

Autobiographical novel

Françoise Simonet-Tenant

Sam Ferguson (trad.)

The autobiographical novel, which is one of the possible combinations of the novel and autobiography, has aroused considerable misgivings among critics : in Henri Godard's view, it is "a parasitic and inconsistent notion [...] that we would like to see disappear from the critical vocabulary" (*Poétique de Céline* [*Céline's Poetics*], 1985), while according to Jacques Lecarme it is "a scourge of critical discourse whose imminent extinction we can now hope to bring about" (*L'Autobiographie* [*Autobiography*], 1997). The ambiguity of this category, the result of such an incongruous pairing, goes some way to explaining its disgrace. It will be useful to try to distinguish it from its neighbouring forms in order to better define the nature of the autobiographical novel. In autobiography (for example, Rousseau's *Confessions*), the author makes a pact with the reader that amounts to saying to the reader : "I am talking about myself". In fictional autobiography or memoirs (Marivaux's *La Vie de Marianne* [*The Life of Marianne*]), the author subscribes to a fictional framework and suggests to the reader : "It is not about me, but I am acting as if it were about me". In the autobiographical novel (such as Vallès's *L'Enfant* [*The Child*]), the author makes an ambiguous statement to the reader : "It may be about me, but that it is not certain".

Genealogy

In order to better understand this problematic form, it is necessary to situate it in literary history. At the risk of diluting the category and succumbing to the illusion of hindsight, Vincent Colonna (*Autofiction et autres mythomanies littéraires* [*Autofiction and Other Literary Mythomanias*], 2004) believes that we can identify texts that are forerunners of the autobiographical novel in late antiquity (Lucian of Samosata's *The Dream*)

and the medieval period (Dante's *Vita Nova*). Most critics agree that the beginnings of the autobiographical novel can be traced back to the end of the eighteenth century or the very beginning of the nineteenth century, in an atmosphere marked by Wertherism and Rousseauism. Jacques Voisine argues that the autobiographical novel emerged from the disintegration of the epistolary novel, a transition that is manifest in Ugo Foscolo's *Ultime Lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (1798), "one of the most astonishing specimens of autobiographical literature, and its uncertainties, of the time"; for Thibaudet, Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* [*The New Héloïse*] constitutes the paradigm of the autobiographical novel; for Gasparini, Chateaubriand's *René*. The beginnings of Romanticism and a century associated with the consecration and heroism of the writer thus appear to provide a favourable ground for the flourishing of the autobiographical novel : this new genre abandons the twists and turns of an eventful plot, which had made up the essential material of the picaresque novel, in favour of the tumults of a soul baring itself in a disguised confession. Sainte-Beuve played a significant role in the recognition of this generic category, with his enthusiasm for Senancour's *Oberman* and the creation of the term the "roman intime" [intimate novel] (1832)[1]. *Oberman* (1804), *René* (1805), *Adolphe* (1816), *Émile* (1827), *Volupté* (1834), *La Confession d'un enfant du siècle* [*A Modern Man's Confession*] (1834), *Novembre* (1842), *Raphaël* (1849), and *Dominique* (1862) are all examples of oblique and disguised confessions in which Senancour, Chateaubriand, Constant, Girardin, Sainte-Beuve, Musset, Flaubert, Lamartine, and Fromentin go in search of their own identity through characters who are copies and projections of themselves. The expression "autobiographical novel" appears in the *Dictionnaire universel des littératures* of 1876. It is notable, however, that this ambiguous, heterogeneous literary category, whose most certain characteristic is its generic uncertainty, was barely theorised by those who practised it. The Realist and Naturalist movements adopted this model and generic category, while adding more romanesque elements and eventful plots (*Le Petit Chose* [*Little Good-For-Nothing*] by Alphonse Daudet, 1867), or more irony (Vallès's trilogy and Jules Renard's *Poil de Carotte* [*Carrot Top*], 1894). In 1906 Joachim Merlant wrote a thesis on the "Roman personnel, de Rousseau à Fromentin", using the terms "roman personnel" [personal novel] and "roman autobiographique" [autobiographical novel] without any distinction. The term gradually fell from favour, first being viewed with suspicion owing to its association with a positivist biographical approach, and then becoming obsolete at the time of the rise of structuralism and the death of the author. This fall from favour of the term itself does not mean that no more autobiographical novels were written in the second half of the twentieth century or the early years of the twenty-first century : *Jules et Jim* (1953) by Henri-Pierre Roché, *Le Bouquet de*

1. Translator's note : The sense of "intime" in "roman intime" is closely connected to the "journal intime" (the diary) and its connotations of privacy and psychological interiority. The latter form was also favoured by Sainte-Beuve (see, for example, the *Vie, poésies et pensées de Joseph Delorme*, 1829).

roses rouges (1935) by Isabelle Rivière – a transparent transposition, sometimes clumsily executed, of the author's relationship with her brother, Alain-Fournier, and her husband, Jacques Rivière – *Les Armoires vides* [*Cleaned Out*] (1974) by Annie Ernaux, *Saison violente* (1974) by Emmanuel Roblès, *La Vacation* (1985) by Martin Winckler, *Franz et François* (1997) by François Weyerganz, and *Les Pays* (2012) by Marie-Hélène Lafon are a few examples, among others, of autobiographical novels.

Definitions

The autobiographical novel is Philippe Lejeune's point of comparison when he explains the origin of his long-running exploration of autobiography : "All my analysis started from this obvious question : how can we distinguish between autobiography and the autobiographical novel ?" (*Moi aussi* [*Me Too*], 1986). He shows in *Le Pacte autobiographique* [*The Autobiographical Pact*] that the essential criterion distinguishing autobiography is onomastic identity (between author, narrator, and character), a criterion that is not present in the autobiographical novel. Nevertheless, it can be observed that in a way he removes this slippery category from the equation, subsuming it in the concept of the "autobiographical space", a term that was first inspired by Lejeune's analysis of the works of Gide. The autobiographical space is a vast echo chamber in which the author cultivates his taste for ambiguity, a complex architecture in which lyrical, fictional, essayistic, and autobiographical texts resonate with each other, and a progressive construction of the self-image takes place in the interrelations between the texts : within this space one can decide whether a novel is autobiographical by considering it in relation to the rest of the work and in its intratextual context.

More than forty years after the publication of *Le Pacte autobiographique*, it remains difficult to give a unified definition of such a fragile and polymorphous category. No doubt we can agree on the fact that the autobiographical novel is a fictional text, a transposed confession that may be either homodiegetic (Colette's *La Vagabonde*, 1910) or heterodiegetic (Irène Némirovsky's *Le Vin de solitude* [*The Wine of Solitude*], 1935), and which provokes a hypothesis in the reader's mind – isn't the text really about the life of the author ? – while the text itself does not provide the means to confirm this hypothesis. The author intentionally plays hide and seek with the reader, not wishing, for various reasons, to assume the identity of author-narrator-character, and thereby exciting the voyeurism of the reader, who becomes a sleuth. The autobiographical novel can make use of the devices of the novel, in particular the use of dialogue, which is generally scarce in autobiography but sometimes abundant in the autobiographical novel. Finally, the category of the autobiographical novel is a spectrum ranging from an accurate and recognisable transposition of its model to a heavily disguised and oblique confession.

It fell to Philippe Gasparini, at the moment of the rise of autofiction, to bring the concept of the autobiographical novel back to the fore, in *Est-il je ? Roman autobiographique et autofiction* [*Is he I ? Autobiographical Novel and Autofiction*] (2004), an essay that, despite its title, is primarily concerned with the autobiographical novel. While a certain modernity with a short memory is in thrall to autofiction, which seems to have emerged from nowhere, Gasparini's essay provides a useful reminder that the relationship between the novel and autobiography was called into question long before the era of autofiction. He establishes that the autobiographical novel and autofiction are related subgenres : "the autobiographical belongs to the category of the [...] 'vraisemblable naturel' [naturally plausible]. It is imperative that the autobiographical novel convince the reader that everything could logically have taken place in this way. Otherwise, it falls into another genre that mixes the plausible and the implausible, that is, autofiction." To the extent that the category of autofiction is marked both by its vagueness and its vampiric nature, this distinction may leave the reader sceptical. Perhaps Yves Baudelle's attempt to distinguish between autofiction and the rehabilitated autobiographical novel is more convincing : "My remarks will focus less on the intrusion of the fictional into the biographical, which is now very well documented, than on the opposite process : the intrusion of the biographical into fiction. Faced with the present hegemony (at least in academic discourse) of autofiction, a genre that is exemplary of the drift from biography to fiction, I shall therefore endeavour to rehabilitate the symmetrical notion of the autobiographical novel, a notion of which which some have recently attempted to deny all relevance." Taking up the classic question of the distinction between related subgenres – autobiography, autofiction, and the autobiographical novel – he observes that "in autofiction, everything can be false except the name of the principal character. In the autobiographical novel, on the contrary, everything can be true except the names. The supreme law of the autobiographical novel is to change the names (but if only the names have been changed, it is a mere 'roman à clés')." Yves Baudelle's position could be usefully supported by the contribution of genetic criticism, which allows us to measure precisely, in certain novels, the role and degree of empirical data that have been transposed. The autobiographical novel, a category that is certainly out of fashion, is probably no less fragile and no less functional than its neighbouring category with an aura of modernity, that of autofiction.

Bibliography

Baudelle Yves, "Du roman autobiographique : Problèmes de la transposition fictionnelle," *Protée*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2003, pp. 7–26 (en ligne : https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/pr/2003-v31-n1-pr747/008498ar/ ; consulté le July 9th, 2024).

Gasparini Philippe, *Est-il je ? Roman autobiographique et autofiction*, Paris, Seuil, 2004.

Thibaudet Albert, "Les deux écoles," in *Réflexions sur la littérature*, Paris, Gallimard, 2007, pp. 1259–1263.

Voisine Jacques, *Au tournant des Lumières (1760-1820) et autres études*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2010.

Pour citer cet article :
Françoise Simonet-Tenant, « Autobiographical novel », trad. Sam Ferguson de l'article « Roman autobiographique » (*Dictionnaire de l'autobiographie*, dir. F. Simonet-Tenant avec la collab. de M. Braud, J.-L. Jeannelle, P. Lejeune et V. Montémont, Paris, Champion, 2017, p. 696-699), dans *EcriSoi*, « Dictionnaire en ligne », 2021, URL : https://ecrisoi.univ-rouen.fr/bibliotheques/dictionnaires/668d2f75499d390012456e57, page consultée le 2 novembre 2026.