

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 depreciate 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*.

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 phantasmatic 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.