

Memoirs

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In his *Dictionnaire universel des littératures* [*Universal Dictionary of Literature*] published in 1876, Gustave Vapereau defined memoirs as a "kind of historical composition with the aim of relating events in which the narrator – a statesman, soldier, writer, artist – was involved", adding that, although among modern writers they are henceforth "indispensable for the study of history", there are also "genuine memoirs" that were produced under the various names of "commentaries", "confessions", "confidences", and "autobiographies". The entry that Vapereau devoted to autobiography confirms this view : here we learn that "as autobiography becomes precise and complete, it takes on the forms of confessions or memoirs". More than a century later, we find an entry on "Memoirs" in another book, the present work, entitled *Dictionnaire de l'autobiographie : Écritures de soi en langue française* [*Dictionary of Autobiography : Self-Writings in French*]. Having formerly constituted a veritable archigenre of self-narratives, memoirs must now find themselves a place within the field of intimate writings, which is dominated by autobiographical writing : it is this reversal that we must now account for.

Memoirs are not a genre whose legacy from centuries of practice would suffice to guarantee its durability, but rather a model of composition that varies from one period to the next depending, on the one hand, on the categories and formal practices in use, and on the other hand, on changes in the two principal domains in which it is used : history and the range of first-person narratives. From the outset, its birth, which tends to be identified with the *Mémoires* [*Memoirs*] of Philippe de Commynes, actually covers a whole collection of procedures, most notably editorial ones. Initially, in 1524, it was entitled *Cronique et hystoire faicte et composee par feu messire Phelippe de Commines* [*Chronicle and History Made and Composed by the Late Phelippe de Commines*] by Galliot du Pré, and this was continued by his successors. The work of this "father" or "godfather"

of the genre was only given the title *Mémoires* by Sauvage in his authoritative edition of 1552. However, if the model of composition was born at the end of the fifteenth century from the narratives of Olivier de la Marche, Jean de Roye, or Philippe de Commynes, the identification and recognition of the genre largely took place only retrospectively. The term was then applied to a certain type of narrative, distinguished, on one side, from a vast body of documents of an administrative, legal, commercial, or scholarly nature, and on the other side, from widespread writing practices (*livres de raison*, diaries, confessions, essays), from which they differed mainly in their historiographic ambition and through an exceptional emphasis on promotion – from initially being kept for close acquaintances or individual addressees, memoirs came to be gathered and disseminated (often at the cost of making certain alterations to the text) with the aim of defending the memory of their author, and by extension, also the memory of the the social group to which he was connected. As narratives granting more or less direct access to the corridors of power, and especially when they are closely concerned with the functioning of the state, memoirs transform writing itself, as a narrative recomposition of the past followed by a process of publication, into an act of power.

The genre's emergence is, moreover, inseparable from the authority wielded by history at the centre of literary genres in France. This prestigious elder, a lofty ideal which could never be matched by the texts published in the wake of the work *De Rebus gestis Francorum* by Paulus Aemilius Veronensis, certainly overshadowed the writings of individual citizens, but also paradoxically created a clearly defined space for them. Memoirs were able to occupy the space that was left empty by the noble genre of history, and seemed to form what Pierre Le Moyne described in 1670 as an illustrious "library" where "we would find only Princes and Dukes of Paris, Marshals of France, army generals, all dressed in fine bindings and arrayed on ivory shelves". The self-conscious humility of these historians writing without warrant or the authority of a discipline became their greatest strength. Like Philippe de Commynes, who boasted to the Archbishop of Vienne (in Dauphiné) of his "sweet and pleasant language", memorialists made a virtue of their "naive simplicity", thanks to which "the good faith of the author shines through". By presenting their work as a mere raw material for future historians, they promoted the model of a "*vera et pura narratio*" ["true and pure narrative"], which made use of the psychological and moral resources ordinarily employed by works of history. In this way they transformed the formal inferiority of their writings into the guarantee of their credibility, thereby satisfying a new fashion for the truthful and unembellished evocation of past events.

The extraordinary persistence of memoirs over the centuries can be explained by this ambivalence, which certainly makes them more difficult to define, but also more flexible and able to adapt to different times. Because they developed at the margins of

the historical genre, without the constraints that govern scholarly discourse, memoirs are divided between two roles, focusing both on the information that is provided and on the person who was its author – in the double sense of the person acting in the world and the narrator of the text, just as Blaise de Monluc refers to Julius Caesar "writing down at night what he had carried out in the day". Nonetheless, the model of "Memoirs of" gradually overcame that of "Memoirs on", and favoured the role of the genre as an apology. This resulted in a second ambivalence, which is again characteristic of the genre. Unlike in other self-narratives, the prior authority of the memorialist, whether social, political, or military, takes precedence over his authorship (his act of writing). This allows a certain latitude in the identity of the signatory : the memorialist might therefore be no more than the privileged witness of an illustrious figure (such as M^{me} de Motteville, first chamber maid to Anne of Austria) without the work necessarily becoming biography. In the same way, since the genre did not require the recognised author to be the same person as the actual writer, it also easily lent itself to a logic of manufacturing and could be produced by a team of secretaries (such as in the case of Richelieu's *Mémoires*) or by professional writers whose involvement remained hidden, without this use of a ghostwriter undermining the status of the text's subject as its signatory. Such a great flexibility in its execution inevitably led to the genre spilling over into fiction, to the extent that, in certain periods, the history of the genre became confused with that of the novel, through the contrary forces of counterfeit and demarcation, particularly in the 1730s-1760s (when the memoir-novels of Marivaux and Prévost triumphed), then under the Restoration and the July Monarchy, when some publishers such as Louis Mame or Pierre-François Lavocat specialised in the mass production of pseudo-memoirs (falsely attributed to a historical person) or apocryphal memoirs (attributed to a fictional character). All these developments threatened the genre's referential and historiographical ambition, but they also demonstrate its extreme resistance to being subjected to "formal mimesis" (Michał Głowiński).

The Romantic generation brought memoirs to the pinnacle of their success (Chateaubriand entitled a chapter of his *Génie du christianisme* [*The Genius of Christianity*], "Why the French Write Only Memoirs"), and the genre then became established in the form by which we now recognise it, following a series of critical operations, especially regarding their classification, since publishers, historians, and bibliographers adopted the term to accommodate huge series of texts. After Furetière, who defined memoirs as "books of History, written by those who played a part in the events, or were eye witnesses to them, or containing their life or their principal actions", Pierre Larousse gave the term its full semantic breadth in the *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX^{e} siècle* [*Great Universal Dictionary of the Nineteenth Century*], distinguishing memoirs "in which one discusses" from memoirs "in which one narrates" – he particularly favoured historical or

biographical works (to the detriment of the lives of private citizens), on the grounds that they have a distinctively French character. The creation of huge collections of memoirs at the end of the Restoration and during the first years of the July Monarchy (Petitot and Monmerqué's *Collection complète des Mémoires relatifs à l'histoire de France* [*The Complete Collection of Memoirs Relating to the History of France*] and Michaud and Poujoulat's *Nouvelle collection des Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de France depuis le XIII^e^ siècle jusqu'à la fin du XVIII^e^* [*The New collection of Memoirs Relating to the History of France from the Thirteenth Century to the End of the Eighteenth*]), but also huge bibliographical projects gathering the available documentary resources, all supported the nationalisation of the genre that was being undertaken by Chateaubriand, Augustin Thierry, Jules Michelet, and Gustave Lanson, who applauded the natural disposition of the French, as a "sociable and talkative race", for the writing of memoirs. To crown it all, the publication of studies by Charles Caboche (*Les Mémoires et l'histoire de France* [*Memoirs and the History of France*]) and Edmond Biré (*Mémoires et Souvenirs* [*Memoirs and Recollections*]) conferred on memoirs an exceptional prestige because of their ability to combine a historiographic project with literary prestige.

But the critical issue is, of course, the dialectic that joins the genre of memoirs with the emerging genre of autobiography – in practice at least, since the term "autobiography" would only gradually become established in the classification of genres starting from the late nineteenth century. The difficulty is in interpreting such a dialectic : should we consider that a slow and inexorable process of interiorisation, taking place within self-narratives because of different factors (the emergence of a morality of individual responsibility, practices of religious introspection, a growing interest in psychological analysis…), gradually devalued memoirs in favour of autobiography, or should we situate autobiography in the continuity of memoirs, of which it would be a relatively recent outgrowth, developing as one more modality of self-narration ? In the former case, we might be tempted to perceive in the memoirs of Classical centuries traces of what Frédéric Briot has called "egotropism" (since, in speaking of others, the memorialist also speaks of himself, envisages extensions of his existence, and sketches possible destinies), yet we would then be condemning the genre to live on only in a fixed and somewhat anachronistic form after the emergence of autobiography. In the second case, we are forced to delimit the fields of practice of the two models, an undertaking that was begun in 1833 in the *Encyclopédie des gens du monde* [*Encyclopaedia of the People of the World*] (in which the memorialist is not 'required to give an account of what happens within his soul' since he "writes a commentary on the events at hand", while autobiography ""writes the novel of the heart") and which has continued relentlessly. It may be appropriate, then, to reverse the question and, rather than seeking the origins of autobiography in memoirs as if the history of self-narratives were an evolutionary process in

which one model succeeds another following a logic of progress, to consider instead the particular resources of the genre, which are not related to a gesture of introspection but to the reconstitution of a vast process of socialisation, and to the assessment of different "life plans" (Paul Ricœur), the various practical, social, or political unities that structure our existence. In this respect, the narrative of memoirs appears to be a "struggle for recognition", in which the subject is himself only with, among, or against others. He is the agent and person responsible for his actions, finding in lived events the means of self-preservation.

This point explains why the genre did not disappear in the twentieth century, even though its existence was dangerously threatened during the Third Republic under the effect of a double reorganisation : on the one hand, after 1870, a reorganisation of the historiographical discipline, which henceforth privileged "documents" that would then be subjected to the manipulations of the historian, to the detriment of the "monuments" bequeathed by the actors of history, who were concerned above all for their posterity ; and on the other hand, a reorganisation of first-person writings, favouring autobiography and testimony, which were more in keeping with the democratisation of contemporary societies and the documentary interest in ordinary life. The result was a crisis of "the memorable" (as a set of resources allowing a narrated life to be viewed as exemplary), whose consequences for the genre of memoirs lasted throughout the first half of the twentieth century. However, the Second World War and the two wars of decolonisation that followed, dividing once again members of the national community, restored an important role for narratives in which *an individual gives an account of himself in his historical condition, aiming less at self-knowledge than at the agreement of his contemporaries or his successors concerning the historical representativity and the moral rectitude of the course of his life.* By superimposing the course of their lives on the fractures suffered by the community under the threat of civil war, these works, in which the darkest years occupy a central place, attempt to give meaning to events experienced in common.

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