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## Under Scrutiny: Blueprints for Self-Writing

Claudine Raynaud

*English, François-Rabelais, Tours*

**Philippe Lejeune, *Pour l'autobiographie*. Paris: Seuil, 1998. 427 pp.**

**Philippe Lejeune, *Les brouillons de soi*. Paris: Seuil, 1998. 227 pp.**

These two books are collections of articles by Philippe Lejeune, who started his scholarly career with *L'autobiographie en France* (1971) and is internationally known for the groundbreaking theoretical work *Le pacte autobiographique* (1975). Each book follows a different path while expanding the field of the current work on autobiographical writing and indicating directions for future research. Whereas *Les brouillons de soi* [Drafts of self] investigates how autobiographical writing ramifies when the text does not offer the definitive version (of the self or of the text), *Pour l'autobiographie* [In defense of autobiography] is a veritable manifesto. Surprisingly to anglophone readers, autobiographical practices are still under siege as they were half a century ago, accused of verging on the pathological, of lacking the necessary requirements to be considered as art. Autobiography is a resisting genre, a site of resistance, even if it is gradually being accepted. Lejeune surveys and assesses his own research, from the mixed import of structuralism and existentialism to Paul Ricœur's impact. He finally concentrates on the diary, the last genre to remain unwanted in the canon of belles lettres, the final bastion.

From the backstage of autobiographical practice, *Drafts of Self* examines the distance between the various drafts of an autobiographical text and the

final version. The first three chapters scrutinize autobiographies that stage their own production. This investigation starts with the notion of “autobiocopy,” or how much an autobiographer can copy from another text, beyond intertextuality and with the notebook of personal quotations as the limit of that borrowing practice. It then traces the problematics of childhood narratives and of the musings of the self over what could have happened if. . . . It ponders the consequences of how one constructs a “turning point” in one’s life story. Suspicion is sincerity’s sister. The staging of doubt in childhood narratives (under the aegis of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Stendhal, and Freud) has already led to the analysis of Georges Perec’s “*W ou le souvenir d’enfance*” (in *La mémoire et l’oblique* [1991]) and Nathalie Sarraute’s *Enfance*, to which are here added Mary McCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957) and Guy Bechtel’s *Mensonges d’enfance* (1986). The following section concentrates on a visit paid to writing workshops and the questions it provokes. What happens when one is asked to write one’s life, as in the handbooks for autobiography that proliferate in Anglo-Saxon countries? Is self-writing compatible with constraints, defined as “rules for textual production”? Lejeune draws upon the literary example of Perec’s *Lieux* and on the soft constraints Michel Leiris created as a writing ritual for *La règle du jeu*.

With the detailed study of these blurred textual selves behind him, Lejeune boldly enters the archaeological sites of three major contemporary works. He first verifies the hypothesis made in 1975 about the structures and breaks of Sartre’s childhood text, *Les mots* (1963), through a comprehensive analysis of the drafts, including a 1954 notebook recently found. This section of the book forms his contribution to the collective work conducted by the Sartre team at the Institut des Textes et Manuscrits Modernes (ITEM-CNRS), a long genetic study just crowned by the completion of *Why and How Sartre Wrote Words* (1996) under the direction of Michel Conat. Next comes a study of Sarraute’s *Enfance*, focused on drafts of chapter two, which the author lent Lejeune. Since *Enfance* stages its own genesis, the critic thus is able to compare the actual genesis of the work with the fictional genesis as it appears in the published text. The third and last site surveyed, that of the personal diary, is both extremely different and problematic. The diary is not a draft and has no draft, yet no diary has been published without being altered. (The question remains open in the domain of English studies.)

In a careful inquiry into the production of Anne Frank’s *Diary*, rewritten first by herself and then by her father, Lejeune convincingly demonstrates that Otto Frank did not, as reported, much delete and censor his daughter’s work but rather established a version of the diary in keeping with Anne’s first revisions. Since the beginning of this study, a new version, which has

created a new text, has become available. The diary's intolerable incompleteness generates one version after another, all incomplete.

This theoretical investigation into personal writing, which Lejeune's other works *Cher Cahier . . .* (1989) and *Le moi des demoiselles* (1993) inaugurated, now leads him into two directions. First, the unpublished diary of a young adolescent, Claire (1970), gives him the opportunity to analyze the elements other than text that enter into the composition of a scrapbook, such as letters, photographs, poems, and texts written by her girlfriends. The last chapter examines the first lines of famous diaries, those of Stendhal, Benjamin Constant, Maurice de Guérin, and Henri Frédéric Amiel. The constant shuttle between ordinary lives and the work of more famous writers is the hallmark of Lejeune's work. His all-embracing theoretical vision of the genre brings low and high varieties into a refreshing and creative dialogue.

Lejeune's analyses demonstrate how autobiographical and genetic studies reinforce each other in the exploration of self-writing. Textual genetics is Janus-faced: it has a theoretical and a practical side; it is both laboratory and workshop. Almuth Grésillon's *Éléments de critique génétique* (1994) and Contat and Daniel Ferrer's *Pourquoi la critique génétique?* (1998) offer a thorough survey of this critical approach. Lejeune, himself (and this comes as no surprise) a diarist, promises further studies beyond these beginnings, such as the close study of specific notebooks. He has already outlined analytical hypotheses on the endings of various diaries. The central theoretical essay here, entitled "Self-Genesis" and initially published in *Genesis* (1992), reminds the reader that genetic criticism was part and parcel of Lejeune's practice from the start. He alludes to a comparison between two versions of the Proustian "Madeleine" studied in 1971, which was followed by his further investigations into first drafts or *avant-textes* of works. The central task, when dealing with autobiography, would be to isolate generic characteristics for the study of literary creation.

Genetic analysis is a continuation of the autobiographical act itself. The study of beginnings, of alternative and concurrent manuscripts, makes it possible to rethink and refine complex theoretical questions of the autobiographical field. First, since autobiographical writing deals with the life history of its author, the writing of the autobiography belongs to that history. Moreover an autobiographical text aims at representing the truth of its past. Its contract—a crucial concept in the definition of the autobiographical act—implies the possibility and the legitimacy of verification. External data offer one way of authenticating the image of the past, but when it comes to subjective elements, a comparison between the published text and previous drafts enables an assessment of additions, omissions, and trans-

formations. Alternatively, an autobiographer can become his or her own “geneticist.” In the process the workings of memory are laid bare: memory sorts out, alters. One should, however, quickly abandon the red herring of the truth of the self for the construction of a narrative identity.

In the case of writers, autobiographical texts are often “secondary,” and their study means operating within an “inter-genetic” space. One may thus compare the work’s process and progress (different phases, initial project(s), final version(s), rewriting practices) with preceding works. To generic specificity must be added the generic question of why and how a writer is led to innovate. Genetic criticism first entails the time-consuming task of drawing up a precise inventory of drafts and manuscripts. Once the genetic file has been established, study proper can begin, be it a theoretical inquiry into autobiographical writing, an analysis of the workings of memory, or again the testing of a hypothesis. To develop this research, Lejeune suggested the creation of the team Genesis and Autobiography (1994) within ITEM, where researchers compare and contrast all types of autobiographical writing from the perspective of genetic criticism. His further suggestion is that these scholars confront their findings with the practices of the members of writing workshops.

*In Defense of Autobiography*, or more literally *For Autobiography*, retraces Lejeune’s commitment to the genre since the foundation of the Association for Autobiography (APA) in 1991. The idea of contemporary autobiographical archives was realized with the creation of a multimedia library La Grenette in Ambérieu-en-Bugey (Ain), where writers of personal life stories (autobiographies, diaries, letters) can deposit their works. The association organizes a yearly conference and has elected a reading committee that both advises authors and reflects on autobiographical practices by drawing up files for the documents it archives. La Grenette, an old village granary converted into a “memory keeper” (*Garde-mémoire* is the name of the library’s journal), constitutes a living testimony to contemporary personal writing. As a counterpoint to this French venture and to the association Vivre et l’écrire in Orléans, Lejeune reports his visit to the Italian “village of the diary,” Pieve S. Stefano, an analogous effort to help preserve autobiographical works on the other side of the Alps. The following section addresses the issue of the relationship between autobiography and the law, as manifested in the writing of one’s will, libel, plagiarism, the legal opposition between private and public life, and the notion of discretionary duty. This section is a reminder that private diaries are used in courts of law as evidence. (So much for the temptation to dream of all-fictional selves in a postmodern world.) These studies are all reproduced from the APA journal, *La faute à Rousseau*. In the last part of the collection, reading the works of others

(diaries of unknown young women, sociological surveys of personal writing, Perec, Stendhal, Leiris, Bourdieu), listening to a collection of women's oral histories, and writing about all kinds of autobiographical occasions, like the snapshot, Lejeune shows how his indefatigable scholarly practice is doubled by a writer's joy. Students and writers of autobiography should be thankful to Rousseau, whose "fault" can bring us to envision a culture of autobiography.