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The autobiographical contract

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# 10. The autobiographical contract

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Is it possible to define autobiography? I had attempted to do so, in *L'Autobiographie en France*,<sup>1</sup> in order to be able to establish a coherent corpus, but my definition left a certain number of theoretical problems unresolved. I felt the need to refine and sharpen it, by trying to find stricter criteria. In doing this, I inevitably encountered the classical issues which the genre of autobiography always raises: the relation of biography and autobiography, the relation of the novel and the autobiography. These problems are irritating because of the repetitious nature of the arguments one encounters, the vagueness of the vocabulary used, and the confusion among problems belonging to independent domains. As a result of my new attempt at definition, I wound up trying to clarify the terms in which the problems of the genre are stated. When one wants to get things clear, one runs two risks: the first is that of seeming to repeat the obvious (since there is no alternative to going back to basics), the other is the opposite — the risk of seeming to want to complicate things with excessively subtle distinctions. I will not escape the first charge; for the second, I will try to provide a rational basis for my distinctions.

I had conceived my definition not *sub specie aeternitatis*, not by examining each text as a thing-in-itself, but from the point of view of a contemporary reader who is trying to see order in a mass of *published* texts, which have in common the fact that they tell the story of someone's life. The situation of the 'definer' is thus doubly relativized and limited: as regards *history*, the definition does not claim to cover more than the two centuries since 1770, and is concerned only with European literature; this does not mean that we should deny the existence of personal writing before 1770 or outside Europe, but simply that our present-day way of thinking about autobiography becomes anachronistic or irrelevant outside this area. With regard to *text*, I am adopting the reader's point of view: my starting point is neither the problematic internal state of the author, nor an attempt to establish the canons of a literary genre. By choosing to start from the situation of the reader (which is my own, the only one I know well), I may be able to grasp the functioning of the texts more clearly (and the differences in how they function), since they were written for us, their readers, and since, as we read

This definition involves elements from four different categories:

1. Linguistic form: (a) narrative; (b) prose.
2. Subject treated: individual life, personal history.
3. Situation of the author: author (whose name designates a real person) and narrator are identical.
4. Position of the narrator: (a) narrator and protagonist are identical; (b) narration is retrospectively oriented.

Any work is an autobiography if it fulfills all of the conditions indicated in each of these categories. Genres close to autobiography do not satisfy all of these conditions. Here is the list of the conditions not fulfilled by other genres: memoirs: (2); biography: (4a); first person novel: (3); autobiographical poem: (1b); diary: (4b); self-portrait or essay: (1a and 4b).

It is evident that the different categories are not all equally restrictive: some of the conditions can be largely, though not totally, satisfied. The text should be *mainly* narrative, but we know the importance of speech in autobiographical narration; the orientation should be *mainly* retrospective, but this does not exclude passages of self-description, of diary, of reference to the time of writing, and quite complex temporal constructions; the subject should be *mainly* the writer's individual life and the growth of his personality, but the description of events, of social or political history, can also be included. This is a matter of proportion, or rather of hierarchy: there are natural transitions to the other genres of *littérature intime* (memoirs, diary, essay), and a certain latitude is left to the classifier in the examination of particular cases.

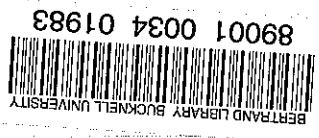
On the other hand, two of the conditions are a matter of all or nothing, and these are, of course, the conditions which oppose autobiography (but also the other forms of *littérature intime*) to biography and to the personal novel: these are conditions (3) and (4a). Here there is no transition or latitude. Either there is identity or there is not. There is no possibility of degrees, and any doubt imposes a negative conclusion.

For there to be autobiography (and more generally *littérature intime*), there must be identity between the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist*. But this 'identity' raises numerous problems, which I will attempt, if not to solve, at least to formulate clearly, in the following sections:

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How can 'identity' between the narrator and the protagonist be expressed in the text? ('I, you, he')?

In the case of a narrative 'in the first person', how is the identity of the author and the narrator-protagonist manifested? ('I, the undersigned'). This will be the context in which to contrast autobiography and the novel.

Is there not a confusion, in most reflection about autobiography, between the notion of *identity* and that of *resemblance*? ('Certified true copy'). This will be the context in which to contrast autobiography and biography.

The difficulties encountered in these analyses will lead me, in the last two sections ('Autobiographical space', and 'The reading contract') to try to formulate the problem in different terms.

### I, you, he

The 'identity' of the narrator and the protagonist which autobiography implies is most often marked by the use of the first person. This is what Gérard Genette calls 'autodidégétique' narration in his classification of the 'voices' of the narrative, based on works of fiction.<sup>2</sup> But he also clearly distinguishes a narration 'in the first person' without the narrator being the same individual as the protagonist. This is what he calls more broadly 'homodidégétique' narration. Continuing along these lines we see that conversely there can perfectly well be 'identity' of the narrator and the protagonist without use of the first person.

Two different criteria must thus be distinguished: one involving the grammatical person, and one involving the 'identity' of the individuals to whom the uses of the grammatical person refer. This elementary distinction is forgotten because of the polysemy of the word 'person', and it is camouflaged in practice by the connections which are *almost always* established between a given grammatical person and a given type of identity relation or of narration. However, this is only 'almost always' the case; the undeniable exceptions require us to rethink the definitions.

Because it raises the problem of the *author*, autobiography spotlights phenomena which fiction leaves in a state of uncertainty: in particular the fact that there can quite well be 'identity' between the narrator and the protagonist in the case of a third-person narrative. Since this 'identity' is not established within the text by the use of 'I', it is determined indirectly, but unambiguously, by the two equivalences: author = narrator, and author = protagonist, from which we deduce that narrator = protagonist, even if the narrator remains implicit. Such a procedure conforms literally to the original meaning of the word 'autobiography': it is a biography, written by its subject, but written like a simple biography.

This technique may be adopted for a variety of reasons, and has produced

different kinds of effect. Speaking of oneself in the third person can imply either an enormous self-esteem (as is the case with the Commentaries of Caesar, or some works by de Gaulle), or else a form of humility (as with certain antique religious autobiographies, where the writer called himself 'the servant of God'). In either case the narrator adopts, with respect to the individual he once was, either the distance of historical perspective, or that of divine perspective, that is, of eternity, and introduces into his narrative a transcendence with which, in the last analysis, he identifies himself. Totally different effects of the same procedure can be imagined, of contingency, of dissociation, or of ironic distance. This is the case with *The Education of Henry Adams*, by Henry Adams, where the author describes in the third person the almost Socratic quest of a young American (himself) looking for an education. In all the examples given so far, the third person is used throughout the work. There exist autobiographies in which part of the text designates the protagonist by the third person, while in the rest of the text the narrator and the protagonist are merged in the first person: this is the case for *Le Traître* in which André Gorz uses these changes of 'voice' to express his uncertainty about his identity. Claude Roy, in *Now*, uses this device in a more banal way to confer a chaste distance on an amorous episode of his life.<sup>3</sup> The existence of these bilingual texts, genuine Rosetta stones for identity, is valuable: it confirms the possibility of an autobiography in the third person.

Even within the personal register (first and second persons) it is clear that it is quite possible to write other than in the first person. What would prevent me from writing my life referring to myself as 'you'? In fiction, this has been done by Michel Butor, in *La Modification*, and by Georges Perec in *Un Homme qui dort*. There seem to be no autobiographies which have been entirely written in that way, but the device sometimes appears briefly in addresses by the narrator to the person he once was, to comfort him in a difficult situation, or lecture or disown him.<sup>4</sup> From such use to a whole narrative there is, to be sure, quite a distance, but the thing is possible. This kind of narration would clearly point up, on the level of discourse, the difference between the subject of discourse, i.e. the speaker, and the subject of the utterance treated as the addressee of the narrative.

These uses of the third and second persons are rare in autobiography, but they make it impossible to confuse problems of grammatical person with problems of 'identity'. One can therefore imagine a matrix conceived like that on p. 196.

It has been necessary, on the basis of exceptional cases, to dissociate the problem of person from that of 'identity'. This allows us to account for the complexity of existing or possible forms of autobiography. It can also induce uncertainty about the possibility of giving a 'textual' definition of autobiography. For the present, after this look at the exceptions, let us return to the

grammatical person	I	YOU	HE
identity			
narrator = protagonist	classical autobiography (autodictélique)	second-person autobiography	third-person autobiography
narrator ≠ protagonist	first-person biography (eye-witness account) (homodictélique)	biography addressed to the subject	classical biography (hétérodictélique)

## REMARKS

- (a) By 'grammatical person' should be understood the person which is given primary importance throughout the narrative. Obviously, an 'I' is not conceivable without a 'you' (the reader), but the latter is generally left implicit; conversely, a 'you' implies a (usually implicit) 'I', and narration in the third person may contain intrusions by a first-person narrator.
- (b) The examples given here are all taken from the gamut of referential narrative offered by biography and autobiography; we could have as easily used examples from fiction. I give Genette's categories at the appropriate points; it will be seen that they do not cover all possible cases.
- (c) The case of a biography addressed to its subject is illustrated by certain academic speeches, where the speaker talks directly to the person whose life story he is telling, before an audience which is the true recipient, just as, in an autobiography in the second person, if such a work existed, the addressee (oneself at an earlier age) would be invoked to receive a discourse, with the reader as onlooker.

most frequent case, that of the classical autobiography in the first person ('autodictélique' narration): we will encounter new reasons for uncertainty, this time concerning the way in which 'identity' is established between the *author* and the *narrator-protagonist*.

**I, the undersigned**

Let us assume, then, that all autobiographies are written in the first person, as one might infer from the constant refrain of the autobiographers: *I*. We find, for example, from Rousseau: 'I, I alone'; Stendhal: 'Once again you are backsliding into *I* and *me*'; Thyde Monnier: *Moi* (a four-volume autobiography); Claude Roy: *Moi, je* (as for me, *I*); etc. Even in this case we are faced with the following question: how is the 'identity' between the author and the narrator manifested? For the autobiographer, it would be natural to pose this question simply by saying 'Who am I?' But since I am a

reader, it is no less natural for me to ask the question in another way: who is 'I'? That is: who is the one who is saying 'Who am I'?

I hope I will be excused for recalling, before continuing the analysis, a few elementary linguistic notions. Unfortunately, in this domain, the simplest things are the ones which are most easily forgotten: they are taken as natural and they disappear in the illusion that they create. I will begin with the analyses of Benveniste, but will arrive at conclusions which are slightly different from his.<sup>5</sup>

The 'first person' is defined by a junction between two domains:

1. Reference: the personal pronouns (*I/you*) have reference only within a discourse, in the very act of utterance. Benveniste points out that there is no concept 'I'. 'I' refers, each time it is used, to the individual who is speaking and who is identified *by the very fact* of his speaking.
2. Utterance: the personal pronouns of the first person express *identity* of the subject of the speech act ('énonciation') and the subject of the utterance ('énoncé').

Thus, if someone says: 'I was born on . . .', the use of the pronoun 'I' because of the junction between these two domains, leads to an identification of the person who is speaking with the person who was born. At least, that is the global effect. This should not be taken to mean that the kinds of 'equivalences' established within these two domains are similar: on the level of reference (discourse as referring to its own production), the identity is immediate: it is instantaneously perceived and accepted by the hearer or reader as a *fact*; on the level of utterance ('énoncé'), what is involved is a simple relation that is expressed, i.e. uttered — that is, an assertion like any other, which one can believe or doubt, etc. The example chosen gives an idea of the problems that may arise: is the baby who was born in some hospital, at a period of which I have not the slightest memory, really the same person as *me*? It is important to distinguish these two relations, fused in the use of the pronoun 'I': as we will see below, failure to distinguish them has introduced a great deal of confusion into thinking about the problems of autobiography (see 'Certified true copy' below). Leaving aside for the moment the problems relevant to utterance, I will restrict my examination to those involving production ('énonciation').

The analyses of Benveniste are based on the situation of *spoken* discourse. In that situation, it might be thought that the reference of 'I' poses no problems: 'I' is the one who is speaking, and I, in my role as interlocutor or hearer, should have no trouble identifying that person. However, there exist two kinds of oral situations in which identification can be a problem:

- (a) *Quotation*: this is discourse within discourse: the first person of the second discourse (the quoted one) refers to a context of utterance which is itself stated in the first discourse. In various languages, different signs —

quotation marks, dashes, etc. — identify embedded (i.e. quoted) discourse when writing is involved. Intonation has a similar function in spoken discourse. But if these indications are unclear, or lacking, there will be uncertainty: this is the case with *re-quoting*, and, in general, in the theatre. When la Berna acts in *Phèdre*, who is the one saying 'je'? The theatrical context can, to be sure, have the function of quotation marks, signalling the fictive nature of the person saying 'I'. But this is where we begin to feel dizzy, for even the most naive among us is tempted to ask whether it is not the person who defines the 'I', but rather perhaps the 'I' which defines the person — that is, whether there is no person except within the discourse. Let us fight off this dizziness for a moment. What we are touching upon here is the problem of the difference between the autobiographical novel and the autobiography, but also, within autobiography, the self-evident truth that the first person is a role.

(b) *Speaking at a distance*: this is, in this context, the conversation on the telephone, or through a closed door, or in the dark: there is no other way to identify the speaker than by his voice: 'Who is it?' 'Me.' ('Me who?' — in such a case dialogue is still possible, and can lead to identification. If the voice is delayed in time, as in a recording, or if the conversation, even when instantaneous, is one-way, as on the radio, then that possibility is lacking. Such a situation is equivalent to that of writing.

So far I have pretended to be following Benveniste, by straightforwardly imagining everything that might happen, in a situation of speaking, to keep the identity of the speaker unclear. No one would want to deny that 'I' refers to the act of speaking; but the speech act is not the final stage of reference — it raises in turn an identity problem, which, in the case of direct oral communication, we solve instinctively on the basis of extra-linguistic data. When oral communication is disturbed, identity can become problematic. However, in the case of written communication, unless it is intended to remain anonymous (as sometimes happens), the person who produces the discourse is supposed to allow himself to be identified on the basis of the discourse content itself, not merely on the basis of material clues, like the postmark, his handwriting, or his spelling idiosyncrasies.

Benveniste remarks (p. 261) that there is no concept of 'I': an accurate observation, if one adds that there is no concept of 'he', etc., either, and that, in general, no personal, possessive, demonstrative, etc., pronoun has ever *referred* to a concept, but that these rather merely perform a function, which is to point to a noun, or an entity capable of being designated by a noun. We therefore propose to refine his analysis by adding the following two propositions:

(a) The personal pronoun 'I' designates the utterer of the discourse token where the 'I' occurs; but this utterer is himself capable of being designated by

a nominal (whether this is a common noun, determined in one way or another, or a proper noun).

(b) The opposition between having and not having an associated concept acquires its meaning from the opposition of the common noun and the proper noun (not of the common noun and the personal pronoun).

In another passage (p. 254) Benveniste justifies as follows, in terms of economy, the use of this first person which has no reference except in its use in a speech act: 'If each speaker, to express his feeling of irreducible personal identity, had his own personal call signal, as each radio station has its own call sign, there would be about as many languages as there are individuals, and communication would be impossible.' This is a strange 'if', for Benveniste seems to be forgetting that these personalized call signals actually exist, in the lexical category of proper nouns designating people: there are almost as many names as there are individuals. Naturally, the different names do not require different forms of the verb conjugation, and Benveniste is right to stress the economical function of 'I'; however, by forgetting to relate it to the lexical category of personal names, he makes it incomprehensible why each speaker, using 'I', is not as a consequence lost in the anonymous mass, and is still able to declare what he irreducibly is by naming himself.

The individual person and his discourse are connected to each other through the personal name, even before they are connected by the first person, as is shown by the facts of language acquisition by children. The infant speaks of himself in the third person, using his own name, long before he comes to understand that he too can use the first person. Later, each of us will call himself 'I' in speaking; but for everyone this 'I' will designate a particular name, which he will always be able to utter. All of the situations of identification, whether easy, difficult, or indeterminate, indicated above for spoken language, inevitably end up by cashing in the first person for a proper noun.<sup>6</sup>

In oral discourse, whenever it is necessary, there is a return to the proper noun: this is the introduction, performed by the person himself, or some third party (the French word for introduction, *présentation*, is itself suggestive, because of its inexactitude: physical *présence* does not suffice to characterize the utterer; there is not full presence without naming). In written discourse, likewise, the *signature* designates the utterer, as the address does the intended recipient.<sup>7</sup>

The problems of autobiography must thus be considered in relation to the *proper noun*. In printed texts, the whole utterance is assumed by a person whose name is customarily placed on the cover of the book, and on the flyleaf, above or below the title. In this name is summed up the whole existence of what is called the *author*: it is the only mark in the text of an indubitable 'outside-of-the-text', designating a real person, who thus asks that we

attribute to him, definitively, the responsibility for producing the whole text. In many cases, the author's presence in the text is reduced to just this name. But the place assigned to the name is highly significant: by social convention, it is connected with the accepting of responsibility by a *real person*. By these words, which occur above in my definition of autobiography, I mean a person whose existence is legally verifiable, a matter of record. Of course, the reader is not going to go out and verify it, and he may very well not know who this person is, but his existence is beyond question; exceptions and fraud only serve to emphasize the general credence given to this variety of social contract.<sup>8</sup>

An author is not just a person, he is a person who writes and publishes. With one foot in the text, and one outside, he is the point of contact between the two. The author is defined as being simultaneously a socially responsible real person, and the producer of a discourse. For the reader, who does not know the real person, although believing in his existence, the author is defined as the person who is capable of producing this discourse, and he thus imagines him on the basis of what he has produced. Perhaps one really becomes an author only with one's second book, when the name written on the cover is the common denominator for at least two different texts, and thus gives the idea of a person who is not reducible to any particular one of his texts, and who, being capable of producing others, goes beyond all of them. As will be seen, this is very important for the reading of autobiographies: if the autobiography is the author's first book, he is an unknown — even if he is telling his own story in the book, he lacks, in the eyes of the reader, that sign of reality constituted by the prior production of *other texts* (non-autobiographical ones), which is indispensable to what we will call 'the autobiographical space'.

The author is thus a personal name, the identical name accepting responsibility for a sequence of different published texts. He derives his reality from the list of his other works which is often to be found at the beginning of the book under the heading 'by the same author'. The autobiography, a narration of the life of the author, presupposes *identity in name* between the author, as represented by his name on the cover, the narrator, and the one being spoken of. This is a very simple criterion, which defines, simultaneously, autobiography and all the other genres of *littérature intime* (diary, self-portrait, personal essay).

One objection comes to mind immediately: what about pseudonyms? The objection is easy to answer, once the pseudonym has been defined and distinguished from the name of a fictitious person.

A pseudonym is a name, which differs from that recognized by the law, which a real person uses to *publish* some or all of his writings. The pseudonym is an *author's* name. It is not exactly a false name, but rather a *nom de plume*, a

second name, exactly like that which a nun adopts when she takes the veil. Admittedly, the use of a pseudonym can sometimes involve deceit, or be the result of a desire for discretion: but in such cases most often just one work is involved, and almost never is that work presented as the autobiography of an *author*. In general, literary pseudonyms are neither secrets nor hoaxes; the second name is as authentic as the first, it just signals that second birth known as published writing. When he writes his autobiography, the pseudonymous author will himself give the origin of his assumed name: thus Raymond Abellio explains that his name is Georges Soulez, and says why he chose his pseudonym.<sup>9</sup> The pseudonym is simply a differentiation, a splitting, of the name, which does not change the identity of the person at all.

The *pseudonym*, defined in this way as the name of an *author* (written on the cover of the book), must not be confused with the *name* attributed to a fictitious individual *within* the book (even if this individual is the narrator and figures as the utterer of the text in its entirety): for this individual is identified as fictive simply because he is incapable of being the *author of the book*. Let us take a very simple example: 'Colette' is the pseudonym of a real person (Gabrielle-Sidonie Colette), who is the *author* of a series of stories; 'Claudine' is the name of a fictitious heroine, who is the narrator of the stories which have her name in the title. If we cannot accept these narratives as autobiographies, this is obviously because of the second fact, not because of the first.

In the case of a fictitious name (that is, one different from the author's) given to a character who tells the story of his life, it can happen that the reader has reason to believe that the story of what happened to the character is exactly that of the author's life, because of parallels in other texts, or because of other information already in the reader's possession, or even because there are things in the text itself which make it ring false as fiction (as when someone says: 'Something happened to a close friend of mine . . .', and then tells the story of this 'friend' in a very involved, personal way). Even if there were all the reasons in the world for believing that the story was exactly the same, it would still be the case that the text in question was not an autobiography: autobiography supposes first of all that *identity* is assumed by the author on the level of the speech act ('énonciation') and, quite secondarily, that there is a *resemblance* on the level of the utterance ('énoncé').

Such texts as these would thus belong to the category of the 'autobiographical novel': I will use this term for any piece of fiction for which the reader may have reason to suspect, on the basis of what he guesses or thinks to be resemblances, that there is identity between the author and the *protagonist*, even though the author has chosen to deny, or at least not to affirm, that identity. So defined, the autobiographical novel includes both personal narratives (where there is 'identity' between the narrator and the

protagonist) and 'impersonal' narratives (where the protagonist is designated in the third person): it is defined in terms of its content. Unlike the autobiography, an autobiographical novel can be so to various degrees. The 'resemblance' supposed by the reader can range from a vague 'family resemblance' between the protagonist and the author to a quasi-transparency which leads us to say that the protagonist is an exact likeness. Thus, concerning *L'Année du crabe* (1972) by Olivier Todd, a critic has written that 'the whole book is obsessively autobiographical beneath transparent pseudonymy'.<sup>10</sup> Autobiography, on the other hand, does not admit of degrees: it is a matter of all or nothing.

It can be seen how important it is to use a clearly defined vocabulary in making these distinctions. The critic speaks here of a 'pseudonym' for the name of the hero; for me, the term can only stand for the name of an author. The hero can resemble the author as much as he wants to; so long as he does not have his name, it makes no difference. From this point of view, the case of *L'Année du crabe* is typical. The subtitle of the book is 'roman', novel; Todd's hero is called Ross. On the jacket, the publisher informs the reader that Ross is really Todd. This is a clever advertising gambit, but it does not change anything. If Ross is really Todd, why does he have a different name? If it really was him, why did he not simply say it was? Whether he coquettishly helps the reader to guess that it is him, or the reader figures it out in spite of the author, does not matter much. Autobiography is not a guessing game: in fact, it is exactly the opposite. What is missing here is something essential, it is what I have proposed calling the *autobiographical contract*.

Ascending from the first person to the proper name, I am now forced to correct what I wrote in *L'Autobiographie en France*: 'How are we to distinguish the autobiography from the autobiographical novel? It must be admitted, if we restrict ourselves to an internal analysis of the text, that there is no difference at all. All the devices that are used in autobiography to convince us of the authenticity of the story can be imitated by the novel, and that has often been done.' This is true as long as the text is considered without the title page; when that is taken as part of the text, with the name of the author, then a general textual criterion is available: 'identity' between the names of the author, narrator, and protagonist. The autobiographical contract is the affirmation in the text of this identity, referring in the last resort to the *name* of the author on the cover.

The forms of the autobiographical contract are quite varied, but they all manifest an intention to 'honour the signature'. The reader can quibble about how much resemblance there is between the protagonist and the author, but not about whether there is 'identity'. Everyone knows only too well how much each of us values his own name.

A piece of autobiographical fiction can turn out to be 'exact', with the

protagonist resembling the author; an autobiography can be 'inexact', with the individual described being different from the author. These are *de facto* matters (though we are still leaving aside the question of *who* is to judge whether there is resemblance, and how), which do not affect the *de jure* matter of the type of contract existing between the author and the reader. It can be seen that the contract is important from the observation that it in fact determines the attitude of the reader: if there is not an affirmation of identity, as is the case with fiction, then the reader will try to find resemblances, in spite of the author; if there is, as in the case of autobiography, he will tend to look for differences (errors, distortions, etc.). When confronted with a narrative that has the appearance of an autobiography, there is often a tendency for the reader to act like a detective; that is, to look for breaches of the contract, whatever kind of contract it may be. This is what is responsible for the myth of the novel that is 'truer' than autobiography: we always believe what we think we have discovered from the text in spite of the author to be truer and deeper. If Olivier Todd had presented *L'Année du crabe* as his autobiography, perhaps our critic would have been sensitive to the flaws, gaps, and rearrangements of the narrative. This indicates that all questions of *falseness* (this is the problem of 'resemblance') depend in the last analysis on the question of *authenticity* (this is the problem of identity), which itself is formulated in terms of the name of the author.

*Identity in name* between the author, the narrator, and the protagonist can be established in two ways:

1. *Implicitly*, with the connection between the author and the narrator, suggested by the *autobiographical contract*, which can take two forms: (a) *titles* can be used which can remove all doubt that the first person refers to the named author (*The Story of My Life, Autobiography*, etc.); (b) there can be an *initial section* of the text where the narrator makes commitments to the reader by behaving as if he was the author, in such a way that the reader has not the slightest doubt that the 'I' designates the name on the cover, even if the name is not repeated in the text.

2. *Overtly*, with the name that the narrator-protagonist gives to himself in the course of the narrative, and which is the same as that of the author on the cover.

It is necessary for identity to be established in at least one of these two ways; it often happens that both are used.

In symmetry with the autobiographical contract, we could posit the *fictional contract*, which would itself have two aspects: *overt practice of non-identity* (the author and the protagonist do not have the same name), and *attestation of fictionality* (the subtitle 'roman' (novel) generally has this function nowadays; note that 'roman', in present-day terminology, implies the fictional contract, while the word 'récit' (narrative) is indeterminate, and compatible with the

autobiographical contract). It will perhaps be objected that the novel has the potential to *imitate* the autobiographical contract: was not the eighteenth-century novel developed in fact by imitating the different forms of *littérature intime* (memoirs, letters, and, in the nineteenth century, the diary)? But this objection does not hold, if one remembers that such imitation cannot be sustained through its final term, that is, the *name* of the author. One can always pretend to be reporting, to be publishing the autobiography of someone whom one wishes to be taken as a real person; as long as that someone is not the *author*, the only one responsible for the book, this changes nothing. The only cases which will not be covered by this criterion are cases of literary hoaxes: these are exceedingly rare, and their rarity is not due to respect for other people's names or the fear of punishment. Who is there to prevent me from writing the autobiography of an imaginary person and publishing it under his name, also imaginary? That is in fact what, in a slightly different area, MacPherson did for Ossian! The case is rare because there are very few authors who are capable of giving up *their own name*. The proof is that even the Ossian hoax was short-lived, since we know who was the real author, for MacPherson could not resist putting his name on the title page as the adapter.

Assuming these definitions, we can classify all possible cases with the use of two criteria: the relation between the name of the protagonist and the name of the author, and the nature of the contract entered into by the author. For each of these criteria, three situations are conceivable. The protagonist (1) has a name different from the author's; (2) does not have a name; (3) has the same name as the author; the contract is (1) fictional; (2) absent; (3) autobiographical. By combining these two criteria, we theoretically get nine cases; in fact, only seven are possible, since two are excluded by definition: identity of the names cannot coexist with the fictional contract, nor a difference of name with the autobiographical contract.

The table on p. 205 gives all the possible combinations; the numbers refer to the descriptions below; in each box is given the effect which each combination produces in the reader. This matrix, of course, applies only to 'autodégénétique' narration.

**1. Name of protagonist ≠ name of author**

This alone excludes the possibility of autobiography. It is thus of little importance whether there is also an attestation of fictivity (1a or 1b). Whether the story is presented as true (as, e.g., an autobiographical manuscript found by the author-editor in an attic, etc.), or as fictitious (and believed to be true, connected with the author by the reader), in any case there is not identity between the author, the narrator, and the hero.

Name of protagonist / Contract	≠ name of author	= 0	= name of author
fictional	1(a) NOVEL	2(a) NOVEL	
= 0	1(b) NOVEL	2(b) indeterminate	3(a) AUTOBIOGRAPHY
autobiographical		2(c) AUTOBIOGRAPHY	3(b) AUTOBIOGRAPHY

**2. Name of protagonist = 0**

This is the most complex case, because of its indeterminacy. Everything depends on what contract the author chooses. Three cases are possible:

(a) Fictional contract (the book is identified as 'fiction' on the cover or title page): the 'autodégénétique' narrative is attributed to a fictitious narrator. The case cannot be frequent — no example comes to mind immediately. One might be tempted to cite *À la recherche du temps perdu*, but this fiction does not exactly correspond to the case in question, for two reasons: on the one hand, there is no clear indication of the fictional contract at the beginning of the book, and in fact numerous readers have mistakenly identified the author Proust with the narrator; furthermore, it is true that the narrator-protagonist has no name — except on just one occasion, where, in a single utterance, the possibility is offered of giving the narrator the same first name as the author (we can attribute this utterance only to the author, for how can a fictitious narrator know the name of his author?), and in this manner we are informed that the author is not the narrator. This strange intrusion of the author functions simultaneously as a fictional contract and as an autobiographical clue, and situates the text in some ambiguous intermediate region.<sup>11</sup>

(b) Contract = 0: not only does the protagonist not have a name, but the author does not subscribe to any contract, autobiographical or fictional. There is total indeterminacy. An example is *La Mère et l'enfant*, by Charles-Louis Philippe. While the secondary characters in this narrative have names, the mother and the child have no family name, and the child does not have a first name. It is easy to imagine that they are Madame Philippe and her son, but this is not stated anywhere. In addition the narration is ambiguous (is the work a paean to childhood in general or the story of a particular child?).



the time and place are quite vague, and we do not know who the adult is who is speaking of this childhood. The reader can read the book in whatever way he pleases.

(c) Autobiographical contract: the protagonist has no name in the narrative, but the author states explicitly his identity with the narrator (and hence with the protagonist, since the narrative is 'autodidégétique'), in an initial contract. An example is *Histoire de mes idées* by Edgar Quinet; the contract, incorporated in the title, is made explicit in a long preface, signed by Edgar Quinet. The name does not appear once in the entire narrative, but, because of the contract, 'je' always refers to Quinet.

### 3. Name of protagonist = name of author

This of itself excludes the possibility of fiction. Even if the narrative is, in historical terms, completely false, it will be a *lie* (which is an autobiographical category) and not fiction. Two cases can be distinguished:

(a) Contract = 0 (this is meant to include the contract indicated by the title and other peripheral material): the reader realizes the identity of author, narrator, and protagonist, although this is not stated explicitly. Example: *Les Mots*, by Jean-Paul Sartre. Neither the title nor the beginning indicate that the work is an autobiography. Someone is telling the story of a family. On page 14 of the *Folio* edition the narrator appears explicitly for the first time ('*Il m'intrigue: je sais qu'il est resté célibataire . . .*' (He fascinates me: I know he remained a bachelor); or 'Elle l'aimait, je crois . . .' (She loved him, I think)); on page 15, doctor Sartre appears in the story, who, on page 16, has a grandson: 'moi'. Because of the name, we grasp the identity between the protagonist, the narrator, and the author whose name is printed above the title: Jean-Paul Sartre. And the fact that this is the famous author, and not someone else with the same name, is established by the text itself, whose narrator claims the authorship on page 48 of *Les Mouches*, *Les Chemins de la liberté*, and *Les Séquestrés d'Altona*, and, on page 211, of *La Nausée*. The story itself will give us insights of the most varied kinds concerning this name, from daydreams of glory - 'This little Sartre knows his business; if he were to disappear, little does France know what she would be losing' (p. 80) - to familiar - and familial - distortions of his first name - 'André thinks that Poulou is showing off' (p. 188).

This criterion might be considered to be quite haphazard. Sometimes the first occurrence of the author's name in the narrative is far from the beginning, in a minor episode which, we feel, could be eliminated from the text with no change at all in its general aspect: thus, in the autobiography of Julien Green, *Partir avant le jour* (Grasset, 1963), only on page 107, in an anecdote about the awarding of prizes, does his name appear. It sometimes

even happens that there is only a single and allusive occurrence of the name. This is the case in *L'Âge d'homme*, where we understand 'Michel' for 'Micheline';<sup>12</sup> but still, almost always, the name appears. Naturally, in general, the autobiographical contract does not mention the name: one's own name is such an obvious thing, and it will be on the cover anyway. It is because of this inevitability of the name that it never receives a formal avowal on the part of the author (the *author*, just because he is an author, always assumes that the reader knows him to some extent), but still sooner or later shows up in the narrative. For all that, it may be explicitly given, or since it is always the name of an author, it may be only implicit, when the narrator acknowledges having written the other works of the author of the book (thus, while Quinet does not name himself, he names his books, which amounts to the same thing).

(b) Autobiographical contract: this is the most frequent case, for, very often, even if the contract is not formally avowed at the beginning of the book, it is present in scattered form throughout the text.

An example is the *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: the contract, expressed in the title, is developed in the preamble, and confirmed all through the text by the use of 'Rousseau' and 'Jean-Jacques'.

I will here use the term 'autobiography' for texts which fall under cases 2(c), 3(a), and 3(b); as for the rest, we will read the texts which fall under cases 1(a), 1(b), 2(a), and, if we want, 2(b), as novels (but without forgetting that it is *we* who decide).

In this kind of classification, it is always instructive to think carefully about the limiting cases, which are more revealing than those whose description poses no real problems. Are the alternatives which I have rejected really impossible? Two problems are worth exploring here: that of the two blanks in the above matrix, and then that of the anonymous author.

#### The blanks

(a) Can the hero of a novel which is declared to be such have the same name as its author? There is nothing to prevent this situation from existing, and it is, perhaps, an internal contradiction which could serve as the basis for interesting effects. However, in practice, no example comes to mind of such an attempt. When the case does arise, the reader has the impression that there has been a mistake: thus, the autobiography of Maurice Sachs, *Le Sabbat*, was published by Corréa in 1946 with the subtitle *Souvenirs d'une jeunesse oraguse* (Memories of a stormy youth); it was reissued in 1960 by Gallimard (and again in 1971 in the *Leire de Poche*), with the subtitle 'roman' (novel). Since the story is narrated by Sachs in his own name (the even gives himself as well as his pseudonym, his real name: Ertinghausen), and the



publisher is clearly responsible for the subtitle, the reader concludes that there has been a mistake; (b) In an autobiography which is declared to be such, can the protagonist have a different name from the author (apart from cases involving a pseudonym)? It is difficult to find an example;<sup>13</sup> and if, in his desire for an artistic effect, an autobiographer chose this device, the reader would always wonder whether he was not simply reading a novel. It is clear that in both these cases, if the internal contradiction was intentionally chosen by an author, it would never result in a text that would be read as an autobiography, or, really, as a novel either, but rather in a Pirandello-like game playing with the ambiguity. To my knowledge, this is a game which is practically never played in earnest.

In the above matrix, the diagonal going from lower left to upper right, comprising the two empty boxes and the central one, thus covers a zone of indeterminateness – extending from the 'neither one nor the other' of the middle box to the 'both at once' of the two blanks.

#### The anonymous author

This matrix supposes that the author has a name; a tenth case should therefore be envisaged, that of the anonymous author. But this case (along with the subdivisions generated according to whether the protagonist has a name or not, and whether a publisher establishes some contract with the reader in place of the missing author) is also excluded by definition, since the author of an autobiography cannot be anonymous. If the absence of the author's name is accidental (as with an unsigned unpublished manuscript found in an attic) there are two possibilities: either, at some point in the text, the narrator gives his name, and elementary historical research reveals whether a real person is involved, given that by definition an autobiography tells a story that is assigned to a particular time and place; or else the narrator-protagonist does not name himself, and then either the text belongs to category 2(b), or is just fiction. If the anonymity is intentional (as in a published text), then the reader has the right to be suspicious. The text may look true, may give all sorts of checkable or plausible details, may sound like the real thing, but all this can be counterfeited. At best, this would be a case of limiting case, similar to category 2(b). Everything depends in such a case on the reader's decision. An idea of the complexity of the problem can be obtained by reading, for example, the *Mémoires d'un vicairé de campagne, écrits par lui-même* (1841), attributed to l'abbé Epineau, who is supposed to have been forced by his ecclesiastical responsibilities to remain temporarily anonymous.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, in stating that it is impossible for an autobiography to be anonymous, I am only giving a corollary of my definition, not proving it to be correct. Anyone who wants to is free to claim that it is possible, but then he

has to propose a different definition. Everything depends, clearly, on the connection that I have established, through the notion of the *author*, between the person and his name, as well as on the fact that I have chosen to define autobiography from the reader's point of view. For any reader, a text which looks autobiographical, but is not claimed by some individual, looks exactly like a work of fiction.

However, I believe that this definition, far from being arbitrary, brings out the essential point. What defines an autobiography, for the person who reads it, is above all a contract guaranteeing 'identity' sealed by the name of its signer. This is also true for the person who writes it. If I write the story of my life without giving my name, how is my reader to know that it was *me*? It is impossible for the autobiographical vocation and the passion for anonymity to coexist in the same being.

Thus the distinctions proposed here, and the focus on the name, have great importance on the practical level as classificatory criteria; on the level of theory, they necessitate a whole series of observations, which I will give only in outline.

(a) *The author and the person*: autobiography is the literary genre which, by its very content, most clearly exhibits the confusion between the author and the individual person, on which all of the theory and practice of Western literature since the end of the eighteenth century is based. This explains the passion for the name, which goes beyond simple author's vanity, for it expresses the cry for existence of personal identity itself. The deep subject of autobiography is the proper name. One recalls those drawings by Hugo, where his own name is spread in gigantic letters across a chiaroscuro landscape. The desire for glory, for eternity, so cruelly debunked by Sartre in *Les Mots*, depends entirely on the personal name which has become an author's name. Is it possible to imagine today an *anonymous* literature? Valéry was already dreaming of one fifty years ago, but he does not seem to have thought of turning that dream into a reality, since he ended up in the Académie Française. He offered himself the glory of dreaming of anonymity. The *Tel Quel* group, by calling into question the notion of the author (replacing it by the notion of the 'scripteur') makes a similar proposal, but has shown no greater interest in putting it into practice.

(b) *The person and language*: we saw above that it was legitimate to ask, with respect to the 'first person', whether it was the psychological person (conceived naively as being external to language) which expressed itself by using the grammatical person as instrument, or whether rather the psychological person was an *effect* of the act of utterance itself. The word 'person' contributes to this ambiguity. If there is no person outside of language, then, since language is other people, we would have to conclude that autobiographical discourse, far from referring, as everyone imagines, to an 'I' to be

casted as a series of personal names, is on the contrary an alienated discourse, a mythological voice by which each of us is possessed. Naturally, autobiographers are in general as far removed as possible from the problems of Beckett's hero in *L'Innommable* asking who it is inside him who says 'I', but such anxiety emerges in a few books, for example *Le Traître* by Gorz, or rather the sort of 'transcription' of it produced by Sartre (*Des rats et des hommes*). Sartre gives the name 'vampire' to these voices that possess us. No doubt the autobiographical voice is one example. We could then envisage — once the psychology and mystique of the individual are demythologized — developing an analysis of the discourse of subjectivity and individuality as a myth of our civilization. Everyone is, in fact, aware of the danger in this indeterminacy of the first person, and it is not an accident that we attempt to resolve the indeterminacy by anchoring it to the proper name.

(c) *The proper name and the 'proper body'*: in the development of the individual, acquiring his own name is doubtless as important a milestone as the 'mirror stage'. This acquisition occurs at a moment inaccessible to memory, or to autobiography, which can speak only of those second and inverted baptisms which consist, for a child, in the accusations which freeze him in a role by means of a label: 'thief', for Genev, 'Yid', for Albert Cohen (*O You, J'étais humain*, 1972). The name first received and carried, the father's, and above all the given name, which distinguishes you from your father, are without a doubt important facts for the history of the self. Proof of this is the fact that one's name is never neutral, whether one adores it or detests it, whether one is willing to have it from someone else or prefers to receive it only from oneself: this may go as far as a generalized system of games or evasions, as with Stendhal,<sup>15</sup> or a preference for the Christian name, as with Jean-Jacques (Rousseau); more banally, it may result in all those private or parlour or chance playings with this string of letters which each of us feels instinctively to contain the essence of his being. There is play with the spelling, or the meaning of a name: for example, with the bad luck of being called François Nourissier<sup>16</sup> [cf. 'nourricier' = nutritious, foster-father, 'nourisher']; or with its gender: is it Michel or Micheline Leiris (cf. note 12)? The name can be present in the voices of those who say it: 'Ah Rousseau, I thought you were good-natured', said Marion. There can be pondering by a child on the arbitrariness of his name, and an attempt to find another name which is essential rather than accidental, as with Jacques Madaule.<sup>17</sup> There can be a history of the name itself, often in what is for the reader tiresome detail, in those prefaces that read like family trees.

When, therefore, we look for something to distinguish fiction from autobiography, to serve as a basis for the referent of 'I' in first-person narratives, there is no need to appeal to an impossible region 'outside-the-text': the text itself provides, on its outer edge, this final term, the proper

name of the author, which is at once textual and indubitably referential. This referentiality is indubitable because it is based on two social institutions: the legal identity of the individual (a convention which is internalized by each of us from early childhood) and the publisher's contract; there is hence no reason to doubt the author's identity.

### Certified true copy

'Identity' is not resemblance. Identity is a *fact* that is immediately apprehended — accepted, or rejected — on the level of the speech act ('énonciation'); resemblance is a *relation*, and as such is subject to discussion and infinite qualification, and is established on the basis of the utterance ('énoncé').

The 'identity' in question involves three terms: the author, the narrator, and the protagonist. The narrator and the protagonist are the entities referred to, within the text, by the subject of the speech act, i.e. the utterer, and the subject of the utterance; the author, who is represented on the outer edge of the text by his name, is, then, the referent who is designated, through the autobiographical contract, by the utterer.

In dealing with *resemblance*, we are forced to introduce a fourth term into the equation to obtain symmetry with what we have on the utterance side, an extratextual referent who might be called the 'prototype', or, better yet, the *model*.

My thinking about identity has led me to draw a primary distinction between the autobiographical novel and the autobiography: for resemblance, it is the opposition with *biography* that will have to be sharpened. In both cases, in fact, our vocabulary is a source of error: 'autobiographical novel' is too close to the word 'autobiography', which is itself too close to 'biography' for confusion not to take place. Is not an autobiography, as its name indicates, just the biography of an individual written by himself? We tend consequently to perceive it as a particular case of biography, and to apply to it the historicizing approach of that genre. Many autobiographers, whether amateurs or established writers, fall naively into this trap, for this illusion is necessary for the functioning of the genre.

In opposition to all forms of fiction, biography and autobiography are *referential* texts: exactly like scientific or historical discourse, they claim to convey information about a 'reality' which is external to the text and hence to be subject to the test of *verification*. Their goal is not mere 'vraisemblance' but resemblance to the truth. Not the 'reality effect' ('l'effet de réel'), but the image of reality. All referential texts thus embody what I will call a *referential contract*, implicit or explicit, in which are included a specification of the area

of reality being treated and a statement of the manner and degree of resemblance the text is claimed to possess.

In the case of autobiography, the referential contract is in general coextensive with the autobiographical contract. Like the subject of the speech act and the subject of the utterance in the case of the first person, they are difficult to dissociate. Its formula is not 'I, the undersigned', but 'I swear by Almighty God that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.' The oath is rarely taken in such abrupt and total form: it is a supplementary proof of the author's honesty to restrict it to the *possible* (the truth as I see it, insofar as I am able to determine it, etc., given the inevitable memory lapses, errors, involuntary distortions, etc.), and to indicate explicitly the *domain* to which the oath applies (the truth about a given aspect of my life, without any commitments regarding other aspects).

It can be seen how this contract resembles that entered into by any historian, geographer, or journalist, with his readers; but one has to be naive not to see the differences as well. We need not speak of the practical difficulties involved in applying the test of *verification* in the case of autobiography, due to the fact that the autobiographer is telling us precisely – and that is what makes his account interesting – what he alone is able to tell us. Biographical study can easily enable us to assemble other information and determine the degree of exactitude of the account. The difference does not lie here, but in the fact that, rather paradoxically, this exactitude is not of primary importance. In autobiography, it is indispensable that the referential contract be *made*, and *respected*, but it is not necessary that the result be an absolutely faithful resemblance. The referential contract can be, by the reader's criteria, imperfectly respected, without the referential value of the text disappearing – on the contrary – and this is not the case for historical or journalistic texts.

This apparent paradox is of course due to the confusion which I have maintained so far, following the example of most authors and critics, between biography and autobiography. To remove it, we must reconstitute our fourth term: the *model*.

By 'model', I mean the reality to which the utterance claims resemblance. How a text can 'resemble' a life is a question that biographers rarely ask themselves and that they always implicitly assume to have been answered. The 'resemblance' can hold on two levels: negatively – and on the level of the facts given in the narrative – there is the criterion of *exactitude*; positively – and on the level of the narrative as a whole – there is what we will call *fidelity*. Exactitude concerns *information*, fidelity *meaning*. The fact that meaning can be created only through the techniques of narrative and with the help of an explanatory system involving the ideology of the historian does not prevent the biographer from conceiving of it as the same sort of thing as exactitude,

bearing a relation of resemblance to the extratextual reality to which the entire text refers. Thus Sartre states shamelessly that his biography of Flaubert is a 'true story' ('un roman vrai').<sup>18</sup> The model, in the case of biography, is thus the life of a man just as it was.

We can thus construct a diagram (see p. 214) to represent the biographical enterprise, in which the columns represent the text and the extratextual, and the rows the subject of the speech act and the subject of the utterance. Inclosed within the boundary lines separating the text from the extratextual is the author, who occupies the marginal position corresponding to that of his name on the cover of the book.

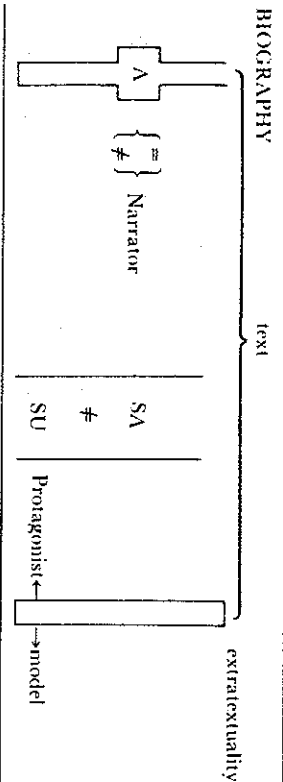
*Comments on the diagram.* In biography, the author and the narrator are sometimes related by the identity relation. This relation can remain implicit or indeterminate, or can be stated explicitly, for example in a preface (as in *L'Idiot de la famille*, where the biographer, Sartre, explains that he has a score to settle with his model Flaubert). It can also be the case that no relation of 'identity' is established between the author and the narrator. What is important is that, if the narrator uses the first person, he never does so to speak of the main character of his story, who must be someone else. When the protagonist is spoken of, the principal mode of narration is the third person, what Genette calls 'hétérodiégétique' narrative. The relation between the protagonist (in the text) and the model (the referent outside the text) is to be sure first of all a relation of 'identity', but it is above all a relation of *resemblance*. In fact, in the case of the subject of the utterance, the identity relation does not have the same *value* that it has for the subject of the speech act: it is simply a fact concerning the utterance, on a par with other facts. It does not prove anything, and it itself needs to be proved by resemblance.

We can already see here what will fundamentally oppose biography and autobiography: the relative importance of the relations of resemblance and 'identity'. In biography, resemblance is the basis for 'identity'; in autobiography, 'identity' is the basis for resemblance. 'Identity' is the actual starting point for autobiography; resemblance is the unattainable goal of biography. This explains the different functions of resemblance in the two systems.

This becomes obvious when we consider the diagram corresponding to autobiography (see p. 215).

The personal ('autodiégétique') narrative is seen here to be not at all reducible to the impersonal ('hétérodiégétique') narrative.

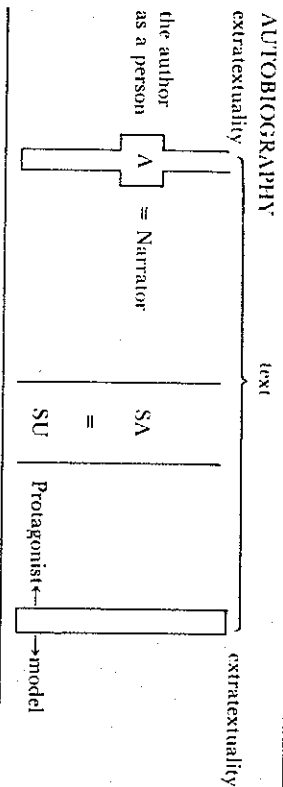
In the case of the personal narrative what does the equals sign connecting the subject of the speech act and the subject of the utterance (signal) stand for? It implies actual 'identity'; and this 'identity', in turn, entails a certain form of resemblance. Resemblance to whom? If the narrative is entirely in the past tense, the resemblance between the protagonist and the model can,



as with biography, be conceived exclusively as a verifiable relation between the protagonist and the model; but any narration in the first person implies that the protagonist, even if long-past experiences are being spoken of, is also the *present* individual who is producing the narrative: the subject of the utterance is a double subject, in that it is inseparable from the subject of the speech act; it only becomes simple, if at all, when the narrator is speaking of his current act of narrating, and never at the other extreme, to designate a protagonist independent of any present narrator.

It is thus clear that the relation expressed by the equals sign is not at all a simple relation, but rather a *relation between relations*; what is meant is that the narrator is to the protagonist (past or present) what the author is to the model; it can be seen that this implies that the ultimate standard of truth (if we are thinking in terms of 'resemblance') cannot be the past individual as thing-in-itself ('être-en-soi') (if in fact such a thing exists), but the *pour-soi*, the present consciousness of the individual, as manifested at the time of utterance. If the narrator errs, lies, forgets, or distorts, with respect to his relation to the history (whether remote or almost contemporaneous) of his protagonist, these errors, lies, omissions or distortions, if we perceive them, will simply be taken as further aspects of his nevertheless authentic speech act. Let us use the term 'authenticity' for this internal relation, which is characteristic of the use of the first person in a personal narrative; it is not to be confused either with 'identity', which concerns the proper name, or with resemblance, which involves a judgement of similarity between two different images that is made by a third party.

This detour was necessary to understand the inadequacy of our diagram for autobiography. The illusion involved is shared by all who think of autobiography in terms of biography. In constructing the diagram for



biography, I was led, because of the non-identity between the narrator and the protagonist, to distinguish two 'sides' for extratextual reference, putting the author on the left and the model on the right. The fact that the relations involved were *simple* - 'identity' on the author side and resemblance on the model side - allowed a linear representation. For autobiography, 'reference' exists on just one side (since there is fusing of the author and the model) and the relation which links identity and resemblance is in fact a relation between relations which cannot be represented linearly.

We thus have the following formulas:

*Biography*: A is or is not N; P resembles M.

*Autobiography*: N is to P what A is to M.

(A = author; N = narrator; P = protagonist; M = model)

Since autobiography is a referential genre, it is naturally also subject to the requirement that there be resemblance with the model, but this is only a secondary aspect. That we judge that there is no resemblance is not essential, as long as we are sure that resemblance was intended. What is important is not so much the resemblance between 'Rousseau at the age of sixteen' as represented in the text of the *Confessions*, and the Rousseau of 1728 as he 'really' was, but the attempt by Rousseau about 1764 to depict: (1) his relation to the past; (2) that past as it really was, with the intention of not changing anything.

With 'identity', the limiting and exceptional case, which proved the rule, was that of the *hoax*; with resemblance, it will be *mythomania*: that is, not just the mistakes, distortions, and interpretations that are an inevitable secretion of the personal myth in any autobiography, but the substitution of an account that is a barefaced *invention*, and lacking in general any exact

correspondence with the author's life. As with hoaxes, this is extremely rare, and the referentiality which is claimed for the narrative is easily undermined by research in literary history. But even if it is shown not to be autobiography, the narrative will retain its interest considered as fantasizing (on the level of the utterance), and the fraudulence of the autobiographical contract, considered as behaviour, will still be revelatory for us (on the level of the speech act), of a subject who still has autobiographical intentions, and whom we will continue to take as existing behind the phoney subject. This is equivalent to analysing, from a different point of view, not the relation of biography to autobiography, but that of the novel to autobiography, to defining what might be called *autobiographical space*, and the *three-dimensional* effect it produces.

### Autobiographical space

It is now time to show the naivety of the illusion on which is based the widespread theory according to which the novel is truer (deeper, more authentic) than the autobiography. This commonplace, like all commonplaces, has no originator; each writer in turn has expressed it in his own way. According to Gide, for instance 'Memoirs are never more than half sincere, no matter how great the concern for truth: everything is always more complicated than people say it is. Perhaps we even come closer to truth with the novel.'<sup>19</sup> Or François Mauriac: 'But this is to seek in lofty regions for excuses for stopping my memoirs after only one chapter. Is the real reason for my laziness not rather that our novels express what is essential in ourselves? Only fiction does not lie; it opens slightly a secret door on a man's life and through it slips, beyond all control, his unknown soul.'<sup>20</sup> Albert Thibaudet has given to the commonplace the academic twist of 'parallelism', the ideal school essay subject, opposing the novel (deep and multifarious) to the autobiography (superficial and schematic).<sup>21</sup>

I will demonstrate the illusion on the basis of the formulation offered by Gide, if only because his work provides incomparable material for the demonstration. The reader need not worry: I have not the slightest intention of coming to the defence of the autobiographical genre, and proving the truth of the contrary proposition, namely that it is autobiography which is truer, deeper, etc. There would be no point at all in reversing Thibaudet's proposal, except perhaps to show that, in whatever direction it is read, it is still the same proposal.

The point is that when it *appears* that Gide and Mauriac are belittling the autobiography and glorifying the novel, in *reality* they are doing something quite different from setting up a more or less debatable schoolroom parallel: they are designating the autobiographical space within which they want us to

read the body of their work. Far from being a condemnation of the autobiography, these remarks, so frequently quoted, are really an indirect form of the autobiographical contract: they give us the nature of the ultimate truth aimed at by these texts. The reader too often forgets that, in these judgements, autobiography presents itself on two levels: along with being one of the two *terms* of the comparison, it is the *criterion* used in the comparison. What is this 'truth' that the novel helps us to come closer to than the autobiography, if not the personal, individual, intimate truth of the author, that is, that very thing which is the object of any autobiographical project? So to speak, it is *insofar* as it is autobiography that the novel is declared to be closer to the truth.

The reader is thus invited to read novels not just as *fiction* which point to truths of 'human nature', but also as *fantasies* which reveal an individual. I will call this indirect form of the autobiographical contract the *fantasmatic contract*.

If hypocrisy is the homage which vice pays to virtue, these judgements are really the homage which the novel pays to autobiography. If the novel is truer than the autobiography, then why have Gide, Mauriac, and so many others not been content to write novels? When the question is formulated thus, things become clear: if they had not *also* written and published autobiographical texts, even 'insufficient' ones, we would never have seen what kind of truth it was that we were supposed to look for in their novels. These statements are therefore ruses, perhaps involuntary, but still quite efficacious: a writer sidesteps accusations of vanity and egocentrism when he shows how lucid he is about the limits and inadequacies of his autobiography; and nobody realizes that, in doing so, he has in fact extended the autobiographical contract, in an indirect form, to the totality of what he has written. Two birds have been killed with one stone.

A double blow, or rather, double *vision* – double writing, an effect, if I may be allowed a neologistic use of the word, of *stereography*.

Looked at in this fashion, the problem is completely different in nature. We are no longer asking which is closer to the truth – the autobiography or the novel. Neither is closer than the other: the autobiography is lacking in complexity, in ambiguity, etc.; the novel lacks exactitude. Is the answer then: one of them plus the other? A better answer is: each of them *in relation to the other*. What is truly revelatory is the space in which the two categories of texts are situated, and which is not reducible to either of them alone. This effect of three-dimensionality which is obtained by the procedure in question is the creation for the reader of an 'autobiographical space'. In this regard, the work of Gide and of Mauriac is typical: both have orchestrated, albeit, it is true, for different reasons, the spectacular failure of their autobiographies, so as to force their readers to read all the rest of their narrative production in

the autobiographical mode. When I speak of failure, I intend no value judgement on texts which are admirable (Gide) or respectable (Mauriac), but simply echo their own statements, and observe that they have *chosen* to leave their autobiographies incomplete, fragmentary, full of gaps, and open.<sup>22</sup>

This form of indirect contract has become more and more widespread. Formerly it was the reader who, in spite of the denials of the author, took the initiative, and assumed responsibility for this type of reading; today authors and publishers orient the reader in this direction from the very start. It is revealing that Sartre himself, who briefly envisaged continuing *Les Mots* in fictional form, repeated Gide's words: 'It is about time I finally told the truth. But I can only do it in a work of fiction', and that he formulated the contract he would have proposed to his readers as follows:<sup>23</sup>

I had planned to write a story in which I wanted to present indirectly everything that I had previously thought I would say in a kind of political testament which would have been the continuation of my autobiography, which I had abandoned. The fictional element would have been quite minor; I would have created a character of which the reader would have been able to say: 'This man presented here is Sartre.'

This does not mean that, for the reader, there would have been exact identity between the protagonist and the author, but that the best way to understand the protagonist would have been to look in him for what came from me.

All these games, which clearly show the predominance of autobiographical intentions, can be found, to varying degrees, in many modern writers. It can also, naturally, be imitated within a novel. This is what Jacques Laurent does in *Les Bêtises* (Grasset, 1971), where he gives us both the piece of fiction that his protagonist is supposed to have written and various 'autobiographical' texts of the protagonist to read. If Laurent ever publishes his own autobiography, the texts in *Les Bêtises* will create a dizzying number of 'dimensions'.

### The reading contract

A stock-taking at the conclusion of our survey indicates that the nature of the problem we started with has changed:

*Negative aspects:* certain points remain vague or inadequate. For example, it can be asked how the fact that the author and the narrator are the same person can be established in the autobiographical contract when the name is not repeated (cf. above, p. 205); there may be scepticism about the distinctions I have proposed in 'Certified true copy'. Above all, the sections entitled 'I, the undersigned' and 'Certified true copy' consider only the case of autobiography using 'autodidactique' narration, even though I noted that other kinds of narration are *possible*: would the distinctions established still hold in the case of third-person autobiography?

*Positive aspects:* on the other hand, my analyses seem to me to be productive whenever, going beyond the apparent structures of the text, they lead me to reexamine critically the positions of the *author* and the *reader*. The 'social contract' engaged in by the use of the author's name, and by the act of publication, the autobiographical contract, the fictional, referential, and fantasmatic contracts, all of the expressions used convey the idea that autobiography is a *contractual* genre. The difficulty I encountered in my earlier attempt was due to the fact that I was seeking in vain, on the level of the structures, modes, or voices of the narrative, some clear criteria to justify a difference which any reader in fact experiences. The notion of 'autobiographical contract' which I formulated at that time remained unanchored, because I failed to see that the proper name was an essential element of the contract. That something so obvious did not then occur to me shows that this kind of contract is implicit, and, because it seems to be part of the nature of things, hardly encourages reflection.

The approach to autobiography proposed here is, therefore, not based on an externally established relation between the text and what is outside it — for such a relation could be only a relation of resemblance, and would prove nothing. Nor is it based on an internal analysis of the functioning of the text, of the structure or of aspects of published texts; rather, it is based on an analysis, at the global level of *publication*, of the implicit or explicit contract proposed by the *author* to the *reader*, the contract which determines how the text is read, and produces the effects which, attributed to the text, seem to us to define it as an autobiography.

The level of analysis used is therefore that of the relation between *publication* and *published*, which is the parallel for the printed text to the relation between speech act and utterance on the level of oral communication. To be carried further, research on contracts between author and reader, on implicit or explicit publishing codes — on that borderline area of the printed text which in reality *governs* all of our reading (author's name, title, subtitle, title of the series, publisher's name, down to the ambiguous function of the preface) — such research should include a historical dimension which I have not given it here.<sup>24</sup> Chronological variations in these codes (which are due both to changes in the attitudes of authors and readers and to the technical or economic problems of publishers) would make it much easier to see that we are dealing with codes, and not with 'natural' or universal states of affairs. For instance, since the seventeenth century, behaviour with respect to anonymity and the use of pseudonyms has changed a great deal; writers who make claims that their fiction is really true do not play the game today according to the same rules that were used in the eighteenth century;<sup>25</sup> readers, on the other hand, have acquired a taste for trying to ferret out the presence of the author (or his unconscious) even beneath the surface of works

which do not look autobiographical, so great is the extent to which fantastic contracts have created new reading habits.

This global level is the one on which autobiography is characterized: it is as much a way of reading as a kind of writing; it is an historically variable *contractual product*. The present study, in reality, is based totally on the types of contract in use at present: this explains its relativity, and the absurdity of trying to take it as universally valid. This explains also the difficulties we have encountered in this attempt to define our subject — I wanted to make explicit, in a system which was clear, coherent and exhaustive, and which accounted for all cases, the criteria determining a corpus (that of autobiography) which in reality is determined by multiple criteria which vary across time and from person to person, and are often mutually inconsistent. Anyone who managed to find a clear and total formulation for autobiography would in fact have failed. The reader, in the course of this essay which I have tried to make as rigorous as possible, will often have felt that this rigour was becoming arbitrary, and inadequate for an object which perhaps is more appropriately treated in terms of Chinese logic, as Borges describes it, than in terms of the logic of Descartes.

When all is said and done, this study seems to me more of a document to be itself studied — the attempt of a twentieth-century reader to make his reading criteria rational and explicit — than a 'scientific' text: a document belonging to an historical science of the modes of literary communication.

The history of autobiography would, on this view, be above all the history of how it is read; it would be comparative history, where the reading contracts proposed by various types of texts could be made explicit (for there is no point in studying autobiography in isolation, since contracts, like signs, have meaning only through their being in opposition), and confronted with the different kinds of reading actually applied to these texts. If, therefore, autobiography is to be defined in terms of something outside the text, this is not to be done by falling short of the text, by aiming at an unverifiable resemblance to a real individual, but by aiming beyond it, defining it in terms of the kind of reading it engenders, the inherent credibility it reveals, which can be elicited from the critical text.

#### Notes

1. Philippe Lejeune, *L'Autobiographie en France* (Paris, A. Colin, 1971).
2. Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris, Seuil, 1972).
3. Claude Roy, *Notes, Essai d'Autobiographie* (Paris, Gallimard, 1972), pp. 33–9.
4. As, for example, Rousseau does in Book IV of the *Confessions*: 'Poor Jean-Jacques, in that cruel moment you hardly hoped that one day . . .'; cf. also Claude Roy, in *Moi, je* (Paris, Gallimard, 1970), p. 473; where he imagines himself speaking to the person he once was: 'Believe me, my child, you should not . . . You ought not to

have done it.' On this page, Roy, opposing the (present) narrator to the (past) protagonist, uses both the second and the third person to speak to the latter.

5. Emile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris, Gallimard, 1966) Section v: 'L'Homme dans la langue'.
6. Concerning the linguistic aspects of the problem of the proper name and the way it contributes, in the speech act, to reference, see Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage* (Paris, Seuil, 1972), pp. 321–2.
7. The problem of reference in written speech acts, in which the utterer and the person to whom the discourse is directed do not share the same situation (and may not even know each other), is too seldom considered by linguists, or else is mentioned as something which should be studied — but which is not (cf. E. Benveniste, 'L'Appareil formel de l'énonciation', *Langages* 17 (March 1970), p. 18).
8. The case of hoaxes, or the problems of the author's identity (anonymity, the pseudonym), can be studied, to begin with, in the classic works of J.-M. Quérard, *Les Supplémentaires littéraires dévoilés* (1847), or A. Barthier, *Dictionnaire des ouvrages anonymes*, 3rd edn (1872). For an amusing inventory of recent hoaxes, see *Gulliver* 1 (November 1972).
9. Raymond Abellio, *Ma dernière mémoire. I, un faubourg de Toulouse, 1907–1927* (Paris, Gallimard, 1971), pp. 82–3.
10. Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, in *Le Monde* (13 October, 1972).
11. 'She would recover her voice, she would say: "My" or "My dear", followed in either case by my Christian name, which would have made, giving the narrator the same name as the author of this book: "My Marcel", "My dear Marcel".' Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1954) vol. 3, p. 75. The occurrence on page 157 is merely a repetition.
12. Michel Letiris, *L'Âge d'homme* (Paris, Gallimard, collection 'Folio', 1973), p. 174.
13. In spite of appearances, this is not the case with Stendhal's *Vie de Henry Brulard*. This text poses very delicate problems because it is unfinished, and was not ready for immediate publication. Consequently it is difficult to decide whether Henry Brulard is a pseudonym or just the name of a character, since the text never reached the form of a manuscript conceived in terms of publication: the humorous titles were meant, not for the publisher, but for 'M. M. de la Police' in case of a surprise visit; the subtitle 'Novel imitated from *The Vicar of Wakefield*' had the same function of burlesque flimflam. The fact that this is a genuine autobiography, temporarily 'camouflaged', becomes obvious when we read the text itself. The name *Brulard* appears only three times in the text (Stendhal, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1955), pp. 6, 42, and 250). Two out of these three occasions reveal the camouflaging: on p. 6, 'Brulard' is written over Stendhal's true name 'Beyle'; on p. 250, the first version of the 'seven letters' of 'Brulard' was 'five letters'; and throughout this delightful passage 'Bernard' is to 'Brulard' as 'Brulard' is to 'Beyle'. The rest of the time, the family name is given as 'B.' (which can be applied to either 'Beyle' or 'Brulard' or else merely as 'Beyle', 'signing' the text as autobiography (pp. 60, 76, 376), or as 'S.' (Stendhal) (p. 247), which amounts to the same thing).
14. These anonymous *Mémoires*, in their second edition (1843) are prefaced by A. Auménayer. The preface carries the ambiguity to the extreme.
15. Cf. Jean Starobinski, 'Stendhal pseudonyme', in *L'Œil Vivant* (Paris, Gallimard, 1961).
16. François Nourissier, *Un Petit Bourgeois* (Paris, Livre de Poche, 1969), pp. 81–4.



17. Jacques Madaule, *L'Interlocuteur* (Paris, Gallimard, 1972), pp. 34-5.  
 18. Interview in *Le Monde* (14 May 1971).  
 19. André Gide, *Si le grain ne meurt* (Paris, Gallimard, collection 'Folio', 1972), p. 278.  
 20. François Mauriac, 'Commentaires d'une vie', in *Écrits intimes*, (Geneva/Paris, La Palatine, 1953), p. 14.  
 21. Albert Thibaudet, *Gautier Flaubert* (Paris, Gallimard, 1935), pp. 87-8.  
 22. See my 'Culte et l'espace autobiographique', in *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris, Seuil, 1975), pp. 165-96.  
 23. Interview with Michel Contat, in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (23 June 1975).  
 24. Concerning this problem, see my 'Autobiographie et histoire littéraire', in *Le Pacte autobiographique*, pp. 31-41.  
 25. Cf. Jacques Roustin, 'Mensonge et vérité dans le roman français du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* (January-February 1969).

## 11. A complication of text: the

### *Illuminations*

FEVRETTAN TODDOROV

Ma sagesse est aussi dédaignée que le chaos. Qu'est mon néant  
auprès de la stupéur qui vous attend?

Rimbaud, *Vier* 1

(My wisdom is as disdained as chaos. What is my nothingness next to  
the stupor which awaits you?)

The real problem of the *Illuminations* is obviously not chronological but semantic: what are these enigmatic texts about, and what do they mean? The literature on Rimbaud is particularly copious, so one can hardly avoid turning to it in search of an answer, and, although most writers have been much more interested in Rimbaud's travels in England or the Harar, in his homosexual experiences or drug-taking, than in the meaning of his texts, there do exist a number of studies devoted to the interpretation of the *Illuminations*. Reading them, however, I have the impression that they fall short of, or immediately overshoot, the real problem posed by this group of 'poems in prose'. Thus, to place in context my own reaction to this text, I must summarize briefly the different attitudes it has inspired in the past, and explain why they appear unsatisfactory to me.

I will use the term *Euhemerist criticism* for one form of reaction to Rimbaud's text which, to my mind, cannot really be called an 'interpretation'. Euhemerus was an ancient Greek writer who read Homer as a source of information about the people and places described in the epics, as a factual (and not imaginary) narrative; Euhemerist reading passes through the text without the slightest pause, in a search for clues to some reality outside it. Astonishing as it may seem, Rimbaud's work, though it seems so little referential in its intention, has most often been read as a source of information about the poet's life. This seems an especially precarious undertaking in that his life is something we know little about, and the poetic texts are often the only source we have: the biography is constructed from the work, and yet some critics give the impression that they are explaining the work from the life!

This can be seen from one of the texts from the *Illuminations* that are easiest to understand: 'Ouvriers'. The expression 'cette chaude matinée de février'