

FACT AND FICTION: THE PROBLEM OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING IN LEJEUNE AND MALERBA

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Abstract

Questo saggio presenta una lettura del Diario di un sognatore di Luigi Malerba sulla base della teoria dell'autobiografia elaborata da Philippe Lejeune in Le pacte autobiographique. Cerca di illustrare come il libro di Malerba gioca ironicamente con i problemi inerenti alle riflessioni sistematiche di Lejeune già rilevati da critici come Michel Beaujour o Paul de Man, cioè l'insolubile contraddizione tra la postulata autenticità dei fatti narrati ed il modello romanzesco-letterario cui ubbidisce involontariamente ogni racconto della propria vita. La carica umoristica del Diario deriva addirittura dall'impossibile ipotesi che i sogni si possano registrare in modo scientifico come dati obbiettivi. Così la storia del sognatore conferma le obiezioni dei critici di Lejeune, mettendo in rilievo la dipendenza dello scrittore da strutture culturali che precedono e dominano le sue esperienze "reali". Il Diario di un sognatore può essere letto come la ricerca dell'io in un mondo in cui tutto è divenuto citazione, riproduzione o semplicemente metafora. Se l'io minacciato riesce a sopravvivere, è grazie allo stile ironico con cui esprime il suo stato precario.

This article gives an interpretation of Malerba's *Diario di un sognatore* based on Philippe Lejeune's theory of autobiography. According to Lejeune's definition, Malerba's book is not an autobiography in the strict sense of the term, as it covers only one year of the author's life

and a very restricted aspect of it. But as a diary recording the author's personal dreams, it doubtlessly represents a form of autobiographical writing. The prologue even seems to confirm the existence of what Lejeune would call an explicit "autobiographical pact". Before discussing Malerba's text I would like to give an account of Lejeune's notion of the *pacte autobiographique* as well as a brief survey of the controversy it provoked among his major critics.

According to Lejeune, what defines autobiographical writing as such is the assurance given by the author that the story which he relates is the story of his real life narrated as authentically as possible. As the biographer records the facts of a person's life with the utmost historical precision, the author of an autobiography establishes a so-called "referential pact" with his reader: a *pacte référentiel*, asserting that his discourse refers to a reality beyond the text:

As opposed to all forms of fiction, biography and autobiography are *referential* texts: exactly like scientific or historical discourse, they claim to provide information about a "reality" exterior to the text, and so to submit a test of *verification*. Their aim is not simple verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth. Not "the effect of the real," but the image of the real. All referential texts thus entail what I will call a "referential pact," implicit or explicit, in which are included a definition of the field of the real that is involved and a statement of the modes and the degree of resemblance to which the text lays claim (Lejeune, 1989: 22).

Of course, Lejeune himself recognizes that the situation of the autobiographical writer is much more complex than that of the biographer. In the former case the issue is not resemblance but identity, which entails a series of problems. For example, how can you seriously expect a *subject* to give an *objective* account of his or her personal life? As Jean Paul Sartre has argued, every individual is free at any point of his existence to develop a new project of his own life and to reinterpret his past in the light of it. That is obviously what Lejeune has in mind when he states in an obvious existentialist terminology that

the ultimate expression of truth (if we reason in terms of resemblance) can no longer be the being-for-itself of the past (if indeed such a thing exists), but being-for-itself, manifested in the present of the enunciation. It also implies that in his relationship to the story (remote or quasi-contemporary) of the protagonist, the narrator is mistaken, lies, forgets, or distorts – and error, lie, lapse of memory, or distortion will, if we distinguish them, take on the value of aspects, among others, of an enunciation, which, itself, remains authentic (Lejeune, 1989: 25).

Lejeune's criteria of "accuracy" or "fidelity" (1989: 23) become even more problematic against the background of his own statement that an autobiography is a particular form of the novel and thus unquestionably belongs to the realm of fiction¹. For what is right or wrong in a fictional text is normally judged by aesthetic standards. The question of whether individual facts that lie outside the text are "truly" or "falsely" represented, is aesthetically irrelevant. It is not surprising, therefore, that Lejeune's critics almost unanimously point to this inner contradiction as a drawback or a fault in his theory.

¹ See Lejeune, 1971: 23: "[...] en fait l'autobiographie est un cas particulier du roman, et non pas quelque chose d'extérieur à lui [...]." On page 30 he furthermore defines an autobiography as a work of fiction produced under particular circumstances ("Nous devons toujours garder à l'esprit que l'autobiographie n'est qu'une fiction produite dans des conditions particulières").

Michel Beaujour (1977: passim), for example, observes that in his early theory Lejeune defines an autobiography as a narrative text which represents the story of an individual's life as it is experienced in its chronological sequence². Later on, in his studies on Sartre and Leiris, however, Lejeune tends to dismiss the importance of a chronological order in favour of thematic patterns by which the autobiographer confers an (aesthetic) structure and a deeper meaning to his own life story³. For Michel Beaujour, these two different types of discourse seem to be incompatible. Influenced by Michel Foucault and Philippe Sollers, Beaujour believes that rhetorical language is a self-generating medium belonging to a cultural heritage which exists and functions independently of individual experience. Language thus erases the subject who makes use of its tropes and figures⁴.

Not unlike Beaujour, but from a different perspective, Paul de Man asks the question of whether autobiography depends on reference, in other words whether the author's life story really "produces autobiography", as Lejeune seems to suggest, or whether the author's life itself is influenced by his autobiographical project and the technical demands of his literary language (Man, 1979: 920). De Man seems to

² See Lejeune, 1971: 33: "l'autobiographie est avant tout un *récit*, qui suit dans le temps l'*histoire* d'un individu [...] la structure *principale* du texte est narrative [...]."

³ See Lejeune, 1975: 15 f.: "L'*Age d'homme* ne semble pas au premier abord être composé « chronologiquement » sous la forme d'un récit suivi qui irait de la naissance au présent. Ou du moins cette chronologie est secondaire par rapport au dessein de construction thématique. [...] Construire une autobiographie autour de thèmes et d'images, c'est privilégier dans chaque élément du récit la signification, c'est vouloir aboutir à un système de signification. [...] Par cette construction, Leiris réalise le projet secret de toute autobiographie (trouver l'*ordre* de la vie) [...]."

⁴ Quoting Foucault Beaujour speaks of "une incompatibilité peut-être sans recours entre l'apparition du langage en son être et la conscience de soi en son identité" (1977: 451). See also p. 457: "[...] le sujet qui entreprend de dire ce qu'il est en ayant recours à ces procédés et à ces structures sera d'emblée amené à déborder sa mémoire et son horizon individuel, devenant en quelque sorte le microcosme d'une culture qu'il réinvestit de sa présence, et qui le voue simultanément au déplacement et à l'absence. A la mort."

be irritated by Lejeune's apparent irresolution about placing the genre of autobiography clearly either in the sphere of documentary or of fictional writing.

It appears, then, that the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but that it is undecidable. But is it possible to remain [...] *within* an undecidable situation? [...] A system of differentiation based on two elements that, in Wordsworth's phrase, "of these [are] neither, and [are] both at once" is not likely to be sound (Man, 1979: 921).

Paul de Man himself believes that, conditioned as it is by metaphorical language, the author's perception of his own self can only be illusory and fictitious.

Michel Beaujour's and Paul de Man's evaluations of Lejeune are not shared by John Eakin, a critic who perhaps shows the deepest insight into the dynamic structure of Lejeune's concept of autobiography. Also Eakin is fully aware of Lejeune's being torn between fact and fiction (between *story* and *discourse*, as he puts it), but in his view, Lejeune's shifting perspectives demonstrate the subtlety of his theory: "One could infer a change of heart or a careless contradiction, but I think it would be truer to say that the disparity between these formulations points to the fundamental complexity of Lejeune's critical personality" (Eakin, 1975: xii). Not willing to simplify the complexity of the object of his investigation for the sake of a "clean" theoretical system, Lejeune in fact circumscribes it from different angles and points of view, always testing his theses empirically against a variety of autobiographical texts. At the same time he himself points out the contradictions he encounters in his

investigation and attempts to resolve them, thus continuously modifying his theory⁵.

In accordance with Eakin's appreciation of the subtlety of Lejeune's arguments, I would like to show in my analysis of Luigi Malerba's *Diario di un sognatore*, that the contradictions in Lejeune's theory may indeed be regarded as heuristic because they may help us to recognize analogous discrepancies in contemporary autobiographical literature. One need only read the first twenty pages of Malerba's *Diary* in order to understand that the narrator of this book is caught up in a tension between two irreconcilable aims: on the one hand the individual's interest in his dreams as plain *chronological facts*, and on the other hand his deeply felt dissatisfaction with the arbitrary character of this chronicle and the irresistible desire to arrange the collected material within the *structure of a literary text*. The wit of Malerba's book derives precisely from this ambiguous situation.

Lejeune's criterion of authenticity seems to be particularly valid for the genre of the diary adopted by Malerba, in which the chronological order and the closeness to the facts of everyday day life are self-evident. As it lacks the retrospective distance between the act of writing and the experience that is related, diary writing is less dependent on the selective nature of memory. It rather captures life spontaneously as it presents itself in immediate experience. Principally meant for private use, it usually makes a much more intimate impression than a classical autobiography and makes no claim to a particular stylistic quality. However, this genre, too, has produced examples of self-analysis at an outstanding literary level.

It seems that Luigi Malerba's *Diario di un sognatore* was meant to be a literary text from the very beginning. This is evident from the

⁵ About ten years after *Le pacte autobiographique*, in *Moi aussi*, Lejeune himself makes fun of the imperfections of his own theory and his continuous revisions in an ironic self-portrait which is an amusing pastiche of La Bruyère's *Caractères*. See "Le pacte autobiographique (bis)". In: Lejeune, 1986: 13-35: 13.

paratext, a prologue and an epilogue addressed to the reader of the book. From a rhetorical point of view, however, the book apparently has been devised to present itself as non-literary as possible. In the prologue the writer informs us that he made the plan to record his dreams during one calendar year: from the 1st of January to the 31st of December 1979. This purely arbitrary span of time, which does not correspond to a particularly important period in the diarist's personal life, suggests an objective, almost scientific observation:

Questo libro è composto dalle trascrizioni dei miei sogni lungo il corso di un anno, il 1979. Una cronaca dunque o un diario di eventi che appartengono all'area dell'immaginario e che ho riferito *con la massima precisione e fedeltà* che erano consentite, *come se si trattasse di resoconti destinati a una indagine scientifica* (Malerba, 1981: 5).

In a note following the prologue the writer adds:

Ho trascritto i sogni giorno per giorno, quasi sempre al mattino, velocemente e senza rileggere il testo. [...] Mi sono fatto scrupolo di trascrivere tutti i sogni, si intende compatibilmente con il ricordo, anche quelli che dentro di me «disapprovavo» o che comunque non mi piacevano, e *ho resistito alla tentazione di operare qualsiasi tipo di censura*. Solo in rari casi ho aggiunto più tardi qualche particolare che avevo ommesso per dimenticanza nella prima stesura (1981: 17 f.).

This prologue is an excellent example of an autobiographical pact as it has been defined by Lejeune⁶. The writer of the diary not only feels

⁶ Malerba seems to allude to the theory of the autobiographical pact, when he formulates: "È sulla base di tali ovvie premesse che questo lavoro reclama *un suo credito presso i lettori*." (1981: 6; italics mine.)

obliged to situate himself in real space (places of residence, travels) and time (every entry is exactly dated), but also reassures his reader of the utmost sincerity of his project. He promises that his dreams will be recorded impartially, without additions or subtractions, and without any attempt at their interpretation which he regards as superfluous. For dreams are real experiences in themselves (“esperienze reali”)⁷. Moreover, the prologue reveals certain rhetorical elements identified by Lejeune as typical of the autobiographer’s claim for credibility⁸. So, for example, the diarist deplures the fragmentary character of memory or the difficulty of describing in words the images of his dreams⁹.

Ironically enough, the project of a neutral recording of his dreams is undermined as soon as the diarist sets out to realize it. In his prologue he had maintained that the chosen period for his investigation (*ricerca*) was to be as arbitrary as the investigated object:

La scelta di un percorso temporale, un anno in questo caso, è arbitraria. È uno dei limiti di un lavoro che, *per non sottostare alle convenzioni retoriche e narrative, assume una forma «aperta» e cioè conforme alla arbitrarietà e casualità del fenomeno* che si propone di descrivere (1981: 8).

⁷ See Malerba, 1981: 5: “Questo libro alla fine non si propone niente di più che offrire del materiale di prima mano su una attività della mente [...]” See also p. 9: “Non tenterò quindi di avventurarmi nella interpretazione dei sogni registrati in questo diario [...]. A loro volta i sogni diventano di per se stessi esperienze reali senza per questo dover rendere conto alla realtà delle loro strutture e forme.”

⁸ See Lejeune’s account of rhetorical commonplaces regarding the “phenomenology of memory” or the problem of “the ineffable” in: Lejeune, 1971: 76-79.

⁹ See Malerba, 1981: 5: “Uno scarto obiettivo si verifica anzitutto nel passaggio dal fenomeno alla sua trascrizione [...]. [...] Credo che rientri nella norma l’eventualità che un certo numero di sogni, o una loro parte, venga dimenticato.” See also page 12: “Quali saranno dunque le parole più adatte e neutrali per dare espressione ai sogni? [...] per fissarne lo svolgimento e i percorsi nella loro fenomenologia spicciola, saranno sufficienti le parole povere del diario?”

But then the book begins with the report of the annoying fact that a most interesting dream has occurred in the night between the 30th and the 31st of December 1978, that is exactly 24 hours before the date which should have marked the beginning of the dreamer's diary: "«Ecco un sogno che avrei preferito fare domani notte quando incomincerò a annotare i sogni.» Lieve disappunto per questo sogno intempestivo [...]" (1981: 19). Even more irritating is the fact that on the morning of the 1st of January 1978 the protagonist cannot remember any dreams at all: "[...] nessuna traccia di sogno nella memoria al risveglio. (Il fatto è insolito e delude una attesa. [...]) pare quasi un «dispetto» al programma di annotare i sogni, un piccolo sabotaggio ai miei piani, proprio all'inizio" (1981: 20). On the one hand, the meticulous account of all these complications strengthens the impression of authenticity and thus seems to confirm the autobiographical pact of the prologue. For, of course, the narrator might as well have cheated, arranging the dates of his dreams according to his plans and without the reader's knowledge. Nevertheless, he is determined to stick faithfully to the "facts", even if they are inconsistent with his project. On the other hand, his irritation about these "complications" proves that the narrator is far from being objective, that his project is far from being "open" and that the alleged "scientific" character of his "work" turns out to be an illusion from the very start. Although he denies the narrative features of his text in the prologue¹⁰, being a writer, the diarist cannot help having certain expectations about the outline and the contents of his book.

What Malerba shows here in his humorous way is that even in the autobiographical subgenre of the diary where chronology has to prevail

¹⁰ See Malerba, 1981: 8: "I percorsi seguiti dai sogni nella loro formazione si sviluppano secondo diagrammi mentali e *non retorici* e perciò questo libro nel caso migliore darà l'immagine *piuttosto di un procedimento mentale che di un procedimento narrativo* [...]"

over a logical thematic construction, the necessity of a meaningful pattern seems to impose itself. Of course, the juggling with the apparent contradictions between the writer's intentions and their realization is an ironical play, in other words it is a fine piece of fiction. But readers will not find that the text thereby loses its authenticity nor will they complain about the violation of an autobiographical pact. The witty opening of Malerba's *Diary* rather shows how difficult it is for an autobiographer to tackle the reality of his own self, especially when this reality is made up of the subconscious parts of his personality (his dreams). The best way to grasp these elusive facts is to make a good story of them. As Eakin has rightly pointed out, a person may also express himself through a stylistic figure (Eakin, 1985: 189-191). Malerba's best way to express himself is his irony.

The difficulty of disentangling facts from fiction seems to be one of the major themes of the book. In his prologue the *sognatore* fears that rhetorical and cultural habits might encroach upon the "prehistoric" reality of his dreams and falsify their description:

Nel raccontare gli eventi fantastici che si sprigionano dal sogno è difficile tuttavia eludere gli statuti culturali con l'ausilio dei quali siamo soliti affrontare ogni ordine di realtà. Ma il sogno rifiuta per sua natura questi strumenti, adotta macchine e finzioni che sfuggono a ogni schema raccomandato di lettura. C'è il rischio dunque di cadere, con la trascrizione, in un falso [...]. Insomma la descrizione degli eventi fantastici del sogno non può sfuggire del tutto alla ipoteca dei modelli espressivi del soggetto, nonostante e a dispetto delle intenzioni di sottrarvisi. Solo le marmotte, dopo i loro lunghi sonni, sono del tutto esenti da impacci culturali (1981: 13 f.).

He clearly opposes the arbitrary, chaotic structure of his dreams to the orderly narrative structures and thus postulates that his dreams have a

reality of their own. They are his “raw material” (“materiale di prima mano”) which precedes his note-taking and his eventual literary treatment (1981: 5).

[...] quasi mai i sogni hanno un inizio netto, il corrispettivo della prima pagina di un libro, e ancora piú raramente dispongono di un finale (il rifiuto dei modelli narrativi ce lo faceva prevedere). Non sempre procedono in una direzione precisa e la loro chiusura è quasi sempre accidentale e occasionale al punto che mai aggiunge senso, come succede con il finale delle normali narrazioni [...]. E la chiusura di solito avviene dispettosamente qualche istante prima che un evento atteso e imminente possa concludere il sogno in senso narrativo e significante (1981: 14).

But once more, the diarist realizes that he is mistaken. The truth is that the dreams do not exist independently of his consciousness and his intentions to write them down. So the opening sentence of the first entry of the dreamer’s diary is a puzzled statement that the mere decision to record his dreams seem to alter them: “La decisione di annotare i miei sogni giorno per giorno nel corso del 1979 incomincia a turbare i miei sogni e a condizionare i miei sogni con ventiquattro ore di anticipo” (1981: 19). In fact, his dreams take on a literary character once they are used as material for a book: “I soggetti «letterari» compaiono con maggiore frequenza da quando ho incominciato a prendere queste note. Prima erano molto piú rari” : (1981: 27). Surprisingly, his dreams seem to acquire narrative structures. Thus, his first dream presents itself in the guise of an “introduction”: “Alla fine emerge la sensazione che questo sogno è una «introduzione» ai sogni che mi appresto a registrare nel corso del nuovo anno” (1981: 20). Many of them even bear a title. Moreover, they have a style which can be defined as dantesque, kafkaesque etc. The diarist was determined not to censor his dreams. But in one of his literary dreams he is upset

because its style does not correspond to his own aesthetic principles and convictions:

Sono cosciente di sognare e mi dico: Ecco un sogno inutile, che non riuscirò mai a raccontare e che per di piú sembra una brutta imitazione di un racconto di Kafka. Che cosa ci può essere di peggio di un sogno «kafkaiano»? (Il sogno «kafkaiano» si interrompe per dar luogo a un «vero sogno» [...]) (1981: 24).

Later on, in a second dream he sees an inscription on a marble block which he feels he could use as a title for his previous dream in order to improve it:

All'ingresso del fabbricato c'è ora una targa di marmo rosa sulla quale leggo la scritta: IL PARALLELEPIEDO. A questo punto penso di inserire la targa nel sogno precedente per dare un nome al fabbricato con i corridoi e rimediare così quel sogno che non mi piace (1981: 25).

Dreaming thus seems to be profoundly linked to his activity as a writer. It becomes a task like writing a text: making a first draft, having a critical look at it, finding additional material in order to correct and complete it. The diarist's fears to fail as a writer are also a recurrent subject matter of his dreams. So, for example, he tries to imagine a certain place which is supposed to be the background of his dream. But he does not succeed in creating the image (1981:122). In another dream the sheets of paper from his desk are blown away by the wind through the chimney. In yet another dream, words disappear from the pages of a book which remains empty (1981: 108, 119).

Writing itself plays an important part. Letters very often appear in their material aspect. They often have the status of real physical things, not signs. For example, the *sognatore* dreams of "soaked words" which have to be dried in order to be saved from destruction:

Un mucchio di carta stampata completamente fradicia gettata alla rinfusa su un pavimento, come salvata da una alluvione. Mi preoccupo per le parole «gonfiate dall'umidità», dovrò stenderle al sole per farle asciugare come dei panni. La stanza è nuda, senza mobili, con il pavimento di mattoni leggermente avvallato al centro, le finestre alte dalle quali non si vede fuori. Non devo perdere tempo altrimenti le parole bagnate potrebbero «andare a male» (1981: 33).

In another dream he tries to burn words and discovers that some are inflammable, others are indestructible. Other times he finds himself hammering on words in order to make them rhyme with each other (1981: 111 and 117). He also dreams of the headlines in a newspaper or of the title pages of books that are unreadable, of the Russian monks Cyrillus and Metodius who write in Cyrillic letters, of the luminous advertisement of a MAGIC CIRCUS, or of words that fly out of a dictionary disguised as butterflies¹¹.

Words are not his only medium, though. The title of one of his dreams is accompanied by music which reminds him of a Hollywood movie (1981: 34). A few days later the dreamer sees himself in the Sahara desert running towards a screen which shows scenes from *Casablanca*. His aim is to step into the film: “Deserto del Sahara. [...] Sono solo, ma laggiù all'orizzonte, su uno schermo lontano, vedo le immagini del film *Casablanca*. Cammino verso lo schermo. Quando sarò arrivato *entrerò nel film*” (1981: 38 f.). The reader asks himself: What is more real? The landscape of the desert or the scenes from *Casablanca*? Ideas of things are mediated by artistic representations of them. *Casablanca* is at least as real as the desert. Experiences are filtered through the media: journals, books, pictures or films. Thus, in

¹¹ See Malerba, 1981: 19, 33, 22, 23, 83 and 105.

an erotic dream the sensuous mouth of a woman first appears on a poster before it becomes real (1981: 64).

These examples seem to confirm Paul de Man's critique of Lejeune. For de Man maintains that the notion of a given "fact" referred to in an autobiographical text is an illusion in a world of metaphors and that the subject in an autobiographical text must therefore lose his voice and his face. Indeed, Malerba's *Diary* often records dreams in which the self, moving around in a world made of cardboard like the scenery of a stage, appears to himself as one-dimensional like a playing-card: "una figura piatta, una carta da gioco" or hollow inside: "*forse anch'io sono un fantasma*, mi viene il sospetto di essere *vuoto dentro*, come le case" (1981: 67 and 71).

But although Malerba blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction and depicts his self as being in danger in a world that consists only of mental constructions, as an autobiographer he does not lose his face or his voice. In a science fiction dream, sitting in an Ufo, the dreamer asks himself the crucial question: "Who am I?", which every serious autobiographer tries to answer: "Chissà da dove vengo, chissà dove vado. Me lo domando angosciato. E soprattutto *chi sono?*" (1981: 104). His diary seems to give a clear answer to this question. For apart from being a dreamer's diary it is above all a writer's diary. For the *sognatore* who converses with Cinderella and Ulysses, with Carducci, August Strindberg, D'Annunzio and the statue of Marcus Aurelius, literary figures, words and images seem to be facts, and rhetoric language instead of threatening to obliterate his self gives him a means of expressing his precarious situation in his own ironical, individual style.

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