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On Autobiography

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Edited and with a foreword by Paul John Eakin
Translated by Katherine Leary

Theory and History of Literature, Volume 52

University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis

(1989)

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The University of Minnesota Press gratefully acknowledges publication assistance provided by Indiana University.

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Chapters 1, 4, and 7 originally appeared in *Le Pacte autobiographique*, copyright © 1975 by Editions du Seuil, Paris; chapters 2, 3, and 9, in *Je est un autre*, copyright © 1980 by Editions du Seuil; chapters 5, 6, and 10, in *Moi aussi*, copyright © 1986, by Editions du Seuil; chapter 8, in *Revue de L'Institut de Sociologie* (1982), pp. 309–34; and "Epilogue," in *Lire Leiris*, copyright © 1975 by Klincksieck, Paris.

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Published by the University of Minnesota Press
2037 University Avenue Southeast, Minneapolis, MN 55414.
Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Lejeune, Philippe, 1938-

On autobiography.

(Theory and history of literature ; v. 52)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Autobiography. 2. Authors, French—Biography—History and criticism.

I. Eakin, Paul John. II. Title.

III. Series.

CT25.L37 1988 920 87-38068

ISBN 0-8166-1631-0

ISBN 0-8166-1632-9 (pbk.)

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Chapter 1

The Autobiographical Pact

Is it possible to define autobiography?

I had tried to do just that in *Autobiographie en France (Autobiography in France)*,¹ so as to be in a position to develop a coherent corpus of texts. But my definition left a number of theoretical problems unaddressed. While trying to find stricter criteria, I felt the need to refine and clarify this definition. I inevitably encountered along my way the classical discussions to which the genre of autobiography always gives rise: the relations of biography and autobiography, and the relations of the novel and autobiography. These problems are irritating because of the endless repetition of arguments, the vagueness that surrounds the vocabulary that is used, and the confusion of problematics borrowed from unrelated fields. Through a new attempt at a definition, then, it is the very terms of the problematic of the genre that I intend to clarify. In wanting to provide clarity, we run two risks: that of seeming to be caught up in an endless repetition of the obvious (because it is necessary to start from the very beginning), and that, on the contrary, of appearing to want to complicate things by using distinctions that are too subtle. I will not avoid the first; as for the second, I will try to base my distinctions on reason.

I had devised my definition not by placing myself *sub specie aeternitatis*, and examining the “things-in-themselves” that would be the texts, but by putting myself in the place of the reader of today who attempts to distinguish some sort of order within a mass of *published* texts, whose common subject is that they recount someone’s life. The situation of the “definer” is thus doubly relativized and spe-

cified: *historically*, this definition does not claim to cover more than a period of two centuries (since 1770) and deals only with European literature; this does not mean that the existence of a personal literature before 1770 or outside Europe must be denied, but simply that our way of thinking about autobiography today becomes anachronistic or not very pertinent outside this area. *Textually*, I begin from the position of the reader: it is not a question of starting from within the mind of the author, which indeed poses a problem, nor is it one of establishing the canons of a literary genre. By taking as the starting point the position of the reader, (which is mine, the only one I know well), I have the chance to understand more clearly how the texts function (the differences in how they function) since they were written for us, readers, and in reading them, it is we who make them function. It is thus by the series of oppositions between the different texts, which are available for reading, that I have tried to define autobiography.

In its modified form, the definition of autobiography would be:

DEFINITION: Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.

The definition brings into play elements belonging to four different categories:

1. *Form of language*
 - a. narrative
 - b. in prose
2. *Subject treated*: individual life, story of a personality
3. *Situation of the author*: the author (whose name refers to a real person) and the narrator are identical
4. *Position of the narrator*
 - a. the narrator and the principal character are identical
 - b. retrospective point of view of the narrative

Any work that fulfills all the conditions indicated in each of the categories is an autobiography. Genres closely related to autobiography do not meet all these requirements. Those requirements that are not met are listed here according to genres:

- memoirs: (2)
- biography: (4a)
- personal novel: (3)
- autobiographical poem: (1b)
- journal / diary: (4b)
- self-portrait or essay: (1a and 4b).

It is obvious that the different categories are not all equally restrictive: certain conditions can be met for the most part without being satisfied completely. The text must be *mainly* a narrative, but we know how important *discourse* is in autobiographical narration. The perspective is *mainly* retrospective; this does not exclude some sections from taking the form of the self-portrait, a journal of the work or of the contemporary present of the composition, and some very complex temporal structures. The subject must be *primarily* individual life, the genesis of the personality; but the chronicle and social or political history can also be part of the narrative. It is a question here of proportion, or rather of hierarchy: some transitions with other genres of personal literature work quite naturally (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 question of all or nothing, and they are of course the conditions that oppose autobiography (but at the same time the other types of personal literature) to biography and the personal novel: these are conditions (3) and (4a). Here, there is neither transition nor latitude. An identity is, or is not. It is impossible to speak of degrees, and all doubt leads to a negative conclusion.

In order for there to be autobiography (and personal literature in general), the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist* must be identical. But this “identity” raises a number of problems, which I will try, if not to resolve, then at least to formulate clearly in the sections that follow:

- How can the identity of the narrator and the protagonist be expressed in the text? (*I, You, He*)
- In the narrative written “in the first person,” how is the identity of the author and the protagonist-narrator shown? (*I, the Undersigned*) Here we have the opportunity to contrast autobiography with the novel.
- Is there not confusion, in most of the arguments concerning autobiography, between the notion of *identity* and that of *resemblance*? (*Exact Copy*) Here we will have occasion to contrast autobiography with biography.
- The difficulties encountered in these analyses will lead me, in the last two sections of this chapter (*Autobiographical Space and Reading Contract*), to try to shift the basis of the problem.

I, You, He

The identity of the *narrator* and the *principal character* that is assumed in autobiography is marked most often by the use of the first person. This is what Gérard Genette calls “autodiegetic” narration in his classification of narrative “voices,” a classification he establishes from works of fiction.² But he states quite clearly

that there can be narrative "in the first person" without the narrator being the same person as the principal character. This is what he calls in broad terms "homodiegetic" narration. We need only continue this reasoning to see that in the reverse order there can be identity of the narrator and the principal character without the first person being used.

It is necessary, then, to point out two different criteria: that of the grammatical person, and that of the identity of the individuals to whom the aspects of the grammatical person refer. This elementary distinction is forgotten because of the polysemy of the word "person"; it is masked in practice by the conjunctions that *almost always* come between a given grammatical person and a given relation of identity or a given type of narration. But it is only "almost always"; the undeniable exceptions compel us to rethink the definitions.

Indeed, by bringing up the problem of the *author*, autobiography brings to light phenomena that fiction leaves in doubt: in particular the fact that there can be identity of the narrator and the principal character in the case of narration "in the third person." This identity, no longer being established within the text by the use of "I," is established indirectly, but without any ambiguity, by the double equation: author = narrator, and author = character, from which it is deduced that narrator = character even if the narrator remains implicit. This procedure is consistent, to the letter, with the root meaning of the word "autobiography": it is a biography, written by the person involved, but as a simple biography.

This procedure could be used for very diverse reasons and could bring about very different *effects*. Talking about oneself in the third person can imply either tremendous conceit (this is the case with Caesar's *Commentaries* or with the comparable texts of General De Gaulle), or a certain kind of humility (this is the case with certain early religious autobiographies, in which the autobiographer calls himself "the servant of God"). In the two cases the narrator assumes, vis-à-vis the character that he was, either a distancing from the perspective of history or a distancing from the perspective of God, i.e., of eternity, and introduces in his narration a transcendence with which, in the final analysis, he identifies. We can imagine the totally different effects—of contingency, of dividing, or of ironic distancing—that the same procedure might produce. This is true of the book by Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, in which the author relates in the third person the quasi-Socratic quest of a young American in search of an education—himself. In all the examples given above, the third person is used throughout the narration. There do exist some autobiographies in which one part of the text refers to the principal character in the third person, while in the remainder of the text the narrator and this principal character are confused in the first person; this is the case with *Le Traître*, in which André Gorz expresses the uncertainty of his own identity through tricks of voice. Claude Roy, in *Nous (Us)*, uses this procedure more tritely in order to place an episode of his love life at a modest distance.³ The existence of these bilingual texts, true Rosetta Stones of

identity, is of great import: it confirms the possibility of autobiographic narration "in the third person."

Even if we remain within the personal register (first and second persons), it is obvious that it is possible to write without using the first person. What would prevent me from writing my life's story and calling myself "you"? In the realm of fiction, such a thing was done by Michel Butor in *La Modification*, and by Georges Perec in *Un Homme qui dort (A Man Who Is Sleeping)*. I am not aware of any autobiographies that have been written entirely in this way; but this method appears somewhat fleetingly in the *speeches (discours)* that the narrator addresses to the person that he was, either to cheer him up if he's in a bad mood, or to lecture him or repudiate him.⁴ There is certainly a distance from this point to a narrative, but such a thing is possible. This type of narrative would show clearly, at the level of enunciation, the difference between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the utterance treated as addressee of the narrative.

These uses of the third and second persons are rare in autobiography, but they keep us from confusing the grammatical problems of person with the problems of identity. We could also imagine a diagram with dual access conceived in this way:

grammatical person → ↓ identity	I	YOU	HE
narrator = principal character	classical autobiography (autodiegetic)	autobiography in the 2nd person	autobiography in the 3rd person
narrator ≠ principal character	biography in the 1st person (witness narrative) (homodiegetic)	biography addressed to the model	classical biography (heterodiegetic)

Remarks on the diagram

1. By "grammatical person," we must understand here the person used in a privileged manner throughout the narrative. It is obvious that the "I" is not understood without a "you" (the reader), but the latter remains generally implicit; in

the opposite direction, the “you” supposes an “I,” equally implicit; and narration in the third person may include intrusions of the narrator in the first person.

2. The examples given here are all borrowed from the gamut of referential narratives that are biography and autobiography; we could also fill up the diagram with examples of fiction. I indicate the categories of G. Genette in the three corresponding blocks; we see that they do not cover all possible cases.

3. The case of biography addressed in the model is that of academic discourses, where the person whose life is told is addressed, before an audience who is the true addressee, just as in an autobiography told in the second person, if such existed, the addressee (formerly oneself) would be there to receive a discourse that would be presented to the reader.

It is necessary, starting with exceptional cases, to dissociate the problem of the person from that of identity. This dissociation allows us to understand the complexity of existing or possible models of autobiography. It is also characteristic of this dissociation to shake the certainties that exist with regard to the possibility of giving a “textual” definition of autobiography. For the moment, having brought up the exception, let’s go back to the most frequent case: the classic autobiography “in the first person” (autodiegetic narration); our purpose is to discover new uncertainties, aimed this time at the manner in which the identity of the *author* and the *narrator-character* is established.

I, the Undersigned

Let’s suppose, then, that all autobiographies are written in the first person, as the great refrain of the autobiographers—I—leads us to believe. Thus Rousseau: “I, I alone”; Stendhal: “Put *I* with *me* and you have repetition”; Thyde Monnier: *Moi (I)* (autobiography in four volumes); Claude Roy: *Moi, je (Me, I)*; and so on. Even in this case the following question is still being asked: how does the identity of the author and the narrator manifest itself? For an autobiographer, it is natural to wonder quite simply: “Who am I?” But since I am the reader, it is no less natural for me to ask the question differently: who is “I?”—i.e., who is it who *says* “Who am I?”

You will excuse me for mentioning, before going on with the analysis, some elementary notions of linguistics. But, in this area, the simplest things are the ones that are most quickly forgotten: they seem natural and disappear in the illusion that they engender. I will begin with some of Benveniste’s analyses, even if I end up with conclusions slightly different from his.⁵

The “first person” is defined through articulation on two levels:

1. *Reference*: the personal pronouns (*I/you*) have real reference only within discourse, in the very act of enunciation. Benveniste points out that there is no

such concept as “I.” The “I” refers, each time, to the person who is speaking and whom we identify by *the very fact* that he is speaking.

2. *Utterance*: the first-person personal pronouns mark the *identity* of the subject of the enunciation and of the subject of the utterance.

Thus, if someone says: “I was born the . . . ,” the use of the pronoun “I” results, through the articulation of these two levels, in our identifying the person who is speaking with the one who is being born. At least this is the total effect obtained. We are not necessarily led to believe here that the types of “equations” established on these two levels are the same. At the level of reference (speech as it refers to its own enunciation), identity is immediate; it is instantaneously understood and accepted by the addressee as *a fact*; at the level of utterance, it is a question of a simple relationship . . . uttered, i.e., of one assertion like another, that we can believe or not, and so on. Moreover, the example that I have used gives us some idea of the problems raised: is it really the same person, the baby who is born in such and such a clinic, in an era of which I have no memory whatsoever—and *me*? It is important to clearly differentiate these two relationships, blurred in the use of the pronoun “I”; we will see later that it is our failure to make such a distinction that causes the greatest confusion in the problematic of autobiography (see *Exact Copy*, below). Setting aside for the moment the problems of utterance, I will limit myself to thinking about enunciation.

The situation of *oral* discourse is the starting point of the analyses of Benveniste. In this situation, we might think that the reference of the “I” poses no problem: “I,” it is the person who is speaking—and *me*, in my position as interlocutor or listener, I have no difficulty in identifying this person. Nevertheless, there exist two series of oral situations in which this identification can pose a problem.

1. *Quotation*, which is discourse within discourse. The first person of the second discourse (quoted) refers to a situation of enunciation itself expressed in the first discourse. Different signs, dashes, quotation marks, etc., differentiate the inserted (quoted) discourses, when we are dealing with written discourses. Intonation plays an analogous role in oral discourse. But these signs become blurred, or faded, and uncertainty appears: this is the case in *re-quotation/re-citation* and in a more general way in the theater. When Berma plays *Phèdre*, who is saying “T”? The theatrical situation can certainly perform the function of quotation marks, pointing out the fictitious character of the person who says “I.” But here, our head starts to swim because the idea crosses the minds of even the most naïve of us that it is not the individual who defines the “I,” but perhaps the “I,” the individual, that is to say, the individual exists only in discourse. Let’s avoid chaos for the moment. What we are touching upon here, in autobiography, are problems related to the difference between the autobiographical novel and autobiography. But also, in terms of autobiography itself, we find evidence that the first person is a role.

2. *Oral from a distance*, which takes place in the moment, as in a telephone

conversation, any conversation through a door or at night. There is no other way to identify the individual except through aspects of voice: who's there?—me—who, me? Here, dialogue is still possible that might lead to identification. Let the voice be delayed in time (recording), or even, in the moment, one-way conversation (radio), and we cannot identify it. We now go back to the case of writing.

Up to this point, I have tried to follow Benveniste, simply by imagining everything that, in an oral situation, might succeed in restoring the identity of the undetermined individual. That the "I" refers to the enunciation, no one is trying to deny. But the enunciation is not the last term of the reference: it poses in its turn a problem of *identity*, which, in direct oral communication, we resolve instinctively from some extralinguistic facts. When oral communication is confused, identity is a problem. But, in written communication, unless s/he wants to remain anonymous (which does happen!), the person who formulates the discourse must allow his/her identification within this speech by using something besides physical signs, like the postmark, writing or spelling peculiarities.

Benveniste indicates (p. 226) that there is no such concept as "I"—quite an accurate remark if we add that there is no such concept as "he" either, and that, in general terms, no personal, possessive, demonstrative, pronoun, etc., has ever referred to a concept, but simply exercises a function, which consists in referring to a noun or to an entity that can be designated by a noun. Accordingly, we will propose to qualify his analysis by the following two propositions:

1. The personal pronoun "I" refers to the speaker at the moment of discourse when the "I" appears; but this speaker is himself capable of being designated by a noun (whether we are talking about a common noun, determined in different ways, or about a proper noun).

2. The opposition *concept/no concept* takes its meaning from the opposition of common noun and proper noun (not from common noun and personal pronoun).

Benveniste thus justifies, economically, the use of this first person, which has reference only in its own enunciation: "If each speaker, in order to express the feeling he has of his irreducible subjectivity, made use of a distinct identifying 'signal' (in the sense in which each radio transmitting station has its own call letters), there would be as many languages as individuals and communication would become absolutely impossible" (p. 220). A strange hypothesis, since Benveniste seems to forget here that this distinct signal exists, and it is the lexical category of proper names (those proper names that designate people): there are almost as many proper names as there are individuals. Naturally, this is not an aspect of verb conjugation, and Benveniste is right in emphasizing the economic function of the "I"; but, in forgetting to articulate it in the lexical category of names of people, he renders incomprehensible the fact that each one, utilizing the "I," does not lose himself for all that in anonymity and is always capable of enunciating what is irreducible in naming himself.

It is in the *proper name* that person and discourse are linked even before being joined in the first person, as the order of language acquisition by children shows. The child talks about himself in the third person while calling himself by his first name, long before he understands that he too can use the first person. Next each of them calls himself "I" in speaking; but for each one, this "I" refers to a single name, which he will always be able to express. All the identifications (easy, difficult, or undetermined) suggested above from oral situations inevitably result in transforming the first person into a proper name.⁶

Each time that oral discourse is necessary, the return to the proper name is accomplished. This is the *presentation*, made by the person involved or by a third party (the word "presentation" itself is suggestive by its inaccuracy: physical presence is not sufficient to define the speaker; there is complete presence only through naming). Similarly in written discourse, the *signature* designates the enunciator, as the address does the addressee.⁷

It is thus in relation to the *proper name* that we are able to situate the problems of autobiography. In printed texts, responsibility for all enunciation is assumed by a person who is in the habit of placing his *name* on the cover of the book, and on the flyleaf, above or below the title of the volume. The entire existence of the person we call the *author* is summed up by this name: the only mark in the text of an unquestionable world-beyond-the-text, referring to a real person, which requires that we thus attribute to him, in the final analysis, the responsibility for the production of the whole written text. In many cases, the presence of the author in the text is reduced to this single name. But the place assigned to this name is essential: it is linked, by a social convention, to the pledge of responsibility of a *real person*. I understand by these words, which figure in my definition of autobiography, a person whose existence is certified by vital statistics and is verifiable. Certainly, the reader is not going to verify this, and he may very well not know who this person is. But his existence is beyond question: exceptions and breaches of trust serve only to emphasize the general credence accorded this type of social contract.⁸

An author is not a person. He is a person who writes and publishes. Straddling the world-beyond-the-text and the text, he is the connection between the two. The author is defined as simultaneously a socially responsible real person and the producer of a discourse. For the reader, who does not know the real person, all the while believing in his existence, the author is defined as the person capable of producing this discourse, and so he imagines what he is like from what he produces. Perhaps one is an author only with his second book, when the proper name inscribed on the cover becomes the "common factor" of at least two different texts and thus gives the idea of a person who cannot be reduced to any of his texts in particular, and who, capable of producing others, surpasses them all. This, we will see, is very important for the reading of autobiographies: if the autobiography is a first book, its author is thus unknown, even if he relates his own story

in the book. He lacks, in the eyes of the reader, that sign of reality which is the previous production of *other texts* (nonautobiographical), indispensable to that which we will call "the autobiographical space."

The author is, then, the name of a person, identical, taking upon himself a series of different published texts. He draws his reality from the list of his other works which figure often in the front of the book: "By the same author." Autobiography (narrative recounting the life of the author) supposes that there is *identity of name* between the author (such as he figures, by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about. What we have here is a very simple criterion, which defines at the same time as autobiography all the other genres of personal literature (journal, self-portrait, essay).

An objection comes to mind at once: what about pseudonyms? An easy objection to avoid, as soon as we have defined pseudonym and distinguished it from the name of a fictional character.

A pseudonym is a name that is different from the one found in vital statistics, which a real person uses in order to *publish* all or part of his writings. The pseudonym is the name of an *author*. It is not exactly a false name, but a pen name, a second name, exactly like the one a religious assumes upon taking orders. To be sure, the use of a pseudonym can sometimes cover up deceptions or be imposed for reasons of discretion; but it has to do most often with isolated productions, and almost never with a work being passed off as the autobiography of an *author*. Literary pseudonyms are in general neither mysteries nor hoaxes. The second name is as authentic as the first; it simply signals this second birth which is the published writing. Writing his autobiography, the author under his pen name will himself explain its origin; thus Raymond Abellio explains that he is calling himself Georges Soulès, and why he has chosen his pseudonym.⁹ The pseudonym is simply a differentiation, a division of the name, which changes nothing in the identity.

We must not confuse *pseudonym*, defined in this way as the name of an *author* (*noted on the cover of the book*), with the *name* attributed to a fictional person *within the book* (even if this person has the status of narrator and assumes the whole of the text production), because this person is himself designated as fictitious by the simple fact that he is incapable of being the *author* of the *book*. Let me give a very simple example: "Colette" is the pseudonym of a real person (Gabrielle-Sidonie Colette), *author* of a series of narratives; Claudine is the name of a fictitious heroine, narrator of the stories that have her name for a title. If the *Claudines* cannot be accepted as autobiographies, it is quite obviously for the second reason, not at all for the first.

In the case of the fictitious name (i.e., different from that of the author) given to a character who tells his life story, the reader has reason to think that the story lived by the character is precisely that of the author: by cross-checking with other texts, or by delving into external news items, or even by reading the narrative

whose fictional appearance rings false (as when someone tells you: "What happened to a very good friend of mine was . . ." and proceeds to tell you the story of this friend with a completely personal conviction). We would have all the reasons in the world to think that the story is exactly the same; nonetheless, the text produced in this way is not an autobiography. The latter supposes first of all an *identity claimed* at the level of enunciation, and absolutely secondarily, a *resemblance* produced at the level of the utterance.

These texts would therefore fall into the category of "autobiographical novel." This is how I will refer to all fictional texts in which the reader has reason to suspect, from the resemblances that he thinks he sees, that there is identity of author and *protagonist*, whereas the author has chosen to deny this identity, or at least not to affirm it. So defined, the autobiographical novel includes personal narratives (identity of narrator and protagonist) as well as "impersonal" narratives (protagonists designated in the third person); it is defined at the level of its contents. Unlike autobiography, it involves *degrees*. The "resemblance" assumed by the reader can be anything from a fuzzy "family likeness" between the protagonist and the author, to the quasi-transparency that makes us say that he is "the spitting image." Thus, concerning *L'Année du crabe* (1972) by Olivier Todd, one critic has written that "the entire book admits to being obsessively autobiographical behind the transparent pseudonyms."¹⁰ Autobiography does not include degrees: it is all or nothing.

We see, in these distinctions, how important it is to use a clearly defined vocabulary. The critic was talking about "pseudonym" for the name of the hero: for me, pseudonym is good only for the author's name. The hero can resemble the author as much as he wants; as long as he does not have his name, there is in effect nothing. The case of *L'Année du crabe* is exemplary from this point of view. The subtitle of the book is *Novel*: Olivier Todd's hero is named Ross. But on page 4, a publisher's note assures the reader that Todd is Ross. A clever advertising trick, but one that changes nothing. If Ross is Todd, why does he have another name? If it was he, how come he does not *say so*? It matters little whether he coquettishly allows us to guess it, or that the reader guesses it in spite of him. Autobiography is not a guessing game: it is in fact exactly the opposite. What is missing here is the essential, what I call the *autobiographical pact*.

Turning back from the first person to the proper name, I am therefore prompted to rectify what I wrote in *Autobiography in France*: "How to distinguish autobiography from the autobiographical novel? We must admit that, if we remain on the level of analysis within the text, there is *no difference*. All the methods that autobiography uses to convince us of the authenticity of its narrative can be imitated by the novel, and often have been imitated." This is accurate as long as we limit ourselves to the text minus the title page; as soon as we include the latter in the text, with the name of the author, we make use of a general textual

criterion, the identity ("identicalness") of the *name* (author-narrator-protagonist). The autobiographical pact is the affirmation in the text of this identity, referring back in the final analysis to the *name* of the author on the cover.

The autobiographical pact comes in very diverse forms; but all of them demonstrate their intention to honor his/her *signature*. The reader might be able to quibble over resemblance, but never over identity ("identicalness"). We know all too well how much each of us values his/her name.

An autobiographical work of fiction can be "exact," the protagonist resembling the author; an autobiography can be "inexact," the protagonist presented differing from the author. These are questions of fact—let's still put aside the question of knowing *who* will be the judge of the resemblance, and how—which have no bearing on questions of *right*, that is to say, on the type of contract entered into between the author and the reader. We see, moreover, the importance of the contract, in that it actually determines the attitude of the reader: if the identity is not stated positively (as in fiction), the reader will attempt to establish resemblances, in spite of the author; if it is positively stated (as in autobiography), the reader will want to look for differences (errors, deformations, etc.). Confronted with what looks like an autobiographical narrative, the reader often tends to think of himself as a detective, that is to say, to look for breaches of contract (whatever the contract). It is here that the myth of the novel being "truer" than the autobiography originates: when we think we have discovered something through the text, in spite of the author, we always accord it more truth and more profundity. If Olivier Todd had presented *L'Année du Crabe* as his autobiography, perhaps our critic would have been sensitive to the faults, to the gaps, to the manipulations of his narrative—namely to the fact that all questions of *fidelity* (problem of "resemblance") depend ultimately upon the question of *authenticity* (problem of identity), which is itself expressed with regard to the proper name.

The *identity of name* between author, narrator, and protagonist can be established in two ways:

1. *Implicitly*, at the level of the author-narrator connection, in the case of the *autobiographical pact*; the latter can take two forms: (a) the use of *titles* leaving no doubt about the fact that the first person refers to the name of the author (*Story of My Life*, *Autobiography*, etc.); (b) *initial section* of the text where the narrator enters into a contract vis-à-vis the reader by acting as if he were the author, in such a way that the reader has no doubt that the "I" refers to the name shown on the cover, even though the name is not repeated in the text.

2. *In an obvious way*, at the level of the name that the narrator-protagonist is given in the narrative itself, and which is the same as that of the author on the cover.

Identity has to be established in at least one of these two ways; this is often accomplished by both of them at the same time.

Parallel to the autobiographical pact, we could place the *fictional pact*, which

would itself have two aspects: *obvious practice of nonidentity* (the author and the protagonist do not have the same name), *affirmation of fictitiousness* (in general it is the subtitle *novel* which today performs this function on the cover; it should be noted that *novel*, in current terminology, implies fictional pact, whereas *narrative [récit]* is, itself, indeterminate and compatible with the autobiographical pact). Some people will object perhaps that the novel has the capability of *imitating* the autobiographical pact: is not the eighteenth-century novel composed precisely by imitating the different forms of personal literature (memoirs, letters, and, in the nineteenth century, diary)? But this objection does not hold—if we consider that this imitation cannot go back as far as the final term—namely the *name of the author*. We can always pretend to record, to publish the autobiography of someone we are trying to pass off as real; as long as this someone is not the *author*, who alone is responsible for the *book*, there is in effect nothing. Only cases of literary fraud therefore would escape this test: they are extremely rare—and this rarity is not due to respect for someone else's name or to the fear of penalties. Who would prevent me from writing the autobiography of an imaginary character and to publish it under his equally imaginary name? It is exactly this, in a slightly different domain, that MacPherson did for Ossian! This is rare, because few authors are capable of renouncing *their own name*. Witness the fact that even the fraud of Ossian was short-lived, since we know who its author is, since MacPherson couldn't keep his name (as adapter) from being included in the title!

Once these definitions are in place, we can classify all the possible cases by bringing into play two criteria: the relationship of the name of the protagonist and the name of the author, the nature of the pact concluded by the author. For each of these criteria, three situations are possible. The protagonist (1) has a name that is different from that of the author; (2) has no name; (3) has the same name as the author; the pact is (1) fictional; (2) absent; (3) autobiographical. In articulating these two criteria, we obtain theoretically nine combinations; actually only seven are possible, the coexistence of the identity of the name and the fictional pact, and that of the difference of name and the autobiographical pact being excluded by definition.

The accompanying chart gives the pattern of possible combinations; the numbers indicated are those of the description that follows; in each box, at the bottom, is the effect that the combination produces on the reader. It goes without saying that this chart is applied only to "autodiegetic" narratives.

1. *Name of the protagonist ≠ name of the author*. This fact alone excludes the possibility of autobiography. It matters little, from then on, whether or not there is, in addition, affirmation that the work is fiction (1a or 1b). Whether the story is presented as true (autobiographical manuscript that the author-publisher would have found in an attic, etc.) or whether it is presented as fiction (and believed to be true, attributed to the author, by the reader)—in any case, there is no identity of author, narrator, and hero.

<i>protagonist's name</i>	\neq author's name	= 0	= author's name
<i>Pact</i> ↓			
fictional	1a <u>NOVEL</u>	2a <u>NOVEL</u>	
= 0	1b <u>NOVEL</u>	2b indeterminate	3a <u>AUTOBIOGRAPHY</u>
autobiographical		2c <u>AUTOBIOGRAPHY</u>	3b <u>AUTOBIOGRAPHY</u>

2. *Name of the protagonist = O*. This is the most complex case, because it is indeterminate. Everything depends, then, on the pact concluded by the author. Three cases are possible:

a. *Fictional pact* (the “fictional” nature of the book is indicated on the cover page). The autodiegetic narrative is thus attributed to a fictitious narrator. It’s a case that must happen infrequently – no example comes immediately to mind. We might be tempted to evoke *Remembrance of Things Past*, but for two reasons that fiction does not correspond exactly to this case: on the one hand, the fictional pact is not clearly indicated at the beginning of the book, with the result that innumerable readers have made the mistake of confusing the author Proust with the narrator; on the other hand, it is true that the narrator-protagonist has no name – except one single time, when in the same utterance it is suggested to us as a hypothesis that we give the narrator the same first name as the author (an utterance that can only be attributed to the author, because how would a fictitious narrator know the name of his author?), and when it is thus pointed out to us that the author is not the narrator. This bizarre intrusion on the part of the author functions both as fictional pact and as autobiographical clue, and sets the text in an ambiguous space.¹¹

b. *Pact = 0*. Not only does the protagonist not have a name, but the author does not conclude any pact – neither autobiographical nor fictional. The indetermination is total. Example: *Mother and Child*, by Charles-Louis Philippe. Even though the secondary characters in this narrative have names, the mother and child have no family name, and the child has no first name. We can certainly suppose that it is about Mme. Philippe and her son, but this is not written anywhere. Moreover, the narration is ambiguous (does it concern a general hymn to child-

hood or the story of one particular child?), the place and time are quite vague, and we do not know who the adult is who is talking about this childhood. The reader, according to his mood, will be able to read it in the register that he wants.

c. *Autobiographical pact*. The protagonist does not have a name in the narrative, but the author has declared explicitly in an initial pact that he is identical to the narrator (and thus to the protagonist, since the narrative is autodiegetic). Example: *Histoire de mes idées* (*Story of My Ideas*), by Edgar Quinet; the pact, included in the title, is clarified in a long preface, signed Edgar Quinet. The name does not appear one single time in the narrative, but, because of the pact, “I” always refers to Quinet.

3. *Name of the protagonist = name of the author*. This fact alone excludes the possibility of fiction. Even if the story is, historically, completely false, it will be on the order of the *lie* (which is an “autobiographical” category) and not of fiction. We can distinguish two cases:

a. *Pact = 0* (let’s understand by pact the pact of the title or the prefatory pact). The reader establishes the author-narrator-protagonist identity, although it is not the object of any solemn declaration. Example: *Les Mots* (*The Words*), by Jean-Paul Sartre. Neither the title nor the beginning indicates that this is an autobiography. Someone is telling the story of a family. On page 13 the narrator intervenes explicitly for the first time in the narrative (“*He intrigues me: I know that he remained a bachelor*,” or “*She loved him, I believe*”); on page 14, in the story, appears Doctor *Sartre*, who, on page 15, has a grandson: “me.” From the name, we thus grasp the identity of the protagonist, of the narrator, and of the author whose name is displayed above the title: Jean-Paul Sartre. And, that it indeed concerns the famous author, and not a homonym, is proved by the text itself, whose narrator takes credit on page 54 for *Les Mouches* (*The Flies*), *Les Chemins de la liberté* (*Roads to Freedom*), and *Les Séquestrés d’Altona* (*The Condemned of Altona*), and on page 251, *La Nausée* (*Nausea*). The story will even give us the most diverse aspects of this name, from the dreaming about fame: “That little Sartre knows his business. France does not realize what she would be losing if he passed away” (p. 92), to the familiar (and familial) deformations of the first name: “André feels that Poulo puts on airs” (p. 224).

We might consider this criterion perfectly contingent. The occurrence of the proper name in the narrative takes place long after the beginning of the book, in reference to a minor episode that we really feel could disappear from the text without changing its general appearance. Thus in the autobiography of J. Green, *Partir avant le jour* (*Leave Before Day*, Grasset, 1963), it is only on page 107, in an anecdote on giving away prizes, that the name appears. At times even this irruption of the name into the text is unique and allusive. This is the case in *L’Age d’homme* (*Manhood*), where Michel is read behind “Micheline”;¹² the fact remains that almost always, he appears. Naturally, in general, the autobiographical pact does not mention the name: our name is so obvious to us, and it will ap-

pear on the cover. Because of this ineluctable character of the name, it never is the object of a solemn declaration (the *author*, by the very fact that he is the author, always assumes that he is more or less known to the reader), yet it always ends up reappearing in the story. After all, this name itself can be given in plain language, or, insofar as it almost always has to do with an author's name, it can be implied by the attribution that the narrator makes to himself of the author's works (if Quinet does not name himself, he names his works, which amounts to the same thing).

b. *Autobiographical pact*. This is the most frequent case (because very often, so as not to appear in a formal way at the beginning of the book, the pact nevertheless appears scattered and repeated throughout the text). Example: *Les Confessions de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (*The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*); the pact already appears in the title, is developed in the preamble, and confirmed throughout the text by the use of "Rousseau" and of "Jean-Jacques."

Here, then, I will call "autobiographies" the texts that enter into cases 2c, 3a, 3b; as for the rest, we read the texts falling into cases 1a, 1b, 2a as novels; and, according to our mood, category 2b (but without our overlooking the fact that it is *we* who are choosing).

In this type of classification, consideration of borderline cases is always instructive and says more than the description of what is a matter of course. Are the solutions that I declare impossible really so? Two fields are to be explored here: first, the problem of the two blackened squares in the chart above; next, the problem of the anonymous *author*.

— *The blackened squares*. (a) Can the hero of a novel declared as such have the same name as the author? Nothing would prevent such a thing from existing, and it is perhaps an internal contradiction from which some interesting effects could be drawn. But, in practice, no example of such a study comes to mind. And if the case does present itself, the reader is under the impression that a mistake has been made. Thus the autobiography of Maurice Sachs, *Le Sabbat* (*The Sabbath*), had been published in 1946 by Correa, with the subtitle *Souvenirs d'une jeunesse orageuse* (*Memories of a Stormy Childhood*); it was republished in 1960 by Gallimard (and again in 1971 in the collection Livre de Poche) with the subtitle *Novel*: because the story is told by Sachs using his own name (he even gives his real name—Ettinghausen—in addition to his pseudonym), and since the responsibility for the subtitle is clearly the publisher's, the reader picks up on the error. (b) In the *stated* autobiography, can the protagonist have a name different from that of the author (the question of the pseudonym aside)? This is hardly ever seen;¹³ and if, by some artistic effect, an autobiographer chose this formula, the reader would always have doubts: isn't he reading a novel, quite simply? We see in these two cases that if the internal contradiction was voluntarily chosen by the author, it would never result in a text that we would read as an autobiography;

nor really as a novel either; but in a Pirandellian game of ambiguity. To my knowledge, it is a game that we practically never play *seriously*.

In the above chart, the ascending diagonal, which includes the two blackened squares and the central square, marks out a zone of indetermination (from "neither one nor the other" in the central square to "the two together" in the blackened squares).

— *The anonymous author*. This chart assumes that the author has a name; a tenth case should therefore be considered: the case of the anonymous author. But this case (with the subdivisions that it would engender depending on whether the protagonist has a name or not, and that a *publisher* concludes in the place of the absent author such and such a pact with the reader)—this case is also excluded by definition, as the author of an autobiography cannot be anonymous. If the disappearance of the author's name is due to an accidental phenomenon (the manuscript found in an attic, unpublished and not signed), there are two possibilities: either the narrator states his name somewhere in the text, and an elementary historical study lets us know if this has to do with a real person, given that by definition an autobiography recounts a dated and situated story; or else the narrator-protagonist does not give his name, and we are dealing either with a text that is part of category 2b or else with a simple fiction. If the anonymity is intentional (a published text), the reader is in a state of legitimate mistrust. The text can appear to be authentic, to give all sorts of verifiable and likely particulars, to ring true—it remains that all this can be counterfeited. At best, this would be a sort of extreme case, analogous to category 2b. Everything rests, then, on the decision of the reader. We will have an idea about the complexity of the problem in reading, for example, the *Mémoires d'un vicaire de campagne, écrits par lui-même* (*Memoirs of a Country Priest, Written by Himself*) (1841), attributed to Father Epineau, whose ecclesiastical office would have forced him to remain provisionally anonymous.¹⁴

Surely by asserting that it is impossible to write an anonymous autobiography, I am only stating a corollary to my definition, and not "proving" it. Everyone is free to assert that it is possible, but then it will be necessary to start with another definition. We see that here, everything depends, on the one hand, on the link that I establish, through the notion of *author*, between the person and the name; on the other hand, on the fact that I have chosen the perspective of the reader in defining autobiography. For any reader, a text in the autobiographical style, which is claimed by no one, and a work of fiction are as much alike as two drops of water.

But I think that this definition, far from being arbitrary, brings out the essential point. What defines autobiography for the one who is reading is above all a contract of identity that is sealed by the proper name. And this is true also for the one who is writing the text. If I write the story of my life without mentioning my

name in it, how will my reader know that it was *I*? It is impossible for the autobiographical vocation and the passion for anonymity to coexist in the same person.

The distinctions proposed here, the attention paid to the proper name, have, then, a great importance on the practical level as criteria for classification; on the theoretical level, they impose several series of reflections whose features I will only mention.

1. Author and person. Autobiography is a literary genre which, by its very content, best marks the confusion of author and person, confusion on which is founded the whole practice and problematic of Western literature since the end of the eighteenth century. Whence the kind of *passion for the proper name*, which exceeds simple “author’s vanity,” since through such passion it is the person him/herself who claims existence. The deep subject of autobiography is the proper name. We think about those sketches by Hugo, displaying his own name in gigantic letters across a countryside in chiaroscuro. The desire for fame and eternity so cruelly demystified by Sartre in *Les Mots* rests entirely on the *proper name* become author’s name. Do we imagine the possibility of an *anonymous* literature today? Valéry was already pondering over it fifty years ago. But it doesn’t seem that he thought about practicing it himself, since he ended up in the Academy. Having achieved his reputation, he could dream about anonymity. The *Tel Quel* group, by calling into question the notion of author (replacing it by that of “scripteur”), heads in the same direction but does not pursue the thing any further.

2. Person and language. We saw earlier that we could legitimately wonder, with regard to the “first person,” if it was the psychological person (conceived naïvely as being outside language) who was expressing himself by making use of the grammatical person as an instrument, or if the psychological person was not an *effect* of the enunciation itself. The word “person” contributes to the ambiguity. If there is no one outside of language, since language is other people, we would have to arrive at the idea that autobiographical discourse, far from referring, as each person imagines it, to the “I” minted in a series of proper names, would be, on the contrary, an alienated discourse, a mythological voice by which we would all be controlled. Naturally, autobiographers are in general farthest from the problems of the Beckettian hero of *L’Innommable* (*The Unnameable*) wondering who is saying “I” in him; but this anxiety shows on the surface in some books, such as *Le Traître* (*The Traitor*) by Gorz—or rather in the kind of transcription that Sartre did of it (*Des rats et des hommes* [*Of Rats and Men*]). Under the name “vampire,” Sartre designates these voices that control us. The autobiographical voice is undoubtedly part of them. Thus would open up—all psychology and mystique of the individual demystified—an analysis of the discourse of subjectivity and individuality as the myth of our civilization. Moreover, each of us indeed feels the danger of this indetermination of the first person, and it is no accident if we try to neutralize it by grounding it in the proper name.

3. Proper name and proper body. The acquisition of the proper name is no doubt as important a stage in the story of the individual as the mirror stage. This acquisition escapes memory and autobiography, which can recount only these second and inverse baptisms that are for a child the accusations that freeze him in a role through a qualifier: “thief” for Genet, “yid” for Albert Cohen (*O vous, frères humains* [*You, Human Brothers*], 1972). The name received and assumed first—the father’s name—and especially the Christian name that distinguishes you from it, are no doubt essential basic principles in the story of *me*. Witness the fact that the name is never indifferent, whether we adore it or we detest it, whether we accept that we owe it to others or we prefer to receive it only from the self. This can go on to a generalized system of displacements, as it does with Stendhal;¹⁵ to an increase in the value of the first name, as in Jean-Jacques (Rousseau); and, in a more banal way, to all those games of chance, to parlor games or to private games on those few letters in which each of us thinks instinctively that the essence of his being is registered. Plays on spelling and meaning: of the unhappiness in being named François Nourissier, for example;¹⁶ plays on sex: Michel or Micheline Leiris (see note 12). The presence of a name in the voice of those who have pronounced it: “Oh Rousseau, I thought you were a good fellow,” said Marion. Infantile meditation on the arbitrariness of the name, and search for a second name that is essential, as with Jacques Madaule.¹⁷ History of the name itself, established often quite tediously for the reader in those preambles in the form of a family tree.

When we try, then, to distinguish fiction from autobiography, to determine what it is that the “I” refers to in personal accounts, there is no need to go back to an impossible world-beyond-the-text; the text itself offers this last word at the very end, the proper name of the author, which is both textual and unquestionably referential. If this reference is beyond doubt, it is because it is based on two social institutions: vital statistics (agreement internalized by each of us from early childhood) and the publishing contract; there is, then, no reason to doubt identity.

Exact Copy

Identity is not resemblance.

Identity is a *fact* immediately grasped—accepted or refused, at the level of enunciation; resemblance is a *relationship* subject to infinite discussions and nuances, established from the utterance.

Identity is defined starting with three terms: author, narrator, and protagonist. Narrator and protagonist are the figures to whom the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the utterance refer *within the text*; the author, represented at the edge of the text by his name, is the referent to whom the subject of enunciation refers by reason of the autobiographical pact.

As soon as it becomes a matter of *resemblance*, we are obliged to introduce a fourth symmetrical term on the side of utterance, an extratextual referent that we could call the prototype, or better yet, the *model*.

My reflections on identity have led me to distinguish especially the autobiographical novel from autobiography; for resemblance, it is the opposition with *biography* that is going to have to be specified. In the two cases, moreover, vocabulary is the source of errors: "autobiographical novel" is too close to the word "autobiography," itself too close to the word "biography," for some confusions not to arise. Is not autobiography, as its name indicates, the biography of a person written by him/herself? We thus have a tendency to consider it a particular case of biography, and to apply to it the "historicizing" problematic of this genre. Many autobiographers, amateur or established writers, fall naively into this trap—probably because this illusion is necessary to the functioning of the genre.

As opposed to all forms of fiction, biography and autobiography are *referential* texts: exactly like scientific or historical discourse, they claim to provide information about a "reality" exterior to the text, and so to submit to a test of *verification*. Their aim is not simple verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth. Not "the effect of the real," but the image of the real. All referential texts thus entail what I will call a "referential pact," implicit or explicit, in which are included a definition of the field of the real that is involved and a statement of the modes and the degree of resemblance to which the text lays claim.

The referential pact, in the case of autobiography, is in general coextensive with the autobiographical pact, difficult to dissociate, exactly, like the subject of enunciation and that of utterance in the first person. The formula for it would not be "I, the undersigned" either, but "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." The oath rarely takes such an abrupt and total form; it is a supplementary proof of honesty to restrict it to the *possible* (the truth such as it appears to me, inasmuch as I can know it, etc., making allowances for lapses of memory, errors, involuntary distortions, etc.), and to indicate explicitly the *field* to which this oath applies (the truth about such and such an aspect of my life, not committing myself in any way about some other aspect).

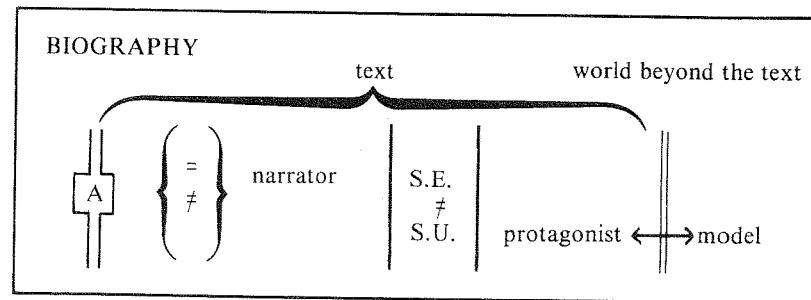
We see what makes this pact look like the one that any historian, geographer, or journalist draws up with his/her reader; but we must be naïve not to see, at the same time, the differences. We are not talking about practical difficulties with the test of *verification* in the case of autobiography, since autobiography tells us precisely—here is the advantage of its narrative—what it alone can tell us. Biographical study easily allows us to gather other information and to determine the degree of the narrative's accuracy. This is not where the difference lies; it lies in the rather paradoxical fact that this accuracy has no essential importance. In autobiography, it is indispensable that the referential pact be *drawn up*, and that it be *kept*; but it is not necessary that the result be on the order of strict resemblance.

The referential pact can be, according to the criteria of the reader, badly kept, without the referential value of the text disappearing (on the contrary)—this is not the case for historical and journalistic texts.

This apparent paradox is due naturally to the confusion that I have maintained up to this point, following the example of most authors and critics, between biography and autobiography. To clear it up, it is necessary to restore this fourth term that is the *model*.

By "model," I understand the real that the utterance claims to *resemble*. How can a text "resemble" a life—that is a question the biographers rarely ask themselves and that they always assume is resolved implicitly. The "resemblance" can be found on two levels: in the negative mode—and at the level of the elements of the narrative—the criterion of *accuracy* intervenes; in the positive mode—and at the level of the whole of the narrative—what we will call *fidelity* intervenes. Accuracy involves *information*, fidelity *meaning*. That meaning can be produced only by narrative techniques and by the intervention of a system of explication involving the ideology of the historian does not prevent the biographer from imagining that it is on the same level as accuracy, in a relationship of resemblance with the extratextual reality to which the entire text refers. Thus Sartre declares shamelessly that his biography of Flaubert is a "true novel."¹⁸ The model, in biography, is thus the life of a man "such as it was."

In order to represent the biographical undertaking, we can construct the accompanying diagram, in which the division into *columns* differentiates the text and the world-beyond-the-text, and the division into *rows* the subject of enunciation and the subject of utterance. Included inside the line separating the text from the world-beyond-the-text is the author, in the marginal position represented by his name on the cover of the book.



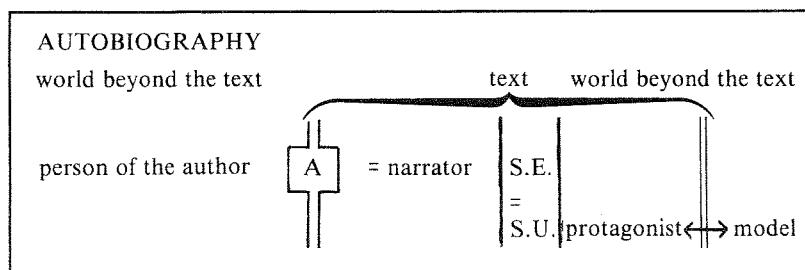
Abbreviations: A = Author
 S.E. = Subject of the enunciation
 S.U. = Subject of the utterance

Relationships: = identical to
 ≠ not identical to
 ↔ resemblance

Commentary on the diagram. In biography, author and narrator are sometimes linked by a relationship of *identity*. This relationship can remain implicit or vague, or can be made explicit, for example, in a preface (for example, that of *L'Idiot de la famille* [The Idiot of the Family], where the biographer, Sartre, explains that he has some accounts to settle with his model, Flaubert). It can also happen that no identity relationship is established between author and narrator. What is important is that if the narrator uses the first person, it is never to talk about the protagonist of the story—this is someone else. Consequently, as soon as the narrator is involved, the principal mode of the narrative is the third person, what G. Genette calls heterodiegetic narration. The relationship of the protagonist (in the text) to the model (referent in the world-beyond-the-text) is certainly first of all a relationship of identity, but it is especially one of “*resemblance*.” As a matter of fact, in the case of the subject of utterance, the identity relationship does not have the same *value* as it does for the subject of enunciation. It is simply a given of the utterance on the same level as the others; it proves nothing; it itself needs to be proved through resemblance.

We notice already here what is going to fundamentally oppose biography and autobiography; it is the hierarchical organization of the relationships of resemblance and identity. In biography, it is resemblance that must ground identity; in autobiography, it is identity that grounds resemblance. Identity is the real starting point of autobiography; resemblance, the impossible horizon of biography. The different function of resemblance in the two systems thereby is explained.

This becomes obvious as soon as we outline the diagram that corresponds to autobiography:



The personal narrative (autodiegetic) seems here to be absolutely irreducible to the impersonal narrative (heterodiegetic).

Indeed, in personal narrative, what does the “equal” (=) sign that is found between the subject of enunciation and that of utterance signify? It really implies *identity*; and that identity, in turn, involves a certain form of resemblance. Resemblance with whom? If we are talking about a narrative written exclusively in the past, like biography, resemblance of the protagonist to the model could be

looked at exclusively as a verifiable relationship between protagonist and model; but all narrative in the first person implies that the protagonist, even if some distant adventures about him are being told, is also at the same time the *real* person who produces the narration: the subject of the utterance is double because it is inseparable from the subject of enunciation; in a way, it becomes single again only when the narrator talks about his own present narration, never in the other direction, to designate a protagonist untainted by any real narrator.

We realize, then, that the relationship designated by “=” is not at all a *simple* relationship, but rather a *relationship of relationships*; it signifies that the narrator is to the protagonist (past or present) what the author is to the model. This implies that the ultimate expression of truth (if we reason in terms of resemblance) can no longer be the being-in-itself of the past (if indeed such a thing exists), but being-for-itself, manifested in the present of the enunciation. It also implies that in his relationship to the story (remote or quasi-contemporary) of the protagonist, the narrator is mistaken, lies, forgets, or distorts—and error, lie, lapse of memory, or distortion will, if we distinguish them, take on the value of aspects, among others, of an enunciation, which, itself, remains authentic. Let's call authenticity that inner relationship characteristic of the first person in the personal narrative; it will be confused neither with identity, which refers to the proper name, nor with resemblance, which assumes a judgment of similitude between two different images, made by a third person.

This detour was necessary in order to grasp the inadequacy of the diagram on autobiography. The illusion is that held by all those who start off from the problematic of biography in order to think about autobiography. While constructing the diagram on biography, I had been prompted, because of the nonidentity of the protagonist and the narrator, to distinguish *two “sides”* for the extratextual reference, placing the author on the left and the model to the right. The fact that we are concerned with *simple* relationships of identity on the side of the author, and of resemblance on the side of the model, allows a linear presentation. For autobiography, the “reference” is made on one side alone (confusion of author and model) and the relationship that articulates identity and resemblance is in fact a relationship of relationships which cannot be represented linearly.

We would thus have the two following formulas:

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

Autobiography: N is to P as A is to M.

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

Since autobiography is a referential genre, it is naturally subject at the same time to the order of resemblance at the level of the model, but this is only a secondary characteristic. The fact that we believed that resemblance is not obtained is incidental from the moment when we are sure that it has been certified. What matters is less the resemblance of “Rousseau at the age of sixteen,” represented in the text of the *Confessions*, with the Rousseau of 1728, “such as he was,” than

the double effort of Rousseau around 1764 to *paint*: 1) his relationship to the past; 2) this past such as it was, with the intention of changing nothing therein.

In the case of identity, the borderline and exceptional case, which confirms the rule, was that of *fraud*. In the case of resemblance, this will be *mythomania*—that is to say, not the errors, the distortions, the interpretations consubstantial with the elaboration of personal myth in all autobiography, but the substitution of an obviously *made-up* story, and one *totally* unrelated to life; as for fraud, it is extremely rare, and the referential character attributed to narrative is thus easily called into question by a survey of literary history. But, disqualified as autobiography, the narrative will retain its full interest as phantasm, at the level of its utterance, and the falsehood of the autobiographical pact, as behavior, will still reveal for us, at the level of enunciation, a subject that is, despite everything, intentionally autobiographical and one that we will continue to assume beyond the trumped-up subject. Thus we come back to analyze on another level, no longer the biography-autobiography, but the novel-autobiography relationship, to define what we could call *autobiographical space*, and the effects of *contrast* that it engenders.

Autobiographical Space

We must now show on what naïve illusion rests the widespread theory according to which the novel is truer (more profound, more authentic) than the autobiography. This commonplace, like all commonplaces, has no single author; each one, in turn, speaks the commonplace with his own voice. Thus André Gide: "Memoirs are never more than half sincere, however great the concern for truth may be: everything is always more complicated than we say it is. Perhaps we even come closer to the truth in the novel."¹⁹ Or François Mauriac: "It is looking much further back for excuses, limiting myself to one single chapter of my memoirs. Is not the true reason for my laziness that our novels express the essential part of ourselves? Only fiction does not lie: it half-opens a hidden door on a man's life, through which slips, out of all control, his unknown soul."²⁰

Albert Thibaudet gave the commonplace the academic form of the "parallel," an ideal dissertation subject, opposing the novel (profound and varied) and the autobiography (superficial and schematic).²¹

I will demonstrate the illusion starting with the formulation proposed by Gide, only because his work furnishes an incomparable area for demonstration. Rest assured, I have no intention of defending the autobiographical genre, and establishing the truth of the contrary proposition, namely that autobiography would be the most truthful, the most profound, and so on. To invert Thibaudet's proposition would be of no interest, except to show that right side up or upside down, it is always *the same* proposition.

Indeed, at the very moment when in *appearance* Gide and Mauriac deprecate the autobiographical genre and glorify the novel, in *reality* they are drawing something very different than drawing a more or less questionable scholarly parallel: they designate the autobiographical space in which they want us to read the whole of their work. Far from being a condemnation of autobiography, these often quoted sentences are in reality an indirect form of the autobiographical pact. Indeed they establish the nature of the ultimate truth to which their texts aspire. In these judgments, the reader forgets all too often that autobiography is understood on two levels: at the same time that it is one of the two *terms* of the comparison, it is the *criterion* that is used in the comparison. What is this "*truth*" that the novel makes more accessible than autobiography does, except the personal, individual, intimate truth of the author, that is to say, the truth to which any autobiographical project aspires? So we might say, it is as autobiography that the novel is declared the truer.

The reader is thus invited to read novels not only as *fictions* referring to a truth of "human nature," but also as revealing *phantasms* of the individual. I will call this indirect form of the autobiographical pact *the phantasmatic pact*.

If hypocrisy is a homage that vice pays to virtue, these judgments are in reality a homage that the novel pays to autobiography. If the novel is truer than autobiography, why are Gide, Mauriac, and many others not happy with writing novels? In posing the question in this way, everything becomes clear: if they had not *also* written and published autobiographical texts, even "inadequate" ones, no one would ever have seen the nature of the truth that it was necessary to look for in their novels. Thus these declarations are perhaps involuntary but very effective tricks: we escape accusations of vanity and egocentrism when we seem so aware of the limitations and insufficiencies of our autobiography; and no one notices that, by the same movement, we extend on the contrary the autobiographical pact, in an *indirect* form, to the whole of what we have written. Double blow.

Double blow, or rather double vision—double writing, the effect, if I can risk this neologism, of *stereography*. Sartre
Hegelian

Posed in this way, the nature of the problem changes completely. It is no longer necessary to know which of the two, autobiography or novel, would be truer. It is neither one nor the other; autobiography will lack complexity, ambiguity, etc.; the novel, accuracy. So it would be one, then the other? Rather, one *in relation* to the other. What becomes revealing is the space in which the two categories of texts are inscribed, and which is reducible to neither of the two. This effect of contrast obtained by this procedure is the creation, for the reader, of an "autobiographical space."

From this point of view, the works of Gide and Mauriac are typical. Both have organized, for different reasons, a spectacular failure of their autobiography, thus forcing their audience into reading all the rest of their narrative production in the autobiographical register. When I talk about failure, it is not a question of making

a value judgment on admirable (Gide) or estimable (Mauriac) texts, but simply of echoing their own statements, and of establishing that they have *chosen* to leave their autobiography incomplete, fragmented, full of holes and open.²²

This form of indirect pact is becoming increasingly widespread. Formerly it was the reader who, despite the denials of the author, took the initiative and the responsibility for this type of reading; today, on the contrary, authors and publishers start off from the beginning in this direction. It is revealing that Sartre himself, who at one time thought about continuing *Les Mots* in fictional form, reverted to Gide's formula: "It would be time finally for me to tell the truth. But I could tell it only in a work of fiction," and that in this way he clarified the reading contract that he would have suggested to his reader:

At the time I was thinking of writing a story in which I would present in an indirect manner everything that I had previously intended to say in a kind of political testament. The testament would have been a continuation of my autobiography, but I had decided not to write it. The fictional element of the story I was considering would have been minimal; I would have created a character about whom the reader would have been forced to say: "*The man presented here is Sartre.*"

This does not mean that for the reader there would have been an overlapping of the character and the author, but that the best way of understanding the character would have been to look for what came to him from me.²³

All these games, which show clearly the predominance of the autobiographical project, are found again, to varying degrees, in many modern writers. And this game can itself be naturally imitated within a novel. This is what Jacques Laurent did in *Les Bêtises* (*Nonsense*, Grasset, 1971), by giving us to read both the fictional text that his protagonist would have written, then different "autobiographical" texts of the same protagonist. If Jacques Laurent ever publishes his own autobiography, the texts of *Les Bêtises* will take on a dizzying "contrast."

Reading Contract

At the end of this reflection, a brief balance sheet allows us to take note of a displacement of the problem:

—*Negative side*: certain points remain blurred and unsatisfying. For example, we might ask ourselves how the identity of the author and the narrator can be established in the autobiographical pact when the name is not repeated (see above p. 16); we might remain skeptical in view of the distinctions I suggested earlier in *Exact Copy*. That section and the one entitled *I, the Undersigned*, look only at the case of autobiography in autodiegetic narration, whereas I have stressed

that other formulas of narration were *possible*: will the established distinctions hold, in the case of autobiography in the third person?

—*Positive side*: on the other hand, my analyses have seemed fruitful to me each time that, going beyond the apparent structures of the text, they prompted me to question the positions of the *author* and the *reader*. "Social contract" of the proper name and the publication, autobiographical "pact," fictional "pact," referential "pact," phantasmatic "pact"—all the expressions used refer back to the idea that the autobiographical genre is a *contractual* genre. The difficulty I had come up against in my first attempt derived from what I was searching for in vain—on the level of structures, modes, and narrative voices—clear criteria to ground a difference that any reader nevertheless experiences. The notion of "autobiographical pact" that I had so elaborated was still wavering, for want of seeing that an essential element of the contract was the proper name. That something so evident was not apparent to me, shows that this type of contract is implicit, and, appearing grounded on the nature of things, barely invites reflection.

The problematic of autobiography proposed here is thus not grounded on a relationship, established from the outside, between the extratextual and the text—because such a relationship could only be one of resemblance, and would prove nothing. Neither is it grounded on an internal analysis of the functioning of the text, of the structure, or of aspects of the published text; but upon analysis, on the global level of *publication*, of the implicit or explicit contract proposed by the *author* to the *reader*, a contract which determines the mode of reading of the text and engenders the effects which, attributed to the text, seem to us to define it as autobiography.

The level of analysis utilized is therefore that of the *publication/published* relationship, which would be parallel, on the level of the printed text, to the *enunciation/utterance* relationship, on the level of oral communication. In order to go on, this study of author/reader contracts, of implicit or explicit codes of publication—on that fringe of the printed text which, in reality, *controls* the entire reading (author's name, title, subtitle, name of the collection, name of the publisher, even including the ambiguous game of prefaces)—this inquiry would have to take on a historical dimension that I have not given to it here.²⁴ The variations in these codes over time (due both to changes in the attitude of authors and readers, and to technical or commercial problems of the publishing business) would make it seem much more clearly that we are dealing with codes, and not with "natural" or universal things. Since the seventeenth century, for example, conventions concerning anonymity or the use of the pseudonym have changed a great deal; plays on the allegations of reality in works of fiction are no longer practiced today in the same way that they were in the eighteenth century;²⁵ on the other hand, readers have become accustomed to feel the presence of the author (of his unconscious) even behind productions that do not seem autobiographical, so much have phantasmic pacts created new habits of reading.

It is at this global level that autobiography is defined: it is a mode of reading as much as it is a type of writing; it is a historically variable *contractual effect*. The present study is based on the types of contract currently in use. Whence come its relativity and the absurdity that there would be in wanting it to be universal; whence come also the difficulties encountered in this undertaking of definition. I wanted to make explicit in a clear, coherent, and exhaustive system (which takes all cases into account) the fundamental criteria of a corpus (that of autobiography) made up in reality according to multiple criteria, variable in time and according to individuals and often noncoherent between them. To succeed in giving a clear and complete formula of autobiography would be, in reality, to fail. While reading this chapter in which I have tried to push exactness as far as possible, one will have often felt that this exactness was becoming arbitrary, inadequate for an object perhaps more within the scope of Chinese logic such as Borges describes it, than within that of Cartesian logic.

When all is said and done, this study would seem to me, then, to be itself more a document to study (the attempt of a twentieth-century reader to rationalize and clarify his criteria of reading) rather than a “scientific” text: a document to assign to the file of a scientific history of literary *communication*.

The history of autobiography would be therefore, above all, a history of its mode of reading: comparative history where we would be able to bring into dialogue the reading contracts proposed by different types of texts (because it would be of no use to study autobiography all by itself, since contracts, like signs, make sense only through the play of opposition), and the different types of readings really practiced on these texts. If autobiography is defined by something outside the text, it is not on this side, by an unverifiable resemblance to a real person, but on the other side, by the type of reading it engenders, the credence it exudes, and the qualities that are manifested in the critical response to autobiographies.

Chapter 2

Autobiography in the Third Person

The I calls itself I or you or he. There are these three persons in me. The Trinity. The one who addresses the I in the familiar “you” form; the one who treats him as Him.

Paul Valéry

Bertolt Brecht used to suggest to actors that they transpose their role to the third person and into the past. These exercises were limited to rehearsals, and intended to encourage distancing. Autobiographers are actors too. And some of them really take this game seriously, in front of their public. But since they are at the same time the authors of the role they are interpreting, the procedure has a totally different function for them. It helps them to express their problems of identity and at the same time to captivate their readers.

These sophisticated games, and after all they are rather infrequent, are revealing *borderline cases*: they bring out into the open what is ordinarily implicit in the use of “persons.” My plan here is to study, thanks to them, “the use of personal pronouns in autobiography,” as Michel Butor would say. To use them as examples of “grammar” in order to clarify autobiographical narration with all the problems of pact, voice, and perspective that it brings up.¹

We will still be concerned with modern autobiographical texts. The third person, certainly, has been used formerly in historical memoirs like those of Caesar, in religious autobiographies (where the author calls himself “the servant of God”), and in aristocratic memoirs of the seventeenth century, like those of the president de Thou. It is still used today in some related genres, brief genres, very strongly coded, and related to publishing strategies, like the preface, the publisher’s blurb, and the biographical notice written by the author. I will at times make allusion to these. But I have chosen to remain within a coherent whole: the use of figures always depends in the final analysis on the reading contract and on the “horizons of expectation” of the genre.