



About the Contractual Nature of the Autobiographical Pact

Zoltán Z. Varga

I remember the first time I read *Le pacte autobiographique*. It was 1996, I had just started my Ph.D. studies and debuted as a teaching assistant at the university. Inexperienced and short of topics but being a passionate diary reader from my late teenage years, I chose “literary diaries” as the subject of one of my courses to teach. At that time, I already knew that there must be a way to study diaries as literary texts, beyond the usual positivist approach which reduces them to (unreliable) historical accounts or documents to reconstruct the author’s personality. *The Autobiographical Pact* was a revelation for me. By reading its thorough and careful theoretical introduction, the way it invested some of the most influential theoretical currents in literary theory of its time (linguistic pragmatism, structuralism, aesthetics of reception) to discover a *terra incognita* for poetical reflection, its inventive reading of the modern “classics” of the genre (Rousseau, Gide, Leiris, Sartre etc.), I felt my intuitions vindicated concerning the artistic and intellectual values of diaries and autobiographical genres in general. But the novelty of Lejeune’s approach to the question of autobiography did not only reside in his choice of object of study but in an appreciation of a formerly underestimated, “minor” genre (compared to the old, “noble” genres at the top of the generic hierarchy such as poetry, novel, plays). Lejeune’s groundbreaking paper and his following eponymous book has also contributed to the establishment of a new scholarly field, which is widely known today under the name of autobiographical studies. It is important to remember this moment of establishment because the later history of the discipline, as well as Lejeune’s own career, witnesses an interdisciplinary opening, a dissemination, or at least a pluralization of the object of autobiographical studies. But in the very moment of the publication of *The Autobiographical Pact*, (1975) there was another task on the agenda, the methodological determination and disciplined approach

which was inspired by a cultural heritage of the “esprit cartésien” and Lejeune’s membership of the great French structuralist generation.

When we reread Lejeune’s first book, the most eye-catching feature is its intention of circumscribing a specific field of study, both from a theoretical and a historical point of view. All necessary operations for describing a literary genre are there: a quest for a clear and univocal definition, its differentiation from other literary genres, a scrupulous limitation of the historical scope it covers, and analyses of some of its canonical works. Lejeune’s gesture of setting in order an ambiguous field, filled with prejudices and false obviousness, a gesture of forming a coherent object of study, is similar to Saussure’s attempt to grasp language as a scholarly object among its manifold possible manifestations. The structuralist affiliation is undeniable: either one thinks of the possible combinations of the types of reading contracts and the identity of the author’s name and the protagonist’s name, arranged in a table, or the dichotomies peculiar to describing autobiography (identity and resemblance; enunciation and proposition). But the poetics of genre practised in the early works of Lejeune has not been among the favourite fields of research of the theoretical avant-garde. That was the case both in the seventies and the eighties, when an enthusiasm for a borderless textuality pervaded the scene of literary criticism both in Europe and the USA. Lejeune’s attempt to constitute a coherent field of study, with its peculiar methodology and its analytical toolkit, to restrict the number of autobiographical works covered by the definition, was historically and theoretically contested and criticised precisely for that reason. However, his endeavour to define autobiography in a restrictive way, to designate and describe a special author-reader relationship in this form of literary communication, is logical if we take into consideration the great number and canonical authority of those works which satisfy even this restrictive definition, especially in 19th century French literature, not to mention the influence that this canon has exerted on contemporary autobiographical (and fictional) production, even in its negative forms, including refusal or criticism.

My sense of revelation on encountering Lejeune’s groundbreaking role was not an individual case, as the critical legacy of *The Autobiographical Pact* confirms. But what remains from one of the founding works of autobiographical studies today, almost half a century later, considering the fact that its author himself revisited his initial conception several times?

The “autobiographical pact” itself includes different theorems. Lejeune’s first work, with its emblematic name, is often reduced to its famous attempt to define autobiography as a separate genre based on textual (retrospective prose and representation of a life story in its temporal, and intellectual/spiritual progression) and extratextual (real person)

elements. The first challenges to his ideas concerned precisely the gesture of definition making. Defining autobiography based on a coherent historical corpus and a consistent theoretical frame also means excluding many borderline cases of written self representations, such as autobiography in verse, self-portraits and dubious cases of an at once maintained and denied identity of the triad protagonist/narrator/author, which became an important literary and theoretical issue under the name of autofiction. Already in his book following the programmatic theoretical background of the “Pact”, entitled *Moi aussi*, and especially in the article “Le pacte autobiographique (bis)” (Lejeune 1986), Lejeune seems to concede his ambition to define autobiography as a circumscribed genre, and he broadens the scope of his definition and his fields of investigation by including in it the whole family of autobiographical genres and also different practices of autobiographical writings.¹ His critical activity in the following decades also witnesses the democratization of the field of autobiographical studies by opening up the textual analysis of hypercanonical literary works (Rousseau, Gide, Leiris, Sartre) to various methodological approaches (from ethnography, social sciences, art history etc.) developed in relation to different life writing productions (spoken autobiography, life story interviews, working class life stories, self-portrait etc.).

Lejeune’s pluralistic conception of autobiography developed during the eighties backs away from generic poetics, and in a certain sense also from poetics of the literary text in general, if we understand it mainly as an interpretative technique based on textual, rhetorical analysis of literary works. His interest in non-literary and even non-written forms of autobiographical production (filmed or recorded interviews), also including autobiographies of subaltern groups, set him apart from mainstream structuralist, post-structuralist or deconstructivist literary criticism. In some respects the evolution of his career could be compared to that of the literary field of his time because Lejeune also experienced his own “cultural turn”, diverting him away from the textual approach of his discipline to autobiographical production.

However, the *Pact* located the study of autobiography to the edge of textuality already in his original formulation even before working with its variants in different media (recorded or filmed interviews, manuscripts of diaries, and other autobiographical materials). One of the strongest arguments of the Pact is that it is impossible to determine on the textual level whether a life story is autobiographical narrative or fictional autobiographical narrative (irrespective of the generic form it takes e.g. diary, memoir, etc.). That is one of the reasons why Lejeune’s solution displaces the problem to a pragmatic level and conceives autobiography (in a broad sense, including all texts governed by an autobiographical pact)

as a contractual genre, an implicit agreement between authors and readers guaranteed by diverse institutions (from the inscription of the proper name to the teaching of literature).

The contractual nature of the autobiography, as well as the hypothesis of the existence of different reading pacts, is a highly contested point of the theory of autobiographical pact. Firstly because only one signature (the author's) guarantees the validity of the contract; and the reader's accord is expected, asked for or demanded, but, in his or her absence, can never be taken for granted. Lejeune himself takes into consideration this disproportionate structure of the reading contract when he analyses the suspicious behaviour of certain (many) readers who invert the proposed pact by presuming a disingenuous authorial strategy behind it. But again, he focuses on how these ambiguous affects of the readers could be "hijacked" by some authors deploying a "phantasmagorical pact", which foresees the readers' suspicion and drives it back to the higher level of the autobiographical space.

In "The Autobiographical Pact (bis)" (1986) Lejeune admits the dangers created by using the term "contract" to refer to the relationship between the author and reader of autobiographies. He acknowledges that literary communication differs substantially from the legal affair that is called to mind by the terms "contract" and "pact" because its parties (author and reader) cannot be present in the same place at the same time, to personally sign the same contract (concerning the autobiographical work). In his self-commentary Lejeune uses a more flexible vocabulary to soften the differences between the compared conceptual frames, claiming that autobiography only creates the "illusion" of such a required co-presence of the parties for a contract, it "gives the impression" that the contract is signed by both parties, and also that autobiography incites the real reader to enter into the "game". (cf. Lejeune 1986, 22) However, this self-critical commentary did not obviate serious objections concerning the presumed contractual nature of autobiographical genres.

The most famous and the most influential of these objections is probably that of Paul De Man, set out in his essay, "Autobiography as De-Facement" (1979), which is worth presenting here in more detail, because it also helps to discredit some poststructuralist interpretations of *The Pact*. First, De Man criticizes Lejeune's solution which displaces the essence of autobiography to an extratextual level, "grounded not in tropes but in speech acts", pretending that "the identity of autobiography is not only representational and cognitive but contractual". (De Man 1979b, 922) From De Man's point of view, it is not the role of the reader that has become problematic in its indetermination but rather that of the author, whose "name on the title page is not the proper name of a subject capable

of self-knowledge and understanding, but the signature that gives the contract legal, though by no means epistemological, authority.” (De Man 1979b, 922) According to De Man, the subject involved in such a contract with its signature “is no longer a subject at all” (De Man 1979b, 923), and to some extent its emptiness is the price to pay for “the move from ontological identity to contractual promise.” De Man claims that autobiographies or complex linguistic self-representations are always unsuccessful, even impossible, attempts to explore and to present knowledge about the self because those attempts are captured, falsified and distorted in “textual systems made up of tropological substitutions.” (De Man 1979b, 922) His scepticism about reliable self-knowledge is partly inspired by his conception of language, pretending that language as a representational system is based on metaphorical substitutions which exclude the possibility of any kind of realism, any factual or referential relationship between a linguistic representation and its object. “The interest of autobiography, then, is not that it reveals reliable self-knowledge—it does not—but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions.” (De Man 1979b, 922)

Obviously, this reformulation of the “individuum ineffabile” argument is nothing surprising in itself. What makes De Man’s criticism original is his demonstration of how this quest for the truth of a life in an autobiographical work undermines the very possibility of its communication by a simple and transparent speech act. In his analysis of some famous scenes of the *Confessions* of Rousseau in the final chapter of the *Allegories of Reading*, De Man shows that in fact Rousseau’s self-accusations turn into self-explanations, his solemn and painful confession in front of his public (but virtual) readership becomes an apology for his past, seemingly immoral deeds by an exploration of their invisible intentions and causes: “the *Confessions* are not primarily a confessional text. To confess is to overcome guilt and shame in the name of truth: it is an epistemological use of language in which ethical values of good and evil are superseded by values of truth and falsehood.” (De Man 1979a, 279) By this operation we assist at a reinscription of the supposed extratextual subject of the confession (autobiography) into its dramatized linguistic-literary representation and into its own understanding. According to De Man, the subject of an autobiographical contract who, by virtue of his/her transcendence from the chains of the textual substitutions, should guarantee the veracity and the authenticity of his/her textual representation becomes again the product of a textual, semiotic process. That is the reason why De Man criticizes Lejeune’s practice of using the terms “signature” and “proper name” as synonyms. For De Man the term “signature” evokes a subject reduced to

its legal or civic function, while the “proper name”—and especially its literary counterpart, the author’s name—is an object of a semiotic process, and its becoming-meaningfulness is the very end of an autobiographical enterprise. The re-semiotization of the author’s signature on the cover of an autobiography—which is carried out on the one hand by his/her own work, and on the other hand by the reader’s semiotic work during the interpretation—undermines its transcendental position.

However insightful and convincing De Man’s argumentation may be, it seems to declare that the living production and consumption of autobiographical texts is based on illusory assumptions, that its practice—both as a reader and as an author—is produced by a “false consciousness”. If one takes De Man’s critique seriously, it must be clear that an autobiography cannot live up to its own promises as speech act, it cannot bring comfort and relief to its performer, its public is destitute of feeling sympathy, catharsis, or of feeling responsible for giving a moral judgement. Yet, it seems that precisely these assumptions, communicative intentions and provoked feelings are mostly responsible for a massive practice of autobiographical writing: “Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as complete subject—it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing”—replies Lejeune (1989, 132) to the poststructuralist objections aimed at him after the seminal paper of De Man. As Paul John Eakin points out, when the question of autobiographical writing is discussed, “poststructuralist theorists of the subject too often ignore” a certain “practical sense.” (Eakin 1992, 26) In Lejeune’s oeuvre precisely this practical sense takes root gradually, while the focus of his interest moves from completed and closed canonical works of art to unpublished manuscripts of ordinary life writing, and to autobiographical practice itself.

The “autobiographical pact” keeps its importance in the new orientation of Lejeune’s work as an operator of a special writing practice and reading convention. The virtual literary communication-situation supposed in the initial formulation of the pact changed considerably during Lejeune’s career. Authors and their readers become very real after his turn toward practices of ordinary (autobiographical) writing, especially after the foundation of the *Association pour autobiographie* (APA). The experience of gathering and archiving contemporary life writings, discussing in reading-circles different ordinary autobiographical works submitted by their living authors, and writing reviews on them, change the presumed anonymity and virtuality of both sides of the literary communication substantially. Still, the principle of “reading in sympathy” (*lire en sympathie*) (Lejeune 2015b) was potentially present in the theorem of the Autobiographical Pact. Texts sealed by an autobiographical pact contain a special protocol of reading, whose usage is taught, whose validity is guaranteed by literary and legal

institutions which both readers and authors trust. A text functions as autobiographical when a reader understands and respects the author's claim that his/her text has to be read as a writing directly concerning his/her own life, when the author believes that his/her past deeds, thoughts or feeling will be judged, forgiven, punished or just listened to and remembered by any virtual community he/she thinks they belong to.

"If we approach self-referential writing as an intersubjective process that occurs within the writer/reader pact, rather than as a true-or-false story, the emphasis of reading shifts from assessing and verifying knowledge to observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding." (Smith and Watson 2001, 13) Lejeune points out correctly that in this communicative situation the focus is not on the fact that in an autobiography the related events are potentially verifiable. "An autobiography is not a text in which one speaks the truth about oneself, but a text in which a real person says that he or she is speaking the truth about himself or herself. And this commitment has specific effects on how the text is received. You don't read a text the same way if you believe it to be an autobiography as you do if you believe it to be a work of fiction". (Lejeune 2015a, 17) Authors and readers are generally aware of the epistemological limits of a representation that wants to grasp the "real" as it is, the past as it was, but their theoretical knowledge does not discredit their intention to produce such mimetic and referential representations.

So what is the final verdict on the autobiographical pact? On the one hand, we have to admit that the semantic field evoked by the contractual metaphor and legal terms is to some extent misleading when we conceive the author-reader-work relationship in an autobiographical work. There is no mutual signature, commonly accepted terms, or officially recognized specifications or collective agreements, and rarely are there further legal actions in the field of autobiographical production or consumption.² In that respect the notion of pact or contract functions as a metonymy in this field. On the other hand, a mutual commitment is expected and supposed: a serious effort on behalf of the author to try to reveal and understand his/her life story; a commitment on behalf of the reader to try to understand the meanings of this self-representation through its partiality, its lacks, its inexactitudes, its fragmentary nature, even with its lies, to understand the very reason why the autobiography was written. Thus, we may conclude with Paul John Eakin that with "the notion of a contract between author and reader [...] autobiographers explicitly commit themselves not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and understand their own lives." (Eakin 1992, 24)

At the end of *Cratylus*, the famous dialogue of Plato on the correctness of names, Socrates and the eponymous hero of the dialogue agree that

the name “Hermogenes” for the third interlocutor is a bad name because it does not correctly describe the essence of the man it is supposed to designate. Nevertheless, they conclude that despite its incorrectness this name continues to designate its object; thus a conventional element must persist in communication. Something similar happened to the “Autobiographical Pact”. “The autobiographical pact”, with its almost half-century career, became a concept in literary theory. As an emblem or a brand, it refers to the mutual and consensual form of literary communication explained above, intended by authors and respected by readers, even if the name is partly misleading or incorrect.

I started my paper by evoking my first encounter with Lejeune’s name. I finish it also with a personal memory. I met Philippe in person for the first time in Paris in 2002, when I was asked to edit a comprehensive volume on his work by the Hungarian subsidiary of the French publishing house L’Harmattan. It seemed a good idea to meet the author, an occasion I generally avoid when it concerns authors of contemporary fiction or poetry. My intuition was right, and the selection and the arrangement of his articles for the Hungarian edition published in 2003 was the beginning of a cooperation and a friendship over many years. During the preparation of the volume I also worked as co-editor on a special number of a major Hungarian journal of poetics to introduce autobiographical studies to a Hungarian professional public with a growing interest in a “poetics of factuality”. Philippe generously offered one of his manuscripts for the journal which I translated myself, together with some other of his writings in those years. These two publications at the outset of the new millennium, as well as his participation in an international conference on autobiography in Pécs, in 2005, reached an interdisciplinary scholarly public in humanities which was searching for new horizons of interpretation for a poetics of subjectivity, quite underestimated during the former decade dominated by deconstructionist and poststructuralist approaches in Hungary. Since then Lejeune’s work has become a major point of reference in research on life writing; his rich and colourful theoretical and historical work, his tender voice in a sometimes starched and austere academic world has inspired many lovers of autobiographical writing, myself among them, who have had the chance to discover the richness of autobiographical production thanks to his work and his personality.

WORKS CITED

- De Man, Paul. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979a.
- De Man, Paul. “Autobiography as De-Facement.” *Modern Language Notes* 94.5 (1979b): 919–930. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2906560>.

- Eakin, Paul John. *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography*. New Jersey, USA: Princeton University Press, 1992.
- Lejeune, Philippe. "Le pacte autobiographique (bis)." In *Moi aussi*. Collection Poétique. Paris: Seuil, 1986. 13–36.
- Lejeune, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- Lejeune, Philippe. "Itinéraires d'une recherche." In *Écrire sa vie: du pacte au patrimoine autobiographique*. Paris: Éditions du Mauconduit. 2015a. 13–35. English version in "From Autobiography to Life-Writing, from Academia to Association: A Scholar's Story", www.autopacte.org/From%20Academy%20to%20Association.html.
- Lejeune, Philippe. "Lire en sympathie." In *Écrire sa vie: du pacte au patrimoine autobiographique*. Paris: Éditions du Mauconduit, 2015b. 49–65.
- Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zoltán Z. Varga (1970) is senior researcher of the Department of Literary Theory, Institute for Literary Studies, Research Center for the Humanities of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, Hungary and lecturer at the Department of Modern Literary History and Theory of Literature at the University of Pécs, Pécs, Hungary. His main fields of research are autobiographical genres in modern literature, comparative literature and modern Hungarian literature. He wrote his Ph.D. thesis on problems of the autobiographical fragments in modern Hungarian literature. He has published several papers in Hungarian, in French and in English. He is a member of IABA-Europe (International Auto/Biographic Association) and the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA). Since 2013 he is the managing editor of the international comparative literature journal, *Neohelicon*. Email: z.varga.zoltan@gmail.com.

NOTES

- 1 "J'ai en effet employé le autobiographie pour désigner largement tout texte régi par un pacte autobiographique, où un auteur propose au lecteur un discours sur soi, mais aussi (et c'est la définition de la p. 14) une réalisation particulière de ce discours, celle où il est répondu à la question 'qui suis-je ?' par un *récit* qui dit 'comment je le suis devenu'." (Lejeune 1986, 19).
- 2 However, some famous cases generated legal actions and caused the change of the generic label (from autobiography to fiction) or the withdrawal of false autobiographical works from the market, or even the financial compensation of the deluded readers (who expected the "real", but got the "fictional" one). One can think of the case of a fake Holocaust-memoir, *Bruchstücke. Aus einer Kindheit 1939–1948*, published under the pen-name "Binjamin Wilkomirski" which touched a particularly sensitive topic because it could potentially feed Holocaust-deniers' arguments. Another famous case is that of James Frey's *Million Little Pieces* which was supposed to be a personal account of the author's drug addiction but proved to be a mostly fictional story. (I would like to thank the editors of this volume who drew my attention to this information).