

Autobiographical
Poetry in England
and Spain, 1950-1980

Autobiographical Poetry in England and Spain, 1950-1980:

Narrating Oneself in Verse

By

Menotti Lerro

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To Maria Rosaria La Marca

Sé que he perdido tantas cosas que no podría contarlas y que esas perdiciones, ahora, son lo que es mío. Sé que he perdido el amarillo y el negro y pienso en esos imposibles colores como no piensan los que ven. Mi padre ha muerto y está siempre a mi lado. Cuando quiero escandir versos de Swinburne, lo hago, me dicen, con su voz. Sólo el que ha muerto es nuestro, sólo es nuestro lo que perdimos. Ilión fue, pero Ilión perdura en el hexámetro que la plañe. Israel fue cuando era una antigua nostalgia. Todo poema, con el tiempo, es una elegía. Nuestras son las mujeres que nos dejaron, ya no sujetos a la víspera que es zozobra, y a las alarmas y terrores de la esperanza. No hay otros paraísos que los paraísos perdidos.

—Jorge Luis Borges

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ix

Part One: The Autobiographical Genre

Introduction 2

1. The Critical Debate..... 8

1.1. What is an autobiography?

1.2. The problem of time. Narrative order in an autobiography

1.3. The importance of the self and of auscultation

2. Autobiography in Verse and in Prose 27

2.1. How to narrate oneself: Lejeune's approach

2.2. Autobiographies in verse

2.3. A "divine self-biography". *The Prelude*: an exemplary autobiography in verse

Part Two: The Difficult Sixties—Elements of Breakage and Continuity towards a New Poetry

Introduction 56

3. Seamus Heaney and Jaime Gil de Biedma 59

3.1. The new generation: postmodernism

3.2. Seamus Heaney: "an autobiographical critic-poet"

3.3. The artist and the spaces of memory

3.4. Seamus Heaney: spaces of memory through the memory of objects

3.5. Post second world war Spanish poetry: from civil war to the *Generación de los Cincuenta*

3.6. Jaime Gil de Biedma: civil poetry, the influence of places, individuals and *de las cosas*

3.7. Jaime Gil de Biedma's and Seamus Heaney's poetry: the need to fill a void

4. Thom Gunn and Carlos Barral.....	116
4.1. The birth of the <i>Movement</i> : return to tradition after the modernist break	
4.2. Thom Gunn: the journey of a poet in search of identity	
4.3. Thom Gunn’s autobiographical poetry: “The Gender Problem”, the body, the disease	
4.4. From England to America: the importance of place in Thom Gunn	
4.5. Carlos Barral and a possible “collective autobiography”	
4.6. Conflicting civil awareness in Carlos Barral	
4.7. The construction of verse in Carlos Barral: the diary as a mirror of reality	
 Concluding Notes	 174
 Appendix	 179
A Survey of Interviews with Contemporary Italian Poets and Critics	
 Bibliography	 218

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PART ONE:
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL GENRE

INTRODUCTION

The tendency to narrate oneself, the incidents and the particular events that have influenced one's life is common to all individuals¹. Some people do not develop this tendency, perhaps, because they are convinced that they cannot do so². Others, starting their story with a peculiar initial mood towards both themselves and the outside world, begin to produce an autobiographical text³. "Why do some people feel called upon to write the story of their lives?" Burton Pike asks himself in the essay *Time in Autobiography*, proceeding with the following statement:

It is easy to account for the case of the politician who wants to show how virtuous one can be in political life, or even the saint who wants his confessions to God to be read by us sinners. But beyond this kind of relatively direct impulse the motivation for this form of self-expression becomes obscure⁴.

Gordon Allport offers a series of reasons from which he defines the *gross anatomy of motives*, highlighting the autobiographical impulse. This sample case includes: "Special pleading, exhibitionism, relief from tension, monetary gain, scientific interest, redemption and social reincorporation,

¹ It was noticed that "the propensity for personal narrative, to talk about oneself following events, facts, and subjective trends seems much more appropriate to the way women express themselves than to men". Furthermore, "in addition to having a strong inclination to auto-narrating, women are also the main 'consumers' of autobiographical fiction" (G. Starace, *Il racconto della vita*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2004, pp. 17-8). Cf. moreover the review by L. Mattesini, *Sull'autobiografia femminile*, in "Nuova DWF", nn. 2-3, 1993. [The translation into English from Italian of this footnote, and those to follow, are my own].

² As Giovanni Starace affirms (*Il racconto della vita*, cit., p. 22): "To take care of oneself is never easy. Finding the force and the serenity to pay attention and listen to what happens internally is very difficult."

³ Roy Pascal explains how a good autobiography requires a strong personal motivation, the need to tell the story of one's own life, as occurs for public figures, who try to awaken interest and satisfy the curiosity of readers with information about their existence. R. Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, Routledge-Kegan Paul, London 1960, pp. 59-181.

⁴ B. Pike, *Time in Autobiography*, in "Comparative Literature", 28, 4, Autumn, 1976, p. 326, in <http://www.jstore.org/stable/1770020>

and wish of immortality”⁵. From a historical point of view, as shall be seen later, the definition of autobiography has often raised conflicting opinions, particularly for different roles, sometimes of unity, other times of multiplicity, that were, from time to time, assigned by critics. Therefore there has been a clash from which a kind of contentious debate concerning the matter of autobiographical writing started. It is clear that, in addition to the autobiography itself, we could add epistolary and diary writings to the same field. These other autobiographical forms, while diversifying themselves⁶ in various ways from the autobiography *tout court*, nevertheless have the following in common with it: the sincerity with oneself and putting the author at the centre of the narrative core. Candace Lang extends the definition of autobiography even further, affirming that: “Autobiography is indeed everywhere one cares to find it”. The author adds that autobiography introduces a great problem for anyone studying the topic. According to Lang, if the writer is always, in the broadest sense, involved in the work, any writing can be judged as autobiographical based upon how it is read⁷. As Linda Anderson exposes, autobiography has also been recognized since the late eighteenth century as an important testing ground for critical disputes:

However, Autobiography has also been recognized since the late eighteenth century as a distinct literary genre and, as such, an important testing ground for critical controversies about a range of ideas including authorship, selfhood, representation and the division between fact and fiction. The very pervasiveness and slipperiness of autobiography has made the need to contain and control it within disciplinary boundaries all

⁵ G. Allport, *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science*, Social Science Research Council, New York 1942, p. 69.

⁶ As Starace points out (*Il racconto della vita*, cit., p. 17), the diary can be considered “the literary genre of adolescent autobiography [...] which contains much of the ‘unspoken’ or the ‘non-communicable’ part and where the present (more than the past) obstructs the whole scene.” Moreover, “the adolescent diary, more than any other autobiographical form, has a function of containment as well as of construction and constitution of the self.” Regarding the adult diary, however, “feelings of loss, related to a time from which the person is separated are dominant. There is a past that obstructs, a written page that crystallizes the old days, that gives them shape and meaning; but it is not only this: the digging in the memory, the exhumation of past events, the game of reclaiming the guise of the past, the same *rêverie*, have entirely the characteristic of discovery, of research of other dimensions of the self, causing astonishment in assisting to the many changes that have occurred”.

⁷ C. Lang, *Autobiography in the Aftermath of Romanticism*, in “Diacritics”, XII, Winter, 1982, p. 6, in <http://www.jstor.org/stable/465057>

the more urgent, and many literary critics have turned to definitions as a way of stamping their academic authority on an unruly and even slightly disreputable field⁸.

In the reference text (in some aspects outdated, but still representing an initial focal point necessary to understand the autobiographical genre and its developments), *The Autobiographical Pact* (1975), Philippe Lejeune defined autobiography as a narration, made by an individual, about one's own personal happenings⁹. It is interesting to make the reader ask themselves what the spark is that triggers the autobiographical fire, the drop that brings the person who narrates themselves to overcome hesitations and pass from the theoretical idea of writing about himself to concrete action¹⁰. Let's imagine for a moment that the spark that lights the autobiographical fire is to see oneself in the mirror, a sort of decisive meeting/clash that the individual has towards their unified image, where one's own copy becomes unrecognizable to one's own eyes: in the mirror I am not there anymore, but there is another. Therefore, lost in that new image, perceiving oneself in two different ways: *I am like this, here and now, a body that lives in this moment and within this form*. But also: *I am, here and now, a mind and body conceived as the result of years passed by; physical and mental elements that hold the signs, the wounds of time, sum of endless moments passed, and therefore infinite different "Is" from what I am now, that made me as I am now, here, in this mirror, discovering myself*.

This is perhaps the key moment of autobiographical writing: the self is now conceived as the sum of the many different "Is", and they create a frighteningly unknown "not I". Here, at precisely the same time, memory comes to the rescue of the individual, who, when writing about themselves, tries to find and rebuild themselves in a way that releases memories held in the depths of their mind, fixing them forever on paper through writing in a narrative structure that becomes a starting point for the search of the "I" and self-analysis just like in the novels of Proust and Svevo.

Writing then begins its journey from what was the first significant event to the last event considered noteworthy. So, image after image, many innumerable "Is", all different from each other, are reconstructed. All of them, at the time of *their* concrete existence, thinking and acting in

⁸ L. Anderson, *Autobiography*, Routledge, London-New York 2001, pp. 1-2.

⁹ For the precise definition given by Lejeune, Cf. *infra*, p. 27.

¹⁰ "I don't know why I never went back before" (E. Figes, *Little Eden: A Child at War*, Persea Book, New York 1978).

a peculiar way. Many innumerable “Is”, both loved and hated. “Is” not understood, or indifferent to themselves. Many different “Is”, which, at the moment of writing, do not want to be forgotten: once *I was like this...* This concept of the “I” found critical support in the twentieth century, when literature tended to deal with psychoanalysis. Until then, and particularly in England in the Victorian Period, the autobiographical text was conceived as a mere statement of facts concerning the public life of the author, giving little space to interiority and feelings, and especially to the complexity of them. In fact, only in the twentieth century there was the realization of the impossibility of describing, and understanding, the truth related to interiority. Obviously, the phrase *once I was like this...* changes according to the role that is given to the memory. As Ugo Bonante explains in *Rendiconti vittoriani* “while the Victorian authors saw the events as if the memory was an instrument of pure recording of the past, for authors of the twentieth century, such as Yeats, memory is instead fundamentally linked to the present and so it brings the past back to light only in the form imposed by the present”¹¹. In this way, as Roy Pascal¹² states, the first practical problems are reached: how to narrate oneself? Which events should be privileged enough to be remembered in the story of one’s own life? Which should be omitted? Which are to be disguised or – not following the essential canon Lejeune gives to distinguish autobiographical texts – even invented? The conflict with ourselves, with the text and with the truth, which is often fatal to the text itself, is thus triggered. Modernist and modern author Virginia Woolf has shown on several occasions to feel uncomfortable managing the autobiographical problem, partly demonstrated by never writing a real autobiography. Regarding the problem of the selection that has to be done before the writing, when she thinks about the possibility of narrating her life, the writer asserts:

¹¹ U. Bonante, *Rendiconti vittoriani*. The English autobiography between the 19th and 20th century, Il Quadrante, Torino 1988, p. 125. Similar is the definition by Alberto Oliari in R. Baravalle, P. Collo, G. Felici (edited by), Carlos Barral. *The dark flight of time*, il Saggiatore, Milano 2011, p. 15: “Memories are always the recreating a past from the present point of view in which they survive, innervated in the time of life of each one. It’s those facts and those encounters that, for reasons difficult to explain, emerge in the act of remembering, maybe to the detriment of others”.

¹² “Autobiography means discrimination and selection in the face of the endless complexity of life, selection of facts, distribution of emphases, and choice of expression. Everything depends on the standpoint chosen [...]” (Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, cit., p. 10).

There are several difficulties. In the first place, the enormous number of things I can remember; in the second, the number of different ways in which memoirs can be written. As a great memoir reader, I know many different ways. But if I begin to go through them and to analyse them and their merits and faults, the mornings – I cannot take more than two or three at most – will be gone. So without stopping to choose my way, in the sure and certain knowledge that it will find itself – or if not it will not matter – I begin: the first memory¹³.

The “excuses” Woolf puts forward seem to sink quickly. The “lack of time” to which Woolf refers seems to be hiding the refusal to control and reorder one’s own experience. Not only did the author continuously postpone the writing of her autobiography, but she actually failed to begin. The author’s basic belief is that one cannot grasp any truth; therefore there is a substantial lack of authenticity in any autobiography. What a difference this is looking back to the ideas expressed a few years before, when she considered that blunt autobiography was the only “true” form of literature, because, to paraphrase the author, unlike the novel, it can provide some truth about the person.

As you know, of all literature [...] I love autobiography most. In fact I sometimes think only autobiography is literature – novels are what we peel off, and come at last to the core, which is only you or me. And I think this little book – why so small? – peels off all the things I do not like in fiction and leaves the thing I do like – you¹⁴.

In any case, the landing place of Virginia Woolf’s ideas, which support the impossibility of the rebuilding of the self, act as forerunners to all of the deconstructionist and poststructuralist theories which actually go on to corroborate the same principles that do not believe much in the reliability of the autobiographical text. The deconstructionists put into serious question the seemingly stable points established by Philippe Lejeune in support of the illusory referentiality (referentiality around which the thesis of the French philosopher is developed) of autobiographical writing. In the essay *Autobiography as De-facement* – in which the author questions the genre itself – Paul de Man explains how, in his opinion, it is not possible to reveal the thin line that exists between facts and fiction in the autobiographical narration, proclaiming, as Jonathan Gil Harris explains: “The impossibility of autobiography, or at least the impossibility of

¹³ V. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, The Hogarth Press, London 1978.

¹⁴ V. Woolf, in J. Trautmann Banks (ed.), *Congenial Spirits: Selected Letters*, Random House, London 2003, p. 319.

separating it from other genres of fiction on the grounds that it has a ‘real’ referent”¹⁵. Hence the comparison with the rotary movement of the *revolving door* symbolizing the sense of loss which grips the autobiographer when he is preparing to narrate the facts of his existence:

The distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but it is undecidable. But is it possible to remain, as Genette would have it, within an undecidable situation? As anyone who has ever been caught in a revolving door or on a revolving wheel can testify, it is certainly most uncomfortable, and all the more so in this case since this whirligig is capable of infinite acceleration and is, in fact, not successive but simultaneous. A system of differentiation based on two elements, which, in Wordsworth’s phrase, “[are] neither, and [are] both at once” is not likely to be sound¹⁶.

On the one hand, the speech of Paul de Man has the merit of contributing heavily to exposing the deceptions which can hide behind the autobiographical writing. On the other hand, it appears to present the limit of non-acceptance of the necessary “compromise”. Literature, as well as language, is always based on a series of compromises which allow readers to cross the unbridgeable distance that exists between meanings which are stated, the words, and those which are suggested, the feelings. The compromise (which is part of the “flexibility”) for genres and literary texts is a necessary element.

Unsurprisingly, Levi-Strauss had little luck in praising the rigidity of artwork. In fact, as Giovanni Bottiroli says: “The flexibility of artwork is, in Straus, not only ignored, but refused”¹⁷.

¹⁵ J. G. Harris, *Shakespeare and Literary Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, p. 50. It is interesting to notice, as Harris himself says (ivi, p. 52), that “of course, de Man’s insistence on the impossibility of autobiography has been interpreted by some of his critics as a devious refusal to own his controversial life story”.

¹⁶ P. de Man, *Autobiography as De-facement*, in “Modern Language Notes”, 94, 5, 1979, p. 926.

¹⁷ G. Bottiroli, *Che cos’è la teoria della letteratura*, Einaudi, Torino 2006, p. 98.

THE CRITICAL DEBATE

1.1 What is an autobiography?

Under the term *autobiography*, the *Oxford Dictionary* states: “[It] is an account of a person’s life written by that person”¹. We can see the etymology of the noun *autobiography* (formed by three Greek words: *autós*, “self” *bios*, “life” and *grápho*, “I write”) and so the sense of its decomposition into three phonemes: the description (*graphia*) of a single human life (*bios*) by the same individual (*auto*). The artificial term *autobiography* is recent, as it appeared only around the end of the eighteenth century, first in German literature, then in English literature².

Historically, the term “autobiography” is clearly of recent and occidental origin. The OED ‘credits Southey with the first usage in 1809’, Michael Sprinker assures us, whereas Olney claims that the first autobiography was published by W. P. Scargill in 1834, or perhaps by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 1760s³.

It is relevant to say that the word is much more recent than the concept of autobiography itself, as *The Confessions* by Saint Agostino (written between 397 and 400) demonstrates. The word ‘autobiography’ became current during the nineteenth century, often replacing the word used previously: *memoirs*.

¹ A. S. Hornby, *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, ed. by S. Wehmeier, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 29.

² G. Mish, *History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, Routledge-Kegan Paul, London 1950, vol. 1, p. 5.

³ E. Kern, *Review of Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical. Edited by James Olney, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1980*, in “the Modern language review”, 76, 4, October, 1981, pp. 918-20, in <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3727204?seq=2>

In this application the word of French origin corresponds to the Latin *commentarii*, which in turn served as a reproduction of a Greek conception (hypomnemata) [...]. This conception includes a definite type of writing irrespective of their content – those only sketched or written without care. Thus the word “memoirs” has no personal connotation, or at least had none originally or until recent times. It can serve as a title for notes of purely factual content, such as official reports of business done or the proceedings of a learned society, just as it can for an autobiographical record. In the latter sense men spoke and probably still speak of *personal memoirs*. In itself, the word simply expresses the unpretentiousness of the writing in question in the matter of literary form, implying that the author has or affects to have no intention at all of coming forward as a literary person. He proposes only to supply material for a literary work that may be compiled by a future historian, or serve for research in other ways⁴

The word *autobiography*, when intended as a literary genre, has undergone continuous adjustments of meaning. Carla Locatelli asserts:

The notion of “Autobiography” is among the most radically reworked in the age of contemporary and deconstructive criticism, and predictably so, since new designations of *subjectivity and writing*; of the borders of *literality and figuratively* in language; and of *allegory and performance* in discourse, have defined the received definitions of each one of these terms, and theorists have striven to re-“define” them⁵.

As Mish affirms, the establishment of autobiography as a real literary genre, following the new terminology “autobiography”, dates back to the age of Enlightenment⁶:

Since the epoch of the enlightenment in England, France and Germany, various writers have recognized the importance of the literature of autobiography and have made it the subject of learned works⁷.

It is important to note that “unexpectedly numerous are the autobiographical documents which we find among the ancient civilized people”⁸. However,

⁴ Mish, *History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, cit., pp. 6-7.

⁵ C. Locatelli, *Is s/he my Gaze? (Feminist) Possibility for Autobiographical Co(n)texts*, in M. Botalico, M. T. Chialant (edited by), *L'impulso autobiografico*, Liguori, Naples 2005, p. 3.

⁶ 6. Starace (*Il racconto della vita*, cit., p. 183) affirms that: “It is not exaggerated to affirm that the birth of autobiography, taken place around the mid-1700s, proves a small revolution, because it breaks a taboo, a kind of deeply rooted modesty, which looks inside oneself in a disillusioned way”.

⁷ Mish, *History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, cit., p. 1.

a radical change of the autobiographical genre has been found since the eighteenth century. From this period, in fact:

The history of autobiography intertwines intimately to an always more refined idea of subjectivity and with a perspective that emphasizes in a well-defined way the personal feeling, intimate to how the person feels. In the beginning it still has the confused and partial nature of confession, since it brings out the sins, negligence and weaknesses; but, potentially, it already expresses those needs that gave a decisive boost to its spread⁹.

As for the modern conception of autobiography, a strong impetus towards the literary genre arrived at the second half of the twentieth century. In particular, concerning the concept of autobiography in the past century, it becomes clear that, passing by the concepts of autobiography of the late nineteenth century, when the truth about one's life and one's self only seemed to be expressed by the narrating self, arriving at a new concept of genre that is, the conviction of the extreme difficulties when grasping the reality and of the necessity to consider different *points of view*. This concept is expressed by authors such as Henry James and William Butler Yeats:

The Victorian model of autobiography reduced to the story of an existential wreck would not last [...]. For James "knocking on the door of the past meant to see it thrust open" [...]. But he realizes that he cannot carry out a selection among memories [...]. The past should not be judged, much less should it be rebuilt with the mentality of a historian. In turn, the story cannot be obliged to strictly observe the chronological sequence of events [...]. A memory brings out another, and still another is dragged into the net to which it is tied, a bit at a time [...]. In the autobiography, James did not see the opportunity for the exhaustive narration of a part of his existence [...]. The story of the events loses the centrality that up until then no one had ever questioned [...]. Victorian autobiography viewed the event as if the memory was an instrument of pure recording of the past – and not infrequently the author's apologies for not remembering everything with the precision that he would have desired¹⁰.

Unlike other authors of the Victorian period, the concept of memory changes radically in the *Autobiographies*¹¹ of William Butler Yeats:

⁸ Ivi, p. 19.

⁹ Starace, *Il racconto della vita*, cit., pp. 183-4.

¹⁰ Bonante, *Rendiconti vittoriani*, cit., p. 125.

¹¹ W. Butler Yeats, *Autobiographies*, Macmillan, London 1966.

In Yeats, memory is instead fundamentally linked to the present and therefore it brings the past back to the light only in the form imposed by the present [...]. The Victorian intellectual could be more or less reticent on many issues, but he was still convinced of the objectivity of what he was writing. Instead Yeats and James wanted to rebuild the self at the time, beyond any conditioning¹².

The Irish poet tries, through the writing of his own autobiography, to represent the crisis of the individual, which was strongly felt in the twentieth century, as well as the impossibility of representation that becomes in the *Autobiographies* a sort of challenge. The text will end up looking like a meta-autobiography that highlights the limits of memory and self-analysis. The scenario of “complex societies”¹³ can no longer be told through the certainties of single individuals, who are mostly only able to catch some fragments of their lives without being able to ensure their veracity. In the last century, which closed the second millennium, the only possible autobiography was the one which staged the shattering of the self and of the same elusive and illusory truth.

The establishment of autobiography as a true literary genre has had many difficulties, and some critics, like for instance Paul Valéry, even supported the idea of the impossibility to affirm autobiography as a genre: “There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography”¹⁴. In 1979, in one of the essays representing a milestone for the studies of autobiography, Paul de Man stressed that: “Empirically, as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition”¹⁵ and hence, just like Avrom Fleishman affirms: “Autobiography is not generically distinguished by formal constituents, linguistic register, or audience effects”; autobiography “therefore has no history as a genre”¹⁶.

Opposing opinions are those of Philippe Lejeune who, comforted by the studies of authors such as Richard G. Lillard, Louis Kaplan, William Matthews, Roy Pascal and Wayne Shumaker, has shared the will to

¹² Bonante, *Rendiconti vittoriani*, cit., p. 128.

¹³ Regarding the notion of “complex societies” Cf. P. Macry, *La società contemporanea*, il Mulino, Bologna 1995.

¹⁴ P. Valéry, in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. by James Olney, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1980, p. XI.

¹⁵ De Man, *Autobiography as De-facement*, cit., p. 920.

¹⁶ A. Fleishman, *Figures of Autobiography: The Language of Self-Writing in Victorian and Modern England*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1983, p. 36.

formulate a definition of a genre with them and to constitute a *corpus* of texts¹⁷.

The establishment of autobiography as a genre on its own is supported by Lejeune, who, in *The Autobiographical pact*, structurally cements its characterization, defining the necessary structure of a text so that it can be considered autobiographical. Lejeune's canon includes the following obligations:

1. Formal: narrative prose in the past;
2. Regarding the content: individual story and not collective or social;
3. Moral: narration of stories "actually experienced", required to comply with reality and sincerity.

Lejeune marks a decisive theoretical step with which other critics will need to compare their ideas. Moreover an important turning point was marked by new deconstructionist conceptions by Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero, which support a real "unreliability of any autobiography"¹⁸. Cavarero's concept regarding autobiographical unreliability is explained in the volume *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti* through the stories of real people and fictional characters: Karen Blixen, Oedipus, Borges, Ulysses, Rilke, Sheherazade and Euridice, whose myths are cited to demonstrate how an individual can receive, through external narration, his own portrait, and can therefore communicate and understand the meaning of his life. One's inability to understand oneself emerges, and consequently the meaning of one's own autobiography can be gathered only by an external entity. Taking the character of Oedipus for example, Cavarero writes:

From other people's narration Oedipus comes to learn about his true birth and, therefore, his true story: a tremendous story that makes him a parricide and incestuous [...]. Oedipus does not know who he is because he ignores his birth, only the story of his birth can then reveal the story of which he is the protagonist [...]. Who Oedipus is, is said by [...] the

¹⁷ Cf. R. G. Lillard, *American Life in Autobiography: A Descriptive Guide*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1956; L. Kaplan *et al.*, *A Bibliography of American Autobiographies*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1961; W. Matthews, *British Autobiographies: An Annotated Bibliography of British Autobiographies Published or Written before 1951*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1955; Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, cit.; W. Shumaker, *English Autobiography: Its Emergence, Materials, and Forms*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1954.

¹⁸ A. Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1997, p. 25.

narration of his story [...]. But we must add a clarification: *others* are the ones who tell him *his* story¹⁹.

As Oedipus comes to understand the “truth” of his life through external narration, an external narration will also make Ulysses understand the meaning of his challenges and who, unlike Oedipus, apparently does not ignore anything about his past life, of his deeds, but, even so, he only seems to understand the deep meaning by listening, anonymously, to the narration of the blind poet.

This, in Cavarero’s opinion, is a paradox:

How could Ulysses weep for the effects related to the biographical story, if he, himself, is able to tell his autobiography? Why, as it has already happened to Oedipus, and whatever the circumstances of his birth were, is the meaning of identity *always* entrusted to others’ narrative of one’s own life story?

Cavarero comes to a partial response hypothesis explaining the reasons for the sorrow of Ulysses. The answer to his tears does not necessarily come from the fact that the external narrative has enabled Ulysses to understand the meaning of his biography. Cavarero, however, seems to support the theory that Ulysses cries because the narrative of his biography makes him understand the true meaning of his deeds, which, although *his own*, are understood only through the biographical narrative of another person:

Hannah Arendt would not have any difficulty in dissolving this strange paradox. It follows from the fact that the category of personal identity always postulates *the other person* as necessary²⁰.

Returning to the development and changes of the autobiographical genre, we should remember the path that leads Cavarero and Arendt to their

¹⁹ Ivi, pp. 20-2.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 31. – Although welcoming the suggestive hypothesis of Cavarero with due respect, it is also possible to speculate that the tears of Ulysses are not representative of the knowledge of the self but rather of the re-cognition of the self through the well-known captivating and emotional force that any great art owns and which is able to project on those who are the spectators. But we could add that, in some way, Cavarero involuntarily arrives at another truth: the ‘other’, able to grasp the autobiographical identity, actually exists. It is not, though, an external person from the autobiographer, but rather his present “I” that is analysing, reviewing and rewriting his past “Is” (See what G. Starace says in note n° 46).

individual solutions²¹. Starting in the 1960s, the writers to give a strong contribution to the studies of the autobiographical genre were the aforementioned Roy Pascal with *Design and Truth in Autobiography*²² and Jean Starobinski with *L'oeil vivant*.²³ Both are seen as real precursors of Philippe Lejeune. In those years, also in Italy, people started paying increasingly more attention to autobiography as a more diffused genre, considered, until then, “less important” by critics.

It is no coincidence that the magazine directed by Gianfranco Folena “Quaderni di retorica e Poetica” (“Notebooks Rhetoric and Poetics”) (Padua, Liviana Publishing) has dedicated three numbers to the “primary forms of writing.” – *La lettera familiare* (1985, 1), *Le forme del diario* (1985, 2) and *L'autobiografia: il vissuto e il narrato* (1986, 1)²⁴.

In 1950, Georg Mish gave this definition of the autobiographical genre:

Autobiography is unlike any other form of literary composition. Its boundaries are more fluid and less definable in relation to form than those of lyric or epic poetry or of drama, which, in spite of variations from age to age, from nation to nation, and from work to work, have preserved unity of form throughout their development, since their first emergence from the obscure and undifferentiated beginnings of literature. Autobiography is a cultural innovation, and yet it springs from the most natural source, the joy in self-communication and in enlisting the sympathetic understanding of others; or the need for self-assertion. In itself it is a representation of life that is committed to no definite form²⁵.

A few years later Philippe Lejeune tried to give a clearer form to the genre providing new insights into the studies of autobiographical writing with the volume *Le pacte autobiographique* and trying to establish the parameters of the genre, that is a set of formal rules, intended to classify a text as “autobiographical”. We owe one of the most precise definitions of the autobiographical genre to the French critic: “A retrospective prose story that a real person relates about his or her own existence, in which he

²¹ In the deconstructionist field, important contributions will be provided by P. de Man in *Autobiography as De-facement* (1979) and J. Derrida in *L'oreille de l'autre. Otobiographies, transferts, traductions* (1982).

²² Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, cit.

²³ J. Starobinski, *L'oeil vivant*, Gallimard, Paris 1961.

²⁴ Bottalico, Chialant (edited by), *L'impulso autobiografico*, cit., p. XI.

²⁵ Mish, *History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, cit., p. 4.

or she gives emphasis to his or her individual life, and to the history of his or her personality in particular”²⁶.

As Smorti stated:

Lejeune highlights three aspects of the autobiographical perspective. It places itself on a *retrospective viewpoint*, it is focused on the *individual life* and it concerns its *own existence*; in other words, it refers to something that could be defined as a history of a life which was concretely lived and that therefore is ontologically given²⁷.

Among the restrictions imposed by Lejeune there is the need for the absolute coinciding of the author’s identity and the protagonist. To have an autobiography (and more generally intimate literature) there must be an identity between the *author*, the *narrator* and the *protagonist*²⁸; the autobiography assumes that there is an identity of name between the author, the narrator of the story and the character which is discussed²⁹. This definition, being innovative, has offered an essential contribution, and critics, therefore, have not delayed in turning their attention towards the thesis of Lejeune.

As Annamaria Laserra clarifies:

Particularly interesting is Michel Beaujour’s speech, who has shown that if it is true that the strict definition “of genre” offered by Lejeune applies quite well to certain works (we can refer to the *Confessions* by Rousseau), it leaves out a wide range of texts that are characterized by elements of expression of the person who could be attributed to an autobiographical writing not equivalent to the definition he formulated³⁰.

²⁶ P. Lejeune, *Il patto autobiografico*, it. translation by F. Santini, il Mulino, Bologna 1986, p. 12.

²⁷ A. Smorti, *Il sé come testo*, Giunti, Florence 2004, p. 86.

²⁸ Ivi, p. 13.

²⁹ Starace (*Il racconto della vita*, cit., p. 28) has clarified that “the fact that there is a physical correspondence between the two individuals does not mean that there is also a psychological one. To be able to reflect on oneself and to produce some autobiographical material, a distancing between the narrating self and the self-narrated is necessary, otherwise the person of the story would risk not being pointed out, to not be able to propose itself to the mental attention. As a result, what happens is that the one who is narrating and the one who is narrated become two people: for this reason autobiography is much closer to biography than what we might think”.

³⁰ A. Laserra, *Tra il sé e l’altro*, in Bottalico, Chialant (edited by), *L’impulso autobiografico*, cit., p. 23.

Therefore Beaujour suggests a new and alternative definition of “autobiography” as a “self-portrait” in order to overcome these shortcomings. In particular, the author takes into account the splitting of the self and the impossibility of any theory of the identity's reunification: “The self-portrait is written from a fall in the formless and disoriented space that is carved into the loss of one's security”³¹. Hence, in the Seventies and Eighties the definition of autobiography was confined by two different and far apart conceptions: the first, from Lejeune, considers autobiography as an expression of the writing of a unitary “I”, which tries to unify itself; the second, from Beaujour, is a conception that perceives the self as a multiple element, decentralized and shattered³².

In addition to the debate between Lejeune and Beaujour there were many polemical discussions which testify that at any time and under different perspectives the statements about the identity of the writer and his relationship with writing have rarely produced and offered full and decisive answers about the uniqueness and the stability of the self. We might, at this point, say that although it does not seem to be difficult, currently, to accept a large part of the definitions and obligations of Lejeune in order for a text to be defined as autobiographical, a few objections can be proposed on the necessity of the first formal obligation; that is, the need to narrate autobiographical events through the exclusive use of prose. In fact, as Paul John Eakin stated, the work of Lejeune at first:

proceeded to emphasize that his definition was expressly intended to distinguish proper autobiography from a related kind of series of autobiographical writing in adjacent genres, including memoirs, the autobiographical novel, the autobiographical poem, and the diary. Doubtless English readers would be quick to object to the exclusion of poetry, which would involve the refusal of a well-established tradition running from Wordsworth and Byron to Robert Lowell and John Berryman, and including Whitman, Eliot, and many others³³.

And so, here, poetry is completely put aside. What is the reason of this cut? We will have a chance to discuss it in the following paragraphs. Paul John Eakin agrees with the idea that autobiography generally tends to be in the form of prose, since this genre is more suitable to define the contours

³¹ M. Beaujour, *Miroirs d'encre*, Seuil, Paris 1980, p. 335.

³² Laserra, *Tra il sé e l'altro*, cit., p. 23.

³³ P. J. Eakin, *Preface*, in P. Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis 1989, p. VIII.

of our lives over time³⁴. He also focuses on the complexity of Lejeune's thoughts – which, on the one hand, had theorised that an ideal autobiography can be identified as *a story without narrative*, and, on the other hand, had defined the autobiographical genre as a *retrospective narrative, the story of a personality*. He was, therefore, alleged to be contradictory. However, we may come upon a duality in the personality of Lejeune, one side of whom appears tired of the traditional chronological order of the conventional autobiographical genre and is fascinated by the experimental innovations in the autobiographical genre. The other Lejeune, on the contrary, remains firm on the importance of the traditional chronological order.³⁵

The critique developed by Paul Ricoeur, Avrom Fleishman and Janet Varner Gunn proposes a correlation between the time structure of the autobiography and “the essential narrative of human experience.”³⁶ In this sense, the presence of chronology in the autobiographical genre might be considered as a manifestation of the inevitable temporality of human experience.

1.2 The problem of time. Narrative order in an autobiography

Which order should an author of an autobiography follow? Nine autobiographies out of ten begin with the moment of birth and thereafter follow a chronological order.

Autobiography, at least beyond the naïve level, does not necessarily consist of remembered empirical experiences. Autobiography oriented writers above the naïve level demonstrate a striking common characteristic: an obsessive preoccupation with the chronological aspect of time³⁷.

According to Burton Pike this concern with time has two aspects: the first is “psychobiological, within the individual”, the second,

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Cf. P. Ricoeur, *Narrative Time*, in “Critical Inquire”, 7, 1980, pp. 169-90; Fleishman, *Figures of Autobiography*, cit., pp. 475-8; J. Varner Gunn, *Autobiography and the Narrative Experience of Temporality as Depth*, in “Soundings”, 60, 1977, pp. 194-209.

³⁷ Pike, *Time in Autobiography*, cit., p. 327.

frequently overlooked, is the role played by culture in determining the individual's conceptions of time and his sense of himself. Different cultures see time and its relation to life differently. Japanese culture of a given period, for instance, will have different attitudes toward time and personal identity than post-Renaissance Europe³⁸.

However, as Maurice Halbwachs claims, the autobiographer inevitably meets some difficulties in complying with this order. Sometimes the memories are not clear: the dates may be inaccurate, there may be confusion of periods, memory can deceive us; there may be many difficulties. Certainly we perceive the scanning of time in our lives according to a straight chronological path and it is natural that chronology, the basis of our history, retains an essential role in the narration of a life³⁹. In a similar way the act of remembering seems difficult to Giovanni Starace. According to him, for the autobiographer

past life appears to be shrouded in a cloud that blurs time and events. People and things can seem so distant and faded to the point of becoming unreal. We may be wondering: have they ever existed? And many events seem so far away as if they belonged to another life, with the result that all passed existence shortens in a moment, in a fragment that runs away when you try to catch it⁴⁰.

Expedients such as flashbacks, previews and recaps show that the time scan that follows the chronological order is unnatural, since the author is constantly obliged to break it. But who forces them to use a linear structure? Why do they not create a style that is better suited to their experience?

The autobiographer sees his life as a somehow coherent identity, a line which begins with his birth and runs up to the present of writing. The continuation of this line into the future, where it will end with his death, is known to the writer as a certainty but not as a fact⁴¹.

In the story of one's existence there is the need to mark time. Of course, this also occurs through the inclusion of interruptions, scanning the time that characterizes different events. According to Hans Leowald, the experience of the disintegration of that time *continuum* is important and it is thanks to this that we hold our world together, the mutual relations and

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ M. Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la memoire*, PUF, Paris 1952.

⁴⁰ Starace, *Il racconto della vita*, cit., pp. 21-2.

⁴¹ Pike, *Time in Autobiography*, cit., pp. 327-8.

the connections between past, present and future [...]. Every moment loses any relationship with other instants and it stands by itself, isolated from the continuum of time⁴².

Moreover, the temporal order may also be considered as a means of self-protection being able to bring order and stability to our existence and our thoughts. Aldo Gargani writes: “Faced with the unlimited and boundless reality, we take refuge in the protection of history, of chronology, of sequence”⁴³.

As briefly mentioned earlier, in the book *On Autobiography* Philippe Lejeune identifies a major renovation in the autobiographical narrative structure, made in particular by two modern writers: Michel Leiris⁴⁴ and Jean-Paul Sartre. In fact, the two authors seemed aware that such innovation would involve a radical renewal of anthropology and of the description models of human beings. The universe of the traditional novel is subverted by these writers, who propose a language that goes beyond the classic one in order to transgress the limits usually imposed by this last one to the reader and to the author himself. In this way new experiences of literary creation are created. Sartre shows the dialectical aspect of his investigation; he is not a scientist who studies an object. Sartre himself and the methods he uses are the product of the society that he is going to study. Autobiography is therefore in Sartre – paraphrasing Lejeune – a moment of dialectical investigation, a moment of vertigo and metamorphosis. Through this folding in on oneself, a new beginning of the investigation is possible⁴⁵.

The text of Sartre, *Les mots (The Words)*, is an autobiography with an apparently traditional structure. The very beginning is the classic one: Sartre gives us his family tree, tells us about his birth, his father’s death, etc. Then he traces the story of his childhood, presenting scenic designs with very crude outlines, using precise and lucid language. The theme of solitude is central, where the only handhold is the symbolic and fascinating use of words that turn into acceptable “truths”. The word becomes the only protection of the self, a self that perceives itself as alone, abandoned and useless, thrown into the world, resulting in a split personality, divided by the confusion of losing his identity whilst

⁴² H. W. Leowald, *The Experience of Time*, in “The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child”, 27, 1973, p. 406.

⁴³ A. G. Gargani, *Il testo del tempo*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1992, p. 7.

⁴⁴ Cf. P. Lejeune, *Lire Leiris: Autobiographie et langage*, Klincksieck, Paris 1975, p. 16. Cf. also Michel Leiris, *Autobiographie et poésie*, in Id., *Le pacte autobiographique*, Seuil, Paris 1975, pp. 245-307.

⁴⁵ Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, cit., p. 75.

unveiling certain “Self truths” prompted by the magic of words discovered in the volumes of his grandfather’s library:

I have begun my life and no doubt I will end it among books. In the office of my grandfather they were everywhere. It was forbidden to dust it, except once a year, before the reopening of schools. I did not know how to read yet, but I was already revering these dense stones: upright or inclined, narrow like bricks on the shelves of the library or nobly spaced apart in avenues of standing stones, I felt that the prosperity of our family depended on them [...]. I touched them secretly to honour my hands with the dust, but I was not sure what to do with them and I attended a ceremonial every day, the meaning of which escaped me: my grandfather – usually so clumsy that my mother even had to button up his gloves – handled those cultural objects with the dexterity of an officiant [...]. Sometimes I got closer to observe these boxes that opened as if they were oysters, and would discover the nudity of their inner organs, pale and musty sheets, slightly puffed up, covered with black veins, which absorbed the ink and gave off a scent of mushroom⁴⁶.

After presenting the story of his childhood, believing that the main features of his neurosis have been extensively outlined, Sartre proposes a brief statement concerning the relationship between his present, his childhood and his promise to tell the story of the crisis which allowed him to get out of it.

I have changed. I will tell you later about which acids corroded the distorting transparencies that were covering me, when and how I served my apprenticeship to violence and discovered my ugliness – which for a long time was my negative principle, the quicklime in which the wonderful child was dissolved –, I shall also explain the reason why I came to think systematically against myself, to the extent of measuring the obvious truth of an idea by the displeasure it caused. The retrospective illusion is in crumbs; martyrdom, salvation, immortality, everything deteriorates, the building falls into ruin, I collared the Holy Spirit in the cellar and threw him out; atheism is a cruel and long-range affair: I think I have carried it through. I see clearly, I have lost my illusions; I know what my real jobs are; I surely deserve a prize for good citizenship. For the last ten years or so, I have been a man who has been waking up and who cannot get over the fact, a man who cannot think of his old ways without laughing and who does not know what to do with himself.⁴⁷

Burton Pike clarifies that for writers like Sartre

⁴⁶ J.-P. Sartre, *Le parole*, it. trans. by L. De Nardis, NET, Milano 2002, pp. 31-2.

⁴⁷ J.-P. Sartre, *Le parole*, trans. it. by L. De Nardis, il Saggiatore, Milano 1994, p. 174.