
Juliana De Nooy, Joe Hardwick, and Barbara E. Hanna, eds. *Soi-Disant: Life-Writing in French*. Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 2005. 125p.

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This collection of essays from the 11th Annual International Conference of the Australian Society of French Studies addresses through a variety of Francophone authors and genres the concept of the “pacte autobiographique”: that is, the complicity between writers and their readers as the latter read for clues that the former leaves—or attempts not to leave—in the text as they assume a rapport with each other.

The editors note that Philip Lejeune first introduced the concept of the “pacte autobiographique” in his 1975 study *L'Autobiographie en France*, and several of the essays in this publication discuss and quote from this or other of Lejeune’s related works in their studies. The collection consists of the editors’ introduction and nine essays, three of which are written in French.

The editors quote Lejeune:

Or, dans le pacte autobiographique... il y a une simple proposition, qui n’engage que son auteur: Le lecteur reste libre de lire ou non, et surtout de lire comme il veut. Cela est vrai. Mais s’il lit, il devra prendre en compte cette proposition, même si c’est pour la négliger ou la contester. (2)

Such a pact, the authors state, “has already nudged the door open towards the possibility of understanding autobiography not only as a mode of writing but as a mode of reading, whereby the *soi* is necessarily constructed in language and in relation to the *vous* of its readership” (3).

Through the examination of a multitude of genres including actual autobiographies, novels, poetry, and diaries, the scholars address such questions as: what if the author never intended an autobiographic pact, but the reader assumes one? What if the pact is difficult to reconcile with the text under interpretation? And what if the writers of autobiographies lose faith in the very contract they offer?

In any case, the authors concur with the notion that writing is moving away from the old notion of *soi* or self that is self-contained, making the *soi* more loose and pliable, and linking more readily it to a *nous*, thereby bringing the reader on board and emphasizing his or her role in the text.

In “Hide and Seek: Autobiographical Secrets in the Work of Queneau and Perec,” Chris Andrews describes how both Raymond Queneau and Georges Perec, while clearing and fog and cobwebs from early childhood memories, play games with their readers by offering obscure and encrypted clues in their works with the intention of being eventually found out. Andrew warns that some readers and critics get so

caught up in the intrigue of discovering the true soi in texts such as Queneau's *Chien et Chêne* and Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* that they draw conclusions about the authors that the authors themselves never intended.

Some 20 years after the deaths of these authors, the games go on, and recent scholars are discovering just how clever Queneau and Perec were. "Queneau and Perec go a step further, associating their invented rules with autobiographical data, using them to express not only a shared situation, but a unique trajectory and unique combination of characters, a self in other words" (23).

Two other scholars treat the cryptic nature of the writings of Jean Genet and the ways in which readers persist in probing his writings for comprehension of his homosexuality and other aspects of his persona therein. In "Friend or Foe? Misidentification, Abject Selfhood, and Genet's Queer Reception," Claire Boyle contends that a distinction needs to be made between Genet's self and the construction of selfhood in his texts. "It may often be assumed that authors write autobiographically in order to represent their selfhood to their reader, but the unconventional form of Genet's self-writing, expressing his notorious prickliness confirms that this is not his aim," Boyle states. Thus, Genet's goal in writing autobiographically is *not* to reveal himself to the readers, but to show a self with whom it is impossible to be acquainted. "Genet thus distances himself from the representational mode of autobiography in favour of creating a legend of an ineffable self" (30).

Similarly, Elizabeth Stephens claims in "Je suis un mensonge qui dit toujours la vérité": Genet's Queer Subjectivities" that Genet's duplicity flies in the face of critics who say his autobiographical writings depict his true self. Genet's writings remain unpopular with gays since they tend to criminalize homosexuality by describing it in heterosexual language and with heterosexual prejudices. Stephens raises such questions in her essay as "To what extent are the identities and literature of homosexual writers inexorably tied to and determined by the very culture in which they are marginalized and condemned?" and "What does it mean to identify a particular text as 'homosexual' because its author is known or believed to have been homosexual?" (45). She concludes that for Genet, "homosexuality is not something that can be directly represented within language, because language itself excludes homosexual subject(ivity)s" (49).

Driss Aïssaoui debunks in his essay "Les Racines culturelles de l'autobiographie au Magreb" the Occidental notion that Arab culture leaves no space or tolerance for writing of the *Moi*. He focuses first on the 1954 watershed text *Passé Simple* by Driss Chraïbi to prove that although Muslim culture is a collectivist society that seems hostile to all portraits of the self, the "je" is beginning to find a place in Magrebine literature. He acknowledges the French colonial presence in the increasing number of

autobiographical texts out of North Africa, but claims also that the Muslim religion subtly sanctions autobiographical texts as well: “la tradition scriptuaire locale a aussi largement contribué à la création d’une ambiance culturelle perméable et ouverte aux diverses expressions du ‘je’” (58).

Jeanne Hyvrard’s novels tend to be viewed as more autobiographical than the author intended, writes Cathy Wardle in “L’idée de l’autobiographie m’est étrangère: The Life and Writing of Jeanne Hyvrard.” For example, after the publication of *Les Prunes de Cythère* (1975), readers assumed and even insisted on Lejeune’s notion of the “pacte autobiographique” and persisted in believing that the author, who is French and Caucasian, must be Martinican and black like her heroine. Wardle notes that Hyvrard herself resents the notion that her work is autobiographical because, to her, the polemic passages are most important. However, says Wardle, this autobiographical nature in Hyvrard’s work is actually what promotes the author’s message to society. Hyvrard’s “writings have consistently foregrounded the connections between the individual and society between the psychological and the historical, the personal and the political, and this sense of connection between the self and the world is nowhere more profoundly expressed than through the role of autobiography in her work” (71).

Among many other works, Amélie Nothomb wrote three autobiographical texts covering different periods of her young life: *Le Sabotage Amoureux* (1993), ages 3 to 5, *Stupeur et tremblements* (1999), age 23, and *Métaphysique des tubes* (2000), age 0 to 3. Hélène Jaccomard states in “La Plus Grande Autobiographie de l’univers: l’hyper-autobiographie d’Amélie Nothomb” that these three works guarantee “la trinité identitaire de l’auteur, du narrateur et du personnage, protocole unique à ces trois texts” (86). Nothomb also abandons the usual *notions-clés* of autobiography—credibility and verifiability—in the pact she proposes to her reader and embraces humor, satire, and the ultimate enemy of the hyper-narratrice. “Cet ennemi, ce n’est pas la mort... non plus la violence, l’amour non-réciproque, ou la xénophobie... l’ennemi de l’hyper-narratrice... c’est avant toute chose, la banalité” (95).

Perhaps one of the most unusual topics among the nine essays is the last one in the book, which examines the influence of a young lady’s diary on her reader-peers. In “Personal Encounters: Catherine Pozzi as Reader of Marie Bashkirtseff’s Journal” Sonia Wilson uses as her point of departure Lejeune’s *Le Moi des Demoiselles: Enquête sur le journal de jeune fille* (1993). In 1887, three years after Bashkirtseff’s untimely death from consumption, the young woman’s diary was falsified, then published. Its popularity reached cult status and created a “rage d’écrire” among other young women of the day who read it more as a novel than an autobiography. Bashkirtseff’s emotions and style were subsequently reflected in many more diaries including

Pozzi's. "Catherine's merging of her own written self with that of Marie points to an erosion of boundaries of the self," writes Wilson. "The process of reading Marie's *Journal* results for Catherine in a dissolving of boundaries. . . . Catherine's own frenzy of identificatory desire [from which] we might conclude that identification is a product of the process of reading any genre of autobiographical text" (112).

Wilson notes that young women's diary writing tends toward an egotistical "assumption of readership" by future peers, which compromises its sincerity. Nonetheless, as in the case of Pozzi, some readers transcend the identification obsession and the expectation of eventual publication of their journals and begin to renegotiate and purify their personal styles in their personal writings.

One of the shortest essays in the book is "S'écrire, se créer: recherche formelle et quête identitaire chez Yves Navarre" by Sylvie Lannegrand. She discusses Navarre's personal anguish as seen in his novels and his life, which ended in suicide. A good, general wrap-up of the collection's theme, this piece also names Jean-Paul Sartre, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Annie Ernaux, Nathalie Sarraute, and Julian Green, who once stated, "Mon vrai journal est dans mes romans," (101) as examples of "autofiction" writers. ✱