Lejeune and Foucault or: A name with no identity

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The term "autobiography" is a neologism of the eighteenth century in Europe and obviously preceded related terms like "confessions" or "memoirs." Even if Georg Misch is correct in defining autobiography etymologically as "the description (graphia) of life (bios) of one person by him- or herself (auto),"[1] the concept of autobiography emerged much later than its Greek origin suggests. It first appeared in England and Germany without any discernible connection, whereas in France it became known much later. The phenomenon of the autobiography is to this day temporally and territorially understood as a native phenomenon of European Enlightenment.[2]

If this is the case then, the word "native" is not quite the right word because since its first appearance, the concept of autobiography has been following different and sometimes even mutually contradicting ways, both in its praxis and its self-referential theoretical endeavors. Being that it was first a pietistic literature of confession, the confessing subject then entered into a dialogue with God. In the autobiographical writings of Rousseau and Goethe we find the subject integrated on two levels: the level of authenticity and uniqueness on the one hand and the level of fiction and the reflection of the world within the self (see Müller 1976). At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was Dilthey who brought the concepts of autobiography and the philosophy of history together. Although Dilthey does call the autobiography a singular entity of meaning, it still represents for him, like Leibniz's monade, "... the historical universe."[3] In the 1950s and 1960s, Gusdorf and Roy Pascal drew the theoretical borders of the autobiography by implementing the terms "sincerity" and "work of art." All the models of autobiography I have mentioned so far have that they deal with relations of a reference outside the autobiographical text itself in common. From the subject's perspective, the links between the text and the extra-textual references range from the divine order of things, poetry and history, to the work of art.

The 1970s witnessed another one of these linking strategies. In his essay "The Autobiographical Pact," published in 1974, Philippe Lejeune tried to establish an overt differentiation between autobiographies and autobiographical novels. His both extremely reductionist and straightforward suggestion is to corroborate the

1 Misch 1991: 38 (translations are mine).

2 This conception ranges from Georg Misch 1907, Georges Gusdorf 1956, and Philippe Lejeune 1975 to Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, who claims the memory of the autobiography to be European even if it is increasingly being interculturally overwritten.

3 Dilthey 1991: 28 (translations are mine).

identity of author, narrator, and protagonist, thus trying to guarantee the reader the non-fictional status of the autobiography.

Lejeune's answer to the question of how, i.e., by what indication or function, does an autobiographical text claim an extra-textual reference is the proper name. In so doing, he compares speech with writing. In a text, each grammatical person (I, you, he/she) could be fiction, while in speech the authentic reference is ensured by the concurrence of speaker and expression. At that point, Lejeune tries to avoid the inherent uncertainty of the written word.

In Lejeune's theory, the author is an important authority in that he constructs the elements of an autobiographical pact with the reader. Lejeune asserts that the autobiography involves some kind of a pact with the reader which is sealed by the author's signature. With his or her signature, the signatory guarantees both the referentiality of the contents and the identity of signatory and author. The signature is the fulcrum of the author's identity since its appearance testifies the "identity of the name," binding the author to the text that bears his or her name. According to Lejeune, this is also true of pseudonymous texts because the pseudonym is nothing but a name of an author. It doesn't matter whether the name used is a proper name designating an existing (or once existing) person or any other name designating a person to whom the text or texts in question can, for whatever reason, be attributed. Authorship is in any case the "common factor" which links a body of texts and in linking them surpasses them (see Lejeune 1994: 24-28).

From Lejeune's point of view, the proper name's referential function is not to be called into doubt since it relies on two societal institutions: the official liability of the name (a convention being internalized already in early childhood) and the publisher's contract. In emphasizing the autobiographical pact between author and reader, which is sealed among author, narrator, and character, Lejeune's definition is a pragmatic, formalistic, and somehow bureaucratic one. In addition to that pragmatic and formalistic attempt to define autobiography, Lejeune also emphatically stresses in the beginning of his theory that an autobiography is "the retrospective work of prose of a real person about their own existence, if they put emphasis on their personal life and especially on the history of their personality."[4]

Two dissimilar languages emerge in his theory at the same time. Firstly, there is a rather general definition of autobiography, its real starting point being the identity of the author with his/her text. Here, it is sufficient if the author intentionally refers to the fact that the text at issue is a written account of his/her personal history. That sort of definition, known since Rousseau's confessions, rejects twentieth century developments in literature, the philosophy of language and sociology all at once.

4 Quoted in Enderwitz 1998: 6.

Secondly, he makes use of a partly structuralistic argumentation by drawing on Emile Benveniste and Gerard Genette in order to point to the importance of the proper name on the textual level. He only allows as much complexity in his text as the proper name can take. Take for instance Sartre's statement of there being a demonic polyphony in his autobiography *Les Mots* as an example of the possible threat to the identity and unity of the proper name, which Lejeune tries to come up against with the thought that it is exactly the proper name which has the capacity to integrate that polyphony.

> Person and speech connect each other in the proper name even before they mutually connect in the first person.[5]

"What difference does it make who is speaking?" asked Samuel Beckett. This question is the provocative starting point in Michel Foucault's lecture "What is an author?" (1969), in which he challenges the term of the author. And he adds to Beckett's notion an irritating but, in the context of his work, fundamental assertion:

> First of all, we can say that today's writing has freed itself from the dimension of expression.[6]

All of Foucault's major works, from *Mental Illness and Psychology* (1954) and *Madness and Civilization* (1960) to *The Order of Things* (1966) and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* (1975) are marked by a criticism of fixed identities. From his analysis of the process of psychologizing "the mad," their exclusion from society and their detention in psychiatric institutions, to modern man, who begins to exist with the disciplination of society of the nineteenth century, Foucault challenges not only the phenomenon of history but also some of the key terms of Enlightenment, such as reason, freedom, meaning as semantic, and the authenticity of the subject.

According to Foucault, the psychological subject is an invention of the nineteenth century. Man as we know him today is not a product of a linear history of development. Foucault sees him as defined by various social codes, such as disciplination (prison, military, schools), efficiency and introspection, all of which appear increasingly in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. The phenomenon of introspection is particularily fundamental to the field of literature. It was the novelists and theorists Karl Philipp Moritz and Jean-Jaques Rousseau who, in their works, created a literature of pure subjectivity with its own developing history. What does one's own life mean? In this context, prose in particular becomes a popular form for the promotion of the self, mainly due to its successive and accumulative character. In this context it is interesting to note that Lejeune's approach seems deeply rooted in the nineteenth century as for him there

5 Ibid.: 29.
6 Foucault 1979: 142.

exists only one possible form of autobiography, namely prose. According to Foucault, the promotion of the self in a literary way at the beginning of the nineteenth century is an attempt to describe one's own life as disciplined and efficient. With these codes and their manifestation in writing, the idea of the modern self comes into existence. However, the development of modern man is not a straight path from immaturity to maturity, but rather the constitution of a self-observing and controlling subject. The Enlightenment not only invented freedom, but also discipline.

The term "expression," which Foucault discharges in his lecture, combines several phenomenons of the Enlightenment, in particular the authencity of a person through his or her articulation and the words' meaning. The term's *a priori* character is mainly based on the phenomenon of a united subjectivity and intentionality. At this point, we once more come across Lejeune, whose introductory hypothesis in "The Autobiograhical Pact" sees an author's expression as evidence of the authencity of his or her autobiography. Lejeune's concept of the identity of author and text is based on the assertion that the author describes only his own life and nothing else.

In Foucault's theory concepts, which are centered upon the term of "discoursivity," every speaking or writing subject moves within the limits of a certain discourse. For Foucault, "discourse" means a system of statements that not only marks the field in which we can speak, but also assigns the positions to the speakers. In other words, every autobiography or any other text always resonates of more than just one individual voice. As Walter Benjamin said, any text, be it autobiography or not, always transmits more historical or social codes than the individual opinion of one single author suggests. In every autobiography, there are various subject-positions or, as Paul de Man would say, figurations (De Man 1993: 131-146). Thus, the crucial question for Foucault does not concern identity between text and author. In contrast to Lejeune, he is interested rather in how the identity between author and text is generated in the first place. In this sense, Foucault does not understand identity as a clear or evident concept. Instead, it is a complicated process of description.

> An author's name is not simply an element in a discourse ...; it performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function. Such a name permits one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts.[7]

Here the name of the author is not the limit of the text, but sets the limit. The creation of identity is setting a limit. According to Foucault, the text is embedded in a discourse which ascribes to the name of the author the function to differentiate texts from each other, but no substance to constitute an original limit.

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7 Foucault 1979: 149.

For Lejeune, however, there is no doubt in this case. If the author's name appears on the cover of the book, the name is definitely the limit of the text. In this sense, the name of the author (for Lejeune this means in particular the proper name) sets the standard for the whole text. Lejeune would probably agree with the functional character of the author's name, as there are numerous structuralistic elements in "The Autobiographical Pact." But Lejeune does not follow this approach through to its logical conclusion, and he reverses his argumentation when he introduces the proper name as the irreducible sign of subjectivity that should shield his definition of autobiography from the polyphony of the subject-positions of the discourse. He equates the proper name with identity.

> There are as many proper names as there are individuals.[8]

The limit is the proper name, or the individual, which for Lejeune represents the extra-textual reference.

> The underlying theme of autobiography is the proper name.[9]

However, in the discourse there are neither depths nor surfaces. It is the discourse itself which defines the depths and surfaces. It also defines what an autobiography is and what it is not. Foucault seeks to explore what happens with a text or an autobiography if we consider the author, the narrator, and the protagonist.

> Doing so means overturning the traditional problem, no longer raising the questions "How can a free subject penetrate the substance of things and give it meaning? How can it activate the rules of a language from within and thus give rise to the designs which are properly its own?" Instead, these questions will be raised: "How, under what conditions and in what forms can something like a subject appear in the functions can it assume, and by obeying what rules?" In short, it is a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse.[10]

Discourse can be interpreted as a cultural frame, which can nevertheless encompass various types of discourses at the same time. For example, in Turkish autobiographies of the twentieth century, issues such as the Europeanization or Westernization of one's own culture are of the same importance as the individual history of the authors. This also applies to Palestinian autobiographies, whose historical discourses are, logically, constituted in a different way. It would thus be very interesting to explore whether (and in what ways) the various discourses, such as history, nation, individuality, family, and geography, communicate with each other. If autobiographies were analyzed in this regard rather than with respect to the author´s persona, there would be more connections to social-historical movements in a definite cultural frame.

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8 Lejeune 2001: 132.
9 Ibid.: 135.
10 Foucault 1979: 157.

Lejeune's theory of autobiography hinders such an opening of the text. His mode of interpretation focusses rather on a hermeneutical understanding of the text in direct relation to its author. Also, in this context, Lejeune understands autobiography as a genuine European phenomenon. His theory doesn't problemize autobiography and disregards further possibilities of what autobiography could be. Lejeune is mostly interested in defining and assuring a specific genre which needs a strong undeniable "I" (or subject). Thus, Lejeune asks:

> Who wrote the text? At which time? Under which circumstances and for what reason?

The autobiographical Subject doesn't seem to arise through the text itself but in the interplay of question and answer.

Foucault's question on the other hand opens a greater historical and sociopolitical dimension which can be made useful in the analysis and consideration of non-European autobiographies.

> We would no longer hear the questions that have been rehashed for so long: "Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authencity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse?" Instead, there would be other questions, like these: "What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject-functions?" And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: "What difference does it make who is speaking?"[11]

If Lejeune created the dramatic formula of autobiographical truth linked to a writer's proper name, Foucault argues dramatically against it: there will be more things if there will be no names.

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[11] Ibid.: 1031 (translated by author).

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