Life Writing in Europe
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A Plea for a Guide to Autobiographical Europe

Here we are back in Europe. I would like to thank Monica Soeting and Alfred Hornung for taking the initiative and doing all the hard work involved in organizing this meeting. The International Auto/Biography Association was founded ten years ago in Beijing in a very positive intention to achieve globalization through exchanges of information, comparisons of different points of view, building personal relationships between specialists in personal literature and organizing the international research community around a subject broadly defined by the English terms Life Writing or Auto/Biography. That conference, which traced the outlines of a global association, was at the same time a paradoxical meeting between two countries that could not be more different: the United States, where the study and practice of autobiography are developed intensively, and China, where the "self" as a concept is far from popular and which has a tradition focused on biography. In the ten years since then, the fact that English is used almost exclusively and the cost of traveling to often distant countries have meant that European researchers have rarely participated in the IABA's biennial meetings or used its listserv. Now we are meeting here to get to know one another better and to create something in our turn. Who are we? From what country, what discipline? What do we know about one another? In fact, apart from our own work, what do we know about what others are doing – or not doing – in this field in our own countries?

I would like to begin by telling you about two experiences.

I was very impressed a few years ago by the work being done by Anna Iuso, an Italian anthropologist who wrote her thesis on European practices in autobiographical archives and published an overview in the journal *Genesis* under the title "Autobiographical Europe." She travelled from Finland to Poland and then to England, Germany, Austria, Italy and France, following the trail of archival collections. This research, at once geographical and historical, should absolutely be continued, but on a different foundation and with a broader scope. The first change would be to have a native informant in each country. The second would be to observe not only a very specific practice – archival collection (even though it is very dear to our hearts) – but the whole of what could be called a country's "autobiographical culture." The third change would be to make this collective inquiry permanent through a network of regularly updated databases or websites in each country, along the lines of my "Autopacte" site. I will come back to these various points – the idea being to gain a better understanding of one another as a basis for future common activity.

The second experience was acting as a spokesman for a group of European autobiographical archives. In November 2003, I travelled to Brussels in that capacity to inform the Commission on Culture of the European Parliament about our work. This was a learning experience and a disappointment: we were given a rather inattentive hearing.

I have drawn two conclusions from that experience: the first is that we must rely on no one but ourselves and that the only way to show we can do it is just by doing it. I had the same experience in France in the 90s, just before founding the *Association pour l'Autobiographie* (APA): I naively went about alerting Government officials at the highest levels to the importance of my project, and everyone spoke very kindly to me and showed me the door. It is up to us to take the first step with the resources we have. Seeking State funding takes too much time and energy and you run the risk of being side-tracked from your goal, although we have seen from the Belgian, German, Italian and Spanish *Eurobiographia* project (the Grundtvig-2 adult education programme) that it can be done. This collective volume in four languages brings together autobiographical accounts reflecting "people's personal feelings on and experiences of Europe." This project, which is interesting from many points of view,

shows in particular that it is possible to publish a collective anthology without using English.

The second conclusion from my venture in 2003 also has to do with languages. As I spoke in French, I was translated simultaneously into some fifteen languages from the interpretation booths overlooking the circular meeting room. We will never have facilities like those. But the large number of languages we use is an advantage as well as a disadvantage, especially in the area of autobiography. Our language is the foundation of our identity; it is the bearer of a particular history and culture, and it would be a shame for us to make everything uniform by using a foreign language, and always the same language, impoverished by our clumsiness.

One last question, before we get to the programme for this "Guide": what are the limits of this "Europe" that brings us together here? Thank heavens, we don't have to draw any borders to include or exclude. A European is anyone who feels that the term applies to them. We remember, of course, that when it comes to autobiography, Europe is based on two traditions: the Greco-Latin tradition and the Judeo-Christian tradition, the one that Georges Gusdorf, in his ground-breaking 1956 article, called the "Western" tradition, which is fundamentally different from other national or religious traditions, that have quite different notions of the self and how it is expressed (in Japan, China, Buddhism or Islam, for example). But we should also remember that this Western vision, which came from the Near East and the Mediterranean region, began spreading throughout the New World during the Renaissance and, owing to globalization, is now colonizing the entire world: the self is a predator like any other. But this vision has also evolved over time and it has its nuances: it is not the same thing to belong to the Catholic tradition, or the Lutheran or Calvinist or Greek Orthodox or Jewish tradition. Our Europe now tends to be identified with the European Union, but we know that its geometry is variable: at its core, in the economic sphere, it is made up of a more restricted "euro" zone. It is up to us to build up a broader "ego" zone around that, in the cultural sphere.

The descriptive "guide" that I have in mind for each country or linguistic zone in Europe would have three chapters.

First, an inventory should be made of all the research groups working on autobiography in each discipline. That would seem quite straightforward, but experience has shown that it is harder to cross the borders between disciplines than between countries. It has actually happened to me that I have introduced two experts on autobiography from the same country to each other.

Autobiography is not in itself a discipline, but a practice that can be approached in very different ways. To state it simply, it can be a *source of information* (in history, human geography, sociology or ethnology), a *subject of study* (in psychology or literature), or a *tool* (in education or clinical sociology). Engaging in dialogue can be difficult: you think you are talking about the same thing, but suddenly nothing looks familiar any more! Rather than being a starting point for productive cooperation, this gap often creates a sense of unsettling strangeness.

Yet these experts in autobiography do have one thing in common that should unify them: within their own disciplines, they are often challenged and marginalized. Oral history was severely criticized by the supporters of written sources; quantitative sociology is hostile toward qualitative sociology; in literature, autobiography was long considered a secondary field. As autobiography is individual and subjective and claims to speak the truth, it creates a sense of unease among those who, quite properly, see science as something general and objective. Not only is autobiography unserious, but it is also uncomfortable because it refers the researcher back to himself. But, generally speaking, those who specialize in autobiography in each discipline are less inclined to seek connections with specialists from other disciplines in their own countries than with their own counterparts in other countries. That is why there are powerful international networks (not just European) that do something similar to what we are doing here today: an International Oral History Association has existed for years (it holds its congress every two years; next year it will be in Prague); in qualitative sociology, there is Euroqual (Qualitative Research in the Social Sciences in Europe – I attended its congress in Madrid last month), as well as the *Association Internationale des Histoires de vie en formation* (the ASIHVIF, or International Association of Life Histories in Adult Education); and finally, very recently, French historians of the "private self" took the initiative, together with other European groups, to propose to

the European Science Foundation a four-year programme entitled “First Person Writings in European Context”. As I read our programme, it seemed to me that the vast majority of us here were specialists in literary or cultural studies, so we won’t have much trouble understanding one another. But just as we represent only a part of Europe, we also represent only a part of the disciplines that are interested in autobiography.

All of that is to say that it’s not easy for an expert on autobiography to describe the status of research in his country for disciplines other than his own. I have to admit that I am not familiar with research in sociology, education or psychoanalysis in France, even though I have participated in conferences organized by those various disciplines. Even in the area of literary or cultural studies, am I really up to date on the latest research on travel writing, for example, or on memoirs from the classical period? And on the other hand, we have a tendency to overvalue our own field of research. But the hope would be that creating this inventory would make everyone aware of the specific and original research being done in each country, or the strong points in each of the classical fields. That can only be done through comparison. I have tried to identify these strong points for France, in the literary area that I am familiar with: for example, the existence of a group of researchers on literary genetics, or an association for the study of epistolary writing; or, although this is not strictly speaking a group, a strong convergence of theoretical studies around the “diary” form, or on the “Memoir” genre; or even polemics, colloquiums and books on the border between autobiography and fiction, around the portmanteau word “autofiction” invented by Serge Doubrovsky (the French variant of a much broader debate). There are also many weak points, and they too will stand out better by comparison with the strong points of other countries. What is the current state, in France, of gender studies or postcolonial studies? Or research on ordinary writing?

Thinking about strong points and weak points, about obsessions and oblivions, brings me to the second chapter of the guide: this would be the chapter containing a primary and secondary bibliography in each language. By primary bibliography, I mean autobiographical texts themselves, both published and unpublished, while the secondary bibliography would be a bibliography of critical studies. I admit that I have

a fondness for complete lists. With "selected" bibliographies, one never knows whether they are really the outcome of a selection or whether they are a cover for ignorance. Since I began working on diaries, I have been trying to compile a list of all of the diaries published in French since 1997 and all of the critical literature in French on the diary since 1938. These two lists, which are kept up to date, can be found online on the "Autopacte" site.

Some might say that there is no point in keeping these "complete" lists – that is, lists that are an attempt at comprehensiveness. But they do serve at least two purposes: they show us how selected lists are built, and they allow researchers to find things they were not looking for. The limitation of that very useful "Search" function in a database is that you only find what you are searching for. My taste for inventories even prompted me to do a country-by-country inventory of "primary" inventories, which I also put on "Autopacte" online, but it may no longer be very up to date: it is difficult to work in languages that you don't speak yourself. There are two types of primary bibliographies: unpublished texts and published texts. In France, for example, the "First-Person Writing" group took the initiative to locate all of the unpublished first-person writings in national and regional archives, and that inventory changed my life as a researcher.

Indeed, I am currently working on a project based entirely on resources from inventories – let me say a few words about it before I get back to my subject. The purpose of my work is to study the origins of the practice of diary-keeping in France, which dates back to the eighteenth century: before now, all of the historical research on this topic was based on reading published diaries. But thanks to these new inventories, we are discovering a whole new world of diaries in the archives – intellectual, sexual, and pedagogical diaries, family diaries, secret diaries, obsessive diaries that no one had any idea existed, just as the telescope shows us that the "empty" areas of the sky are teeming with stars and galaxies.

These diaries also reveal the specificity of national cultures and how tightly sealed the borders between European cultures were during that period. At that time, French was used as a language of education in part of Europe, including for keeping

personal diaries, but the French themselves lagged a good hundred years behind the English and the Germans in their practice of keeping diaries. It is no use showing in bibliographies that the Swiss pastor Lavater published his spiritual journal in 1772: no one knew about it in France. This text, which was written in German, was not published in French translation until the mid-nineteenth century, in French-speaking Switzerland, and never in France. Equally surprising is to see that the magnificent *Anton Reiser* (1785) by Karl-Philip Moritz was translated into French for the first time in... 1986! I may be especially aware of these time-lags because English is the only foreign language I know and because in the past, I was taunted and discredited by Georges Gusdorf for not knowing German.

We all share the same tools of the trade and the same intellectual practices, but what do we know, all of us, about autobiographical texts published in European countries whose languages we don't speak? Most of the autobiographical texts of other countries remain unknown to us: that is what makes the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* so very useful, with its articles on the autobiographies in each country. But we should at least have a history and geography of translations, and we should ask ourselves about the reasons behind each translation and how it was received.

Translation was the subject of our association's last international conference, in Hawaii: the last but one issue of *Biography* is devoted to that topic. At that time, I began a small investigation, which should be continued, based on well-known French autobiographies, trying to see which ones had been translated into English, and when. I should have done the same survey for translations into all other European languages, but it was easier to work with the online catalogue of the Library of Congress. I started with the 164 autobiographies listed in the latest edition of my book *L'Autobiographie en France*. I was surprised to see that 79 of them, almost one-half, had been translated into English over the years, though for very different ideological, religious, historical and literary reasons. When I got to the contemporary period, I realized that some authors whose autobiographies had been best-sellers in French, such as Françoise Dolto, Cavanna, and Nourissier, did not seem to be exportable – they could only be consumed domestically. And I was amazed by the apparent injustices: why have almost all of Annie Ernaux's texts been translated into English, but none of Charles

Juliet's? But I will stop there, because it is quite possible that some of you may not recognize these names.

Translation is an even bigger issue for the secondary bibliography, the bibliography of critical texts, where translations are much less common. Do we read criticism in other languages? If we look at the notes and bibliographies of publications such as *Bios*, *Biography*, or *Epistolaire*, for example, we see that, quite naturally, everyone does most of their reading in their own language. I look at my own practice: in the beginning, I read many critical studies in English (you can see this if you look at the bibliography in *The Autobiographical Pact* or *Je est un autre* – where I even had the audacity, or the courtesy, to provide references for the major German and Spanish texts, which I had obviously not read), but after that I focused my energies on French as I tried to be exhaustive and multidisciplinary. For twenty years, I published ten volumes of a bibliography in hard copy – one every two years – which is now being continued on the Internet. I did this in the hope that someone would do the same work in every country in Europe. My print bibliography had two subject indexes that were supposed to make it easy to consult and make it compatible with other foreign bibliographies.

But, you may ask, what is the use of having references for studies that you can't read about texts that you can't read either? First of all, other people may know more languages than I do. Second of all, it's possible to imagine that European scholarly publications might eventually develop a practice of printing abstracts of each article in two or three languages. It would take just a few lines to see whether you are interested in the subject and whether it is worth finding a colleague who could give you more detail on the contents of the article. There is a great need for information everywhere. As I work on the "diary" form, I would like to know what is being written about it in German, Spanish, Greek, Swedish, Russian and other languages. Personal contacts, like the ones we are making here, can help with that. And this goes not only for publications but for all sorts of events. In July 2008, for example, I found out quite by accident that an exhibition on the personal diary had been taking place since March at the Post and Telecommunications Museum in Frankfurt. I was very interested in this, because with the APA, Catherine Bogaert and I had organized the first exhibition of

that kind in Lyons in 1997. The information had not circulated very widely. And what about you: did you know about the exhibition? Did you go to see it?

I will quickly go over the third part of the "guide to autobiography in Europe": this section would contain information on what constitutes a sort of "culture of autobiography" in each country of the linguistic zone under discussion.

Just one parenthesis, before I go on to the example of France. Each language has a different vocabulary to designate genres and to define the scope of each type of writing. The "archi-genre" we are concerned with is called "Life Writing" in English, "Diaro" in Italian, "Autobiographie" in French, etc. To reshape the practices of the past according to our present interests, words have been coined, and they differ (in meaning) from one country to another and from one discipline to another : "ego-documents" in Dutch, "Ecrits du for privé" in French. The word "memoir" in the singular baffles the French, because it covers so much , and they are also perplexed by the distinction between "journal" and "diary", etc. A small multilingual glossary would greatly facilitate mutual understanding.

So, for France, the third part of the guide would cover:

- associations of autobiographical archives ; what is special about the two French associations, "Vivre et écrire" ("Living and writing"), which collects texts and diaries by teenagers, and the *Association pour l'autobiographie* (APA or Association for Autobiography), is that they have direct links with the authors of texts and, for the APA, that the positions of reader and writer are "reversible".

- autobiographical competitions organized for pensioners of major administrative offices (such as the Ministry of Finance) or large corporations (the Post Office);

- the status of autobiography and the diary in the secondary school curriculum: from 2001 to 2007, autobiography was a required subject for all grade 12 students and it still is now for students in grade 10;

- workshops on autobiographical writing and "pedagogical" literature and life-writing guides; I have a collection that I hope is a complete one of this sort of guide in English and French, and I would like to know whether they exist elsewhere;

- the existence of two publishers specializing in autobiographical comics (the Association and *Ego comme X*);

- the existence of an excellent literary publication devoted entirely to autobiography – *Les Moments littéraires* – and on this subject, I would like to know whether autobiography has as bad a literary reputation in other countries as it does in France, or whether this contempt is a French specialty.

I could continue the list with autobiographical film, the "Salons du livre" devoted to Biography, the "*Nuits de la correspondance*" – and, for your part, I am sure you must be starting at this very moment to make a mental inventory of the autobiographical resources in your countries. I will leave you to dream of this and will end by saying that we will meet again in Strasbourg on June 11, 12 and 13 next year for the "*Journées de l'autobiographie*". Every year, the *Association pour l'Autobiographie* (APA) organizes a weekend in residence that is attended by 100 to 120 people, with workshops, shows, exhibits, round tables and talks – all focusing on one theme. In 2010, the theme will be "Europe and Autobiography". For us, Europe is first and foremost Europeans, meaning ... you and us. In Strasbourg, the "Apaists" (that's what we call ourselves) will be happy to meet people like you who have come from other countries to share their passion for autobiography. So I will see you again soon, and I thank you.

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