



Sam Ferguson, *Diaries Real and Fictional in Twentieth-Century French Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, ISBN 9780198814535).

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Over the last two decades, Philippe Lejeune's research has established diary-writing as maybe the only form of life-writing immune from pan-fictionalism. In an oft-quoted article (Lejeune 2007), the French theorist famously expressed his fiction and autofiction fatigue ('[...] j'ai créé "antifiction" par agacement devant "autofiction", le mot et la chose', 3) and set up an insurmountable ontological barrier between autobiographies and diaries: 'autobiography has fallen under the spell of fiction, diaries are enamored with truth' ('[...] l'autobiographie vit sous le charme de la fiction, le journal a le béguin pour la vérité', 3).¹ In his more recent book, *Aux Origines du Journal Personnel: France, 1750–1815* (2016), Lejeune not only reasserted this privileged connection between diaries and truth/reality—not unlike Barthes's claim in *La Chambre claire* that photography cannot be distinguished from its referent—but went as far as removing diaries from the field of literary studies as, according to him, they do not constitute a literary genre (or only as an epiphenomenon).

In *Diaries Real and Fictional in Twentieth-Century French Writing*, Sam Ferguson opts for an altogether different approach. He reinstates diaries within the field of literary studies and, in a very unLejeunian fashion, goes as far as focusing on real *and* fictional diaries, concluding that, even though '[i]t was not [Ferguson's] intention to prove that real and fictional diaries participate in a single inter-related history of diary-writing [...] it is amply demonstrated by the many relations between them that have emerged throughout the preceding chapters'. To him, diary-writing is bound to be influenced by 'modern life-writing's fascination with fiction' (223). As a matter of fact, Ferguson's book (based on his doctoral thesis) differs from Lejeune's research both in its theoretical approach and its scope. Indeed, whereas the latter has principally studied diaries written

by anonymous or little-known people, the former's strategy consists in concentrating on famous French writers—Ferguson is a researcher and translator in modern French literature—and on the role their diaries, real or fictional, played in their overall work. And it is not just the nature of the diarists studied, but their number: Lejeune's research spans over centuries and encompasses multiple subjects; in contrast, Ferguson's is intentionally very limited. He is well aware that the 'period covered by this first part of [his] study, leading from the 1880s up to the Second World War, encompasses important publications of both real and fictional diaries by a large number of writers'. But, to the question 'So why focus on the diary-writing of just one writer, André Gide?' Ferguson answers: '[...] Gide's own works offer the greatest insight into the historical transformations that diary-writing underwent.' (39) It might, and then again it might not—the following sentence shows that the author himself is not totally convinced by his own claim: 'It is *almost* a matter of consensus to place Gide at the head of twentieth-century diary-writing in France [...]' (39, my emphasis)—but Gide certainly epitomizes a major stage in the history of diary-writing, at least in France. Apart from Gide, Ferguson entrusts three other writers with the task of encapsulating the literary zeitgeist of their time, at least when it comes to diaries: Raymond Queneau, Roland Barthes and Annie Ernaux. These are very, even drastically different authors (can Roland Barthes be considered primarily as an author?) in terms of periods, styles and literary objectives. Tzvetan Todorov stated that all great literary works assert the existence of two genres: the one whose rules it breaks and the one whose rules it creates (56), but does it mean that one great work sums up all texts contemporary with it? However, to 'epitomize a major stage in the history of diary-writing' does not exclude the fact that each work retains irreducible specificities. Actually, Ferguson informs his readers that, '[a]lthough works by several other writers will be touched upon in the chapters that follow' (39) and that he will not only focus on four authors, the chapters can nevertheless 'be read individually' (3). So despite the fact that every scholar interested in diary-writing will find reading *Diaries Real and Fictional* rewarding and stimulating, if you are not specifically interested in contemporary French literature and more precisely in the aforementioned writers, you might find the introduction more enriching for your own research than the case studies. But as we will see, even if you belong to this category, what Ferguson's book lacks in scope, it more than makes up in theoretical depth.

The long and dense 40-page introduction contextualizes the history of diary-writing (again, mostly French diary-writing) by calling on the research of those who have theoretically defined it: Michèle Leleu, Alain

Girard, Béatrice Didier, Philippe Lejeune of course, Michel Braud. Ferguson does not content himself with presenting successively their work, but offers a critical approach of their research. For instance, he rightfully points out that for Lejeune ‘[t]he question of the literary status of diaries is dismissed rather than addressed’ (10), whereas it is central to Braud’s approach, the latter resorting to Genette’s distinction between *diction* and *fiction* to address the potential literary status of diaries. After having reviewed all these different conceptions of diaries, Ferguson concludes that ‘[d]iscussion of the diary’s literary status has been hampered by two persistent myths, that of the *journal intime* as a purely spontaneous and private writing practice [...] and the “mystique académique ou malarinéenne de la littérature” stereotyped by Lejeune’ (12). To be fair to Lejeune, Ferguson is, by contrast, undoubtedly drawn to ‘extreme’ cases, ‘more experimental diaries’ which ‘claimed a certain literary status in their contestation of established literature’ (13) such as Gide’s of course. Ferguson’s *modus operandi* for defining the less congruent concept of fictional diaries is similar to his study of real diaries, and he examines in turn Gerald Prince, Valérie Raoul, Hans Porter Abbott, Lorna Martens and Yasusuke Oura’s analyses of these fictional diaries, a far from common literary practice; in fact, the part devoted to fictional diaries being much shorter than the one dealing with real diaries.

Even though Ferguson’s presentation of the current state of the research on diaries in France is thorough, it only adds up to 15 pages and his original strategy is to provide us early in the book with his ‘own approach’ (16). He first offers his own historical survey of diary-writing, dividing it into two parts: ‘The first part covers a period of experimentation with the literary potential of diary-writing from the pivotal date of 1887–88 up to the landmark publication of Gide’s *Journal 1889–1939* in 1939 and its reception during the Second World War’ (22). As for the second part, it ‘follows the course of diary-writing during the decades of impersonal literary formalism after the War, the return of the writing subject to the literary avant-garde in the 1970s and the rise of life-writing up to the present day’ (22). Again, Ferguson is particularly drawn to diaries which turn out to be ‘impure in form’ (21). His ‘own approach’ mostly revolves around some key, mostly philosophical notions dubbed as ‘some critical concepts’ (24): The ‘Other’ (the complex imaginary presence of a potential reader), especially when the diary ‘replaced its essential privacy with an openness to publication’ (28), which inevitably leads to the sensitive issue of ‘Reading Pacts’ and of ‘the truth status of diaries’ (29), Ferguson going as far as claiming that ‘the reading pacts of *journaux intimes* are usually more problematic than those found in autobiographies’ (30), a statement which remains debatable. But the book’s main strength lies in

its capacity to constantly link the diary to other literary practices such as autobiography and fiction and to broader theoretical concerns like reader response theory through notions such as the Author-Figure (and particularly Foucault's *fonction-auteur*), the *auteur supposé* (not to be mistaken with the implied author, or rather this is the diary's version of the implied author). In my opinion, the theoretical cornerstone of *Diaries Real and Fictional* is Ferguson's invocation of Derrida's concept of the 'supplement' (33) of which he makes a particularly intelligent use in order to further understand the role a diary plays in the overall work of an author. For instance, as a 'supplement', a diary is much more than a just a secondary source; it is also a gap that is filled, a 'supplementary mediation' (35) and I find this approach to diary-writing groundbreaking even though it can only be applied to substantial literary works.

This limit of the applicability of the concept of 'supplement' when it comes to diaries is confirmed by Ferguson's choice of case studies, major French authors, and it makes perfect sense as there must be something to supplement in the first place, which would not be the case with anonymous diaries. I have already discussed the relatively limited choice of examples (Gide, Barthes) and one can rapidly accept Ferguson's strategy since his knowledge of each author's work is impressive—and I particularly appreciated the tables presenting elements of paratext in Gide's principal works (69), the timeline of works relating to Barthes's slightly fuzzy 'Vita Nova' project (168) or the timeline of principal works by the very productive Annie Ernaux (195)—and his ability to connect each author's work to other contemporary works and literary trends stimulating; but of course, if Gide's work is of no particular interest to you—and this might be problematic as Gide is the domineering presence throughout this book, as his various diaries, fictional and real, are the perfect example of how this 'secondary' practice can be inserted in the whole *œuvre*, or can even become an *œuvre* in itself—you can move on directly to Queneau for instance and follow Ferguson's advice to read each chapter individually.

However, I do not find in each example the same potential to epitomize a particular trend in diary-writing; Queneau and especially Barthes's diaries are too specific to set up a rich network of possible comparisons with other authors' diaries, whereas Gide and Ernaux quite certainly embody a distinct time in the history of life-writing. But even in the chapters devoted to Queneau and Barthes, the analyses of the interaction between fictionality and diary-writing and of a diary's problematic referentiality, one that should not be taken for granted, are very enlightening for any reader interested in diaries. It is interesting to note that, although there has always been a lingering suspicion as regards the literary status of

diaries, ‘this rejection, or suspicion, of the *journal intime* by the literary avant-garde was never absolute’ (137); and yet, as Ferguson shows, this avant-garde did nothing to alleviate these legitimate doubts. Queneau is a telling example of a typical postmodern case of ‘an irreverent and sophisticated reflection on the formal apparatus of the author-figure’ (140) through his Sally Mara doppelgänger. Here, Ferguson’s use of the concept of *auteur supposé* and its potential layers is very convincing, especially when he conjures up the figure of the metalepsis, developed by Genette, generally understood as the ‘intrusion of one diegetic level into its respective metadiegetic level’ (147). In this context, the attention paid to the paratext is essential as it is ‘the interplay of [Queneau’s] three signatories’ that ‘brings about considerable changes in their positions in the diegetic framework’ (155). To Ferguson, Sally Mara is much more than just ‘a mere pseudonym for Queneau or the narrator of the diary novel’, ‘she’ should be considered as a genuine ‘*auteur supposé*, largely constituted by the publication of a *journal intime* and her *œuvres complètes*’ (159). I am convinced that Lejeune would disagree, but this obvious bias toward equivocal authorship of diaries once again confirms Ferguson’s attraction to diaries as versatile narrative tropes, rather than just ‘banal’ life-writing activities. This is made clear when he justifies the choice of including Ernaux in his main corpus: ‘Rather than studying any of the numerous authors who have come to write and publish their diaries with the “consistance doctrinale” that Barthes claimed to lack [...], I shall approach the question through the work of Annie Ernaux’ (194). Maybe this ‘consistance doctrinale’ also points the finger at the theoretical approach to the genre, not just its practice.

For my part, apart from the dense wide-ranging introduction, the two chapters devoted to Barthes and Ernaux are the most interesting ones because their diaries allow Ferguson to make the most of the concept of ‘supplement’, whereas Gide and Queneau’s diaries were respectively too central or playful to be strictly considered as such. Barthes’s short stint as a diarist is precisely discussed by Ferguson, and even if this specific aspect of Barthes’s work was very familiar to me as it has been occasionally the subject of my own research, I still gathered precious new information thanks to Ferguson’s extensive research since the contours of his ‘Vita Nova’ project were to be honest very blurry to me and I found the quotes from the French theorist’s inaugural lecture at the Collège de France—that, to my great shame, I have never read—very useful. I was also impressed by how the author managed to bring to the fore the way Barthes was to some extent torn between the *album* and the *livre*, between a form of spontaneity and formalism (more appealing to the academic that he was), especially in *Journal de deuil* and *Soirée de Paris* and

how his autobiographical texts never managed to escape the yoke of his theoretician's superego.

Ernaux's diaries are also fascinating because they are multifarious and above all because they come to supplement a work that is also in great part devoted to writing her life. In a way, they supplement but also 'accompany' the work, this varying but never unbridgeable distance echoing the one separating Ernaux's life and her writing about it: 'This separation between *vie et écriture* is a continuation of the "écriture de la distance" established at the start of Ernaux's life-writing project in *La Place*, and runs counter to some of the developments that had taken place in the diary publications' (213). Even in her more personal texts, Ernaux has always aimed at presenting her life as 'extremely generizable' (213) and of course her diaries put this ambition to the test as, by definition, a diary is what is not 'generizable'. This is the reason why Ferguson's analysis of their 'supplementary relation' (214) to the rest of her work proves to be one of the most rewarding aspects of reading *Diaries Real and Fictional in Twentieth-Century French Writing* as this is where the author can best display his skill at using close reading to establish semantic networks that connect to the rest of the work and, even more importantly, to theoretical issues that any researcher working on life-writing or on contemporary fiction (that mimics life-writing) will find useful.

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NOTE

- 1 Translations from French texts are my own.