auto-biography'. The first French lexicographic definition of this scholarly word was provided by the 1842 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, where the term is described as a neologism: 'The life of an individual written by himself.' This laconic starting point opened the way for subsequent definitions relating to the narrative's content. For Bescherelle (1845), autobiography is 'the narrative that a historical or other person makes of his thoughts and the events that have affected his life'. This definition establishes a dividing line between autobiography ('a kind of confession') and memoirs ('the narration of facts without the impressions of the soul'); the distinction between the two genres, both of which are opposed to fiction, would be taken up by Larousse in 1866. From this point the lexicographic definition would not vary until the 1970s. We will simply remark that the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, from its edition of 1878 until that of 1932-1935, illustrates it with the same example ('autobiographies are often deceptive'), that the Larousse dictionary of 1866 and the Guérin dictionary of 1892 both cite Proudhon ('I hate autobiographies with a passion and I have no desire to write my own'), and Robert's *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique* [*Alphabetical and Analogical Dictionary*] (1960) includes the famous quotation by Thibaudet ('autobiography, which seems at first sight the most sincere of all genres, is perhaps the most false'). Whether consciously or unconsciously, these choices betray a vision of the genre that is often pejorative, which Jacques Lecarme describes as an 'anti-autobiographical ideology' (*L'Autobiographie en procès* [*Autobiography on Trial*], 1997). According to this ideology, autobiography would at best present a deceitful and overly flattering representation of oneself, at worst a second-rate literature. Although the genre became codified at the end of the eighteenth century, it would have to wait until the second half of the twentieth century to attain literary and critical legitimacy: from then on the tables were turned, and it is now recognised as a genre in its own right, in the same way as theatre, poetry, or the novel; one of its avatars, autofiction, has even become its direct competitor.

The autobiographical pact

In France, literary theory began to focus on the writing of the self from the works of Georges Gusdorf onwards (*La Découverte de soi* [*Discovery of the Self*], 1948). Gusdorf, following a humanist approach, connects autobiography with philosophical or social issues; he later reaffirmed this position in *Lignes de vie* [*Lifelines*] (1991), which firmly condemns attempts to separate the subgenres of autobiography and to 'slice up the continuous tradition of self-writing' (*Les Écritures du moi* [*Self-Writings*], 1991). However, the work done from the 1970s by Philippe Lejeune on the problem of a definition would mark a crucial step forward in the knowledge and recognition of the autobiographical genre. The critic takes up the best-known and most widely used definition in *Le Pacte autobiographique* [*The Autobiographical Pact*] (1975): 'a retrospective narrative in prose that a real person makes of his own existence, in which he emphasises his individual life, and especially the development of his personality'. He further postulates that to be accepted as such, autobiography must be the object of a 'pact' between the author and the reader, which involves two clauses: on the one hand, the 'identity of author, narrator, and character' – a problem that Genette explored further in *Fiction et diction* [*Fiction and Diction*] (1991) – and on the other hand, a commitment by the author to 'tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth' (which does not presume, of course, any guarantee of success). Philippe Lejeune therefore places a large emphasis on intentionality; he also defends the idea that a certain literary sincerity is consubstantial with the existence of autobiography. This theoretical line, although threatened by the proliferation of autofictional forms, has been reaffirmed in different terms by Damien Zanone, who notes that 'autobiography is committed to reference', (*L'Autobiographie* [*Autobiography*], 1996) and by Thomas Clerc, who considers that autobiographers cannot 'reject' their relation to reality, which guarantees the validity of their discourse (*Les Écrits personnels* [*Personal Writings*], 2002); Jacques and Éliane Lecarme too emphasise that a text qualified as 'autobiographical' requires the 'social responsibility of the author', including responsibility in the eyes of the law (1997).

The definition of the 'pact' has the merit of taking into account, for the first time, the concomitant presence of elements of a disparate nature. For Thomas Clerc, the autobiographical genre is 'halfway between two linguistic regimes, one aesthetic and one pragmatic', and in fact we can distinguish three superimposed issues:

1) *A pragmatic dimension*. An account of a life, as soon as it is mediated (in this case, by writing) undergoes inevitable distortions: the unreliability of memory, the selection of the episodes reported... One could say that the autobiographer has an obligation of means when he constructs his approach to

storytelling, but not an obligation of results. This is why these authors' introductory statements, these 'pacts' in which they promise to offer faithful accounts of the events, have an essential function: whatever one thinks of their degree of accuracy, they are real commitments, whose performative value is manifested in the relationship that is built between the author and the reader. Although Lecarme stresses the 'leonine' character of this reading contract (from which it is not forbidden to diverge), without this trust, autobiography cannot exist, and would be dissolved in fiction in the broad sense.

2) *Thematically determined content*. Even if the subject ('one's own life') is vast, we expect to find in the autobiography some obligatory passages: an account of childhood and adolescence, the relationship with one's family, school and social life, sexual awakening, and spirituality. In this respect, autobiography is distinguished, more or less depending on the case, from memoirs, which focus on the public action of the individual, and the roles – often illustrious ones – in which he distinguished himself in the social sphere.

3) *Varying degrees of literariness and narrative cohesion*. Some authors will opt for the factual, the plain, and even the disparate or fragmented ('just because it's plain doesn't necessarily mean it's bad', notes Marie Billeldoux in *Un peu de désir sinon je meurs* [A Little Desire Otherwise I Die], 2006), while others, such as Yourcenar or Sarraute, take extreme care in the construction of their narrative. The text is generally a prose narrative, but can opt for a poetic form (Des Forêts, *Ostinato*, 1997) or a verse form (Queneau, *Chêne et chien* [Oak and Dog], 1937). Autobiography, which is not always the prerogative of writers, is also situated on a line between the document and the *œuvre*; and even among recognised authors, the work of writing ranges from a positively assumed stylistic neutrality (Annie Ernaux) or a clinical meticulousness (Perec) to an epic profusion (Gary). Autobiography cannot therefore claim a generic unity on aesthetic or formal grounds.

Given this variety of criteria, it seems appropriate to speak of an autobiographical device (including its formal variations as well as the author-reader relationship).

History

The modern form of autobiography had illustrious predecessors. Philippe Gasparini (*La Tentation autobiographique* [The Autobiographical Temptation], 2013) has highlighted a long tradition of ancient autobiographical writing, which in the Greco-Latin sphere involves genres as varied as the testament, speeches, memoirs, and poems, in cases where the evocation of oneself is more or less prevalent. The conversion narrative is one of its most developed avatars: Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (397-400) popularised a form of first-person discourse, entirely directed towards God; the narrative, which is teleological and connects life with faith, approaches a form of philosophical universality. Much later, Montaigne's *Essais* [Essays] (1588) offer an atypical and shimmering self-portrait: it is not a life narrative strictly speaking, but a fragmented self-portrait, emerging from quotations that are reflected upon, reworked, deformed; even Pascal, who in his *Pensées* (1662) condemned the self as 'detestable' and mocked '[Montaigne's] foolish project to paint himself', had inadvertently provided the fragments of an indirect representation of himself, notably by evoking his dazzling experience of faith. But it was Rousseau who crystallised and fixed the features of the genre in its modern and secularised form, with *Les Confessions* [The Confessions], written between 1765 and 1771, and published posthumously between 1782 and 1789. Rousseau combined an acute awareness of the audacity of his approach ('I am resolved on an undertaking that has no model and will have no imitator', preamble) with a desire for transparency that is admitted, assumed, and exhibited: he wishes to 'reveal [himself] in [his] entirety' so that 'nothing about [him] should remain hidden or obscure' (Book II). Accordingly, the author records what made up the subject of his life, without avoiding its most embarrassing episodes, whether this concerned social transgressions (lying, theft) or sexuality; the book is both an admission and a response to the world's incomprehension of an exceptional personality, who proudly asserts the singularity of his character. Very soon, other authors followed suit, notably Restif de la Bretonne with *Monsieur Nicolas ou le Cœur humain dévoilé* [Monsieur Nicolas or the Human Heart Unveiled] (1797).

Over the course of the nineteenth century, personal writings, broadly defined, enjoyed increasing success. Several autobiographical novels, placing a large emphasis on interiority and the passions, enjoyed wide popularity (Chateaubriand, *René*, 1802; Benjamin Constant, *Adolphe*, 1816; Fromentin, *Dominique*, 1863). Fictitious protagonists, speaking in the first person, recounted, sometimes with barely any work of transposition, the sentimental experiences that had genuinely been lived by their authors; contemporary readers had little difficulty in recognising the real-life models for these characters. This, however, is not the essential point for our history of autobiography, but rather the difficult relationship between memoirs and autobiography: this state of relative confusion favoured contaminations between the two genres. The case of Chateaubriand is exemplary from this point of view, since it is precisely the fusion of the autobiographical element and the memorialising ambition that confers on his memoirs their particular value. Let us recall the origins of this great work: during his first stay in Italy, at the age of thirty-five, Chateaubriand wrote the first draft of his memoirs, in which keeps to the public dimension of his existence; in 1809 he drew up the programme for the *Mémoires de ma vie* [Memoirs of my life], inspired by Rousseau ('[...] I wish, before I die, to go back to my golden years, explain my inexplicable heart'), which he pursued in parallel to a new *Histoire de France* [History

of France]; finally, in the testamentary preface of 1833, the author fixed on the project of his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* [*Memoirs from Beyond the Grave*], which combined the aims of an autobiographical nature with the history of the times in which he lived. Without, perhaps, reaching the same heights as Chateaubriand, George Sand too shared the ambition of uniting personal narrative with a historical account, and exploration of oneself with the reconstruction of a community that had been deeply divided by historic traumas. In the introduction to her *Histoire de ma vie* [*Story of My Life*], she acknowledges that she wanted to 'tell the story of the inner life, the life of a soul, that is to say the story of one's own mind and own heart, with a view to a fraternal teaching'. Rejecting the model of Rousseau's *Confessions*, she proposes to compose an autobiography marked by solidarity, whose legitimacy would be based on the representativity of her story, 'a guide for other spirits engaged in the labyrinth of life'. Since she claimed to experience 'a mortal disgust towards talking about her personality in public', the aim was therefore to go beyond confession, and to share her experience, while being careful not to 'recount [her] life like a novel'. Other novelists also adopted the autobiographical form and fully assumed the exercise: such as Stendhal, who chose to address himself directly, in *La Vie de Henry Brulard* [*The Life of Henry Brulard*] to a reader located in a distant posterity. The author lucidly examines the genre's difficulties, this 'awful quantity of "I" and "Me"', but nevertheless decides to write in the first person in order to 'give an account of interior movements of the soul'; the many drafts and plans attest to the quasi-documentary intention of the work, involving the careful use of memories from a partly unhappy childhood, and an analysis of the development of his conscience.

Psychoanalysis, which took its first steps in the early twentieth century, would reinforce and legitimise the valorisation of a discourse on oneself, giving a new importance to personal experiences, emotions, and feelings. It therefore gave encouragement for making these experiences public. Some critics, such as Gusdorf and Lecarme, connect this new inflection to a secularisation of the genre: the less religious autobiography is, the more it would favour the emergence of the psychological dimension. And even if the unclassifiable *À la recherche du temps perdu* [*In Search of Lost Time*] cannot be equated with an autobiography, we find there, executed in the first person, one of the most masterful explorations of human sensation and sensitivity ever undertaken; it is led by a homodiegetic narrator who shares many identity traits with Proust. The dominant form at this time was undoubtedly the novel, which had to a large extent taken from poetry, from the start of the twentieth century, its pride of place with regard to literary prestige and success. However, autobiography, as a democratic genre – since even the most humble person has a life story to tell – found increasing success. While some texts returned fairly traditionally to the theme of the writer's career, others dared to explore transgressive aspects of life: *Mes Souvenirs* [*My Memories*] by Herculine Barbin (1874) evokes the painful condition of being a hermaphrodite, while Gide's *Si le grain ne meurt* [*If it die*] (1926) and Violette Leduc's *La Bâtarde* [*The Bastard*] (1964) recount an awakening to homosexuality. In the second half of the twentieth century, autobiography would gradually become a necessary rite of passage for all consecrated writers (Sartre, Yourcenar, Beauvoir, Sarraute): it would constitute an increasingly crucial literary issue for them. For some, autobiography or autobiographical narratives would echo their fictional *œuvre*, for which they provide an essential substratum: they then enter into what Philippe Lejeune calls 'the autobiographical space'. This is the case for much of Colette's work, Romain Gary's *La Promesse de l'aube* [*Promise at Dawn*] (1960), and Georges Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* [*W or The Memory of Childhood*] (1975), which all provide keys to a part of their authors' novelistic art. In other cases, a writer's entire work is directed towards autobiography, as we see in the work of Leiris or Ernaux. Leiris's *La Règle du jeu* [*The Rules of the Game*] (1948-1976), a vast undertaking spanning four volumes and thirty years, inaugurates a form of autobiographical discourse that avoids a chronological and organised narrative model. The narrative is instead turned towards the relationship that an individual constructs with his life through language.

Deconstruction and extensions of the genre

The second half of the twentieth century also saw a change in the genre's boundaries: a very significant case in this respect is the publication of Sartre's *Les Mots* [*Words*] in 1964. This brilliant and ironic book, which describes a young boy ('Poulou') idolised by his family, has no qualms with rewriting episodes of Sartre's childhood; to confirm this, we need only to compare them to the narrative, sometimes contradictory, of the same adventures in *Les Carnets de la drôle de guerre* [*Notebooks from a Phoney War*]. Sartre does not claim, like Rousseau, to be obsessed by a concern for truth and an exhaustive confession: on the contrary, his autobiography provides him with the means to exemplify his philosophical system. Indeed, the character of this theatrical child, lacking in authenticity, is depicted as the product of the bourgeois education he has received; he becomes the support for a political reading of life. Here we rediscover the ethical dimension of autobiography, which is frequently used to deliver messages that go beyond a summative or narrative biographical focus: through their narratives, the authors develop a conception of the world, a system of political thought, even making an example of their own story in order to inscribe it in a deterministic worldview, possibly at the cost of reshaping here and there some aspects of the truth of the facts.

Another important milestone in the genre's evolution is Barthes's *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* [*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*] (1975). In this case, the desire to deconstruct, informed by a

structuralist approach, is explicit and is manifested materially in the book: it is divided into two parts, first a group of commented photographs, then a collection of alphabetically organised fragments in which the author has gathered the topics that supposedly define important elements of his life. This whole approach places Barthes's life under the sign of language, from the comments on the photographs to the adoption of a pseudo-dictionary method. Although it is not strictly fiction, it is legitimate to a type of fictionalisation in light of the book's highly ambiguous claim: in place of the book's epigraph Barthes writes, 'All this must be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel'.

This is this the border that Doubrovsky would cross with *Fils [Son/Threads]* (1977), where the element of fabrication is assumed in an equally confusing formula: 'fiction of real events'. These statements underlie a fundamental paradox with which autobiography has grappled since the 1970s. On the one hand, the genre's success is real and lasting, as evidenced by the significant place that it occupies in literary production: *Livres-Hebdo*, a periodical that exhaustively catalogues the publications of French publishers, lists no fewer than 419 autobiographies published or translated into French in 2010 alone. But at the same time, from the 1980s onwards, there has been a real reluctance among authors to subscribe to the canonical model, a reluctance that has continued to intensify. Consequently, several authors have made a show of their desire to circumvent or distort the genre, such as Robbe-Grillet in *Le Miroir qui revient [Ghosts in the Mirror]* (1984), which comments ironically on the excessive 'facility' of the form and the 'dubious pleasure' it provides.

The model of summative and retrospective discourse, organised and centred on the self, is thus condemned to a form of obsolescence, at least among writers. It is overturned in favour of forms that condemn the pact, but only partially. In particular, we note a tendency towards miniaturisation and fragmentation, the specialisation of narratives (such as narratives of filiation) or their thematisation (illness, bereavement, psychoanalysis, or legal life, as found in Guibert, Lydia Flem, Althusser, or Goldman respectively). As a result of the Second World War and decolonisation, the issues of genealogy, origins (notably concerning Jewishness), roots, and biculturalism play a major role. On the level of enunciation, the 'I' gives way to 'you' (Daniel Maximin, *Tu, c'est l'enfance [You, It's Childhood]*, 2004) or to Annie Ernaux's transpersonal 'she' (*Les Années [The Years]*, 2008), which closely links autobiography with a social reading of the environments that are described. Finally, hybridisation has become commonplace (novel/autobiography, autobiography/diary, autobiography/essay), as evidenced, for example, by Claude Mauriac's *Le Temps immobile [Time Immobile]* (1974-1988), while the presence of extra-authorial or extra-literary materials, such as photographs or documents, changes the dynamics of reading some of these texts (see, for example, Rochefort, *Ma vie revue et corrigée par l'auteur [My Life Reviewed and Corrected by the Author]*, 1978, or Raymond Depardon, *La Ferme du Garet [The Farm at Le Garet]*, 1995). Autobiography, rather than being a defined literary territory, now appears to be a flexible surface, which cultivates areas of intersection with other genres and does not preclude any formal mutation. Reciprocally, from 1970, autobiographical desires have become established in artistic domains that had until then favoured fiction: cinema (the work of Alain Cavalier, Dominique Cabrera, Joseph Morder), the autobiographical comic (Marjane Satrapi, *Persépolis*, 2000-2007, Fabrice Neaud, *Journal*, 1996-2002), which can again be hybridised with the documentary account and the travel diary (Emmanuel Lepage, *La Lune est blanche [The Moon is White]*, 2014).

This choice of alternative forms is not antagonistic to a certain desire for sincerity; it is even sometimes its corollary. One avoids the danger of hagiography, or narrative 'facility', by introducing a second or third narrative voice (Nathalie Sarraute, *Enfance [Childhood]*, 1983; Anne-Marie Garat, *Dans la pente du toit [In the Slope of the Roof]*, 1998; Pierre Pachet, *Autobiographie de mon père [Autobiography of my Father]*, 1987). Or one can grasp one's own experience in the form of snapshots, fragments, which might be more truthful than overly neat reconstructions (Zoé Oldenbourg, *Visages d'un autoportrait [Faces of a Self-Portrait]*, 1977; Marie Sizun, *Éclats d'enfance [Fragments of Childhood]*, 2009). Although metatextuality has been an integral part of autobiography since Rousseau's famous preamble to the *Confessions*, since the pact constitutes a true declaration of intent regarding the narrative being undertaken, it often includes, from the second half of the twentieth century, an evocation of the search for original forms, or the expression of a desire to go beyond the canon; reflection on the act of autobiographical writing can thus become one of the driving forces of the narrative. The two thousand pages of Jacques Roubaud's autobiographical cycle *Le Grand incendie de Londres [The Great Fire of London]* (1989-2008), which condemn the genre while insisting on their membership of it, bear witness to this tension, between the desire to tell one's story and the rejection of the form that historically welcomed the discourse of the self. Besides the tension between reality and fiction, which sustains a part of contemporary production, this extremely fertile contradiction seems to be one of the keys to the renewal of autobiographical creation in the twenty-first century.

Bibliography

Brigitte Diaz, « "L'Histoire en personne". Mémoires et autobiographie dans la première partie du XIX^e siècle », dans *Elseigneur* n° 17, *Se raconter, témoigner*, Carole Dornier (dir.), 2001, p. 125-142

Philippe Gasparini, *La Tentation autobiographique. De l'Antiquité à la Renaissance*, Seuil, 2013.

Gérard Genette, *Fiction et diction*, Seuil, 1991.

Jacques Lecarme et Éliane Lecarme-Tabone, *L'Autobiographie*, Armand Colin, 1997.

Philippe Lejeune, *L'Autobiographie en France* [1971], Armand Colin, 2010.

Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* [1975], Seuil, 1996.

Philippe Lejeune, *Moi aussi*, Seuil, 1986.

Philippe Lejeune, *Signes de vie*, Seuil, 2005.

Philippe Lejeune (dir.), *L'Autobiographie en procès*, Nanterre, Université Paris X, 1997.

Dominique Viart et Bruno Vercier, *La Littérature française au présent. Héritage, modernités, mutations* [2005], Bordas, 2008, p. 27-128.



Auteur(s) de l'article:

[Montémont Véronique](#)

[Ferguson Sam \(trad.\)](#)

Mots-clés:

[Autobiographie](#)

Traducteur(s):

Ferguson Sam

Pour citer cet article:

Montémont Véronique, Ferguson Sam (trad.), « Autobiography (trad. de l'article « Autobiographie ») », dans *Dictionnaire de l'autobiographie*, dir. F. Simonet-Tenant, avec la collab. de M. Braud, J.-L. Jeannelle, P. Lejeune et V. Montémont, Paris, Champion, 2017, p. , en ligne, URL : <https://ecrisoi.univ-rouen.fr/dictionnaire/autobiography-trad-de-larticle-autobiographie>, page consultée le 12/07/2025.