

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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In 1975, Phillipe Lejeune coined a definition of autobiography that has now been widely quoted and scathingly criticised. His idea of autobiography came under attack mainly because it implied an identity between author, narrator and protagonist that was hard to maintain after the death of the author. Naïve though it might sound, Lejeune's definition has the merit to have exposed major fissures in literary theory and criticism. Indeed, it has spurred vigorous debate and stirred critical controversy in the study of narrative and poetry. It implied that to discuss autobiography is also to inquire into matters of representation, authorship, selfhood, gender, the role of the reader in the interpretation of texts, the limits between fact and fiction, let alone the tangled relationship between memory, narrative, and the narrated past. Considering these issues, Linda Anderson's *Autobiography* (2011) is a momentous introduction to the study of this genre. Her book pithily synthesizes the core issues concerning the study of autobiography and walks the reader through incisive critical readings of seminal autobiographical texts.

In chapter one, "Historians of the self", Anderson examines texts that set up the dominant tradition of autobiographical writing in Western culture. She starts her analysis by Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, which historically created a model for later autobiographical texts. She then goes over *Grace Abounding* to show how John Bunyan founded his authority on a personal account of his calling and spiritual journey towards grace. "Like Augustine's, Bunyan's narrative takes its form from the experience of

spiritual conversion, though there is nothing to suggest that Bunyan was directly influenced by, or indeed had even read, the *Confessions*” (ANDERSON, 2011: 26). Nevertheless, Anderson argues cogently that Augustine’s *Confessions* shares with Bunyan’s Puritan selfhood the emphasis on a search for redemption of the self’s incoherence and sinfulness through an attempt to unite with God. Next she analyses Rousseau’s *Confessions* and Wordsworth’s *Prelude* from the deconstructionist perspective of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, and argues the case that in the end “there is only writing” (ANDERSON, 2011: 12). She then explains that in spite of being open to dispute, the notion of Romantic selfhood has continued to influence the writing and understanding of autobiography.

The second chapter, “Subjectivity, representation and narrative”, focuses on the works of Sigmund Freud, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. Anderson sees their writings as both theorizations and practices of autobiography. According to her, one of Freud’s most notable insights is his idea that the past can be retroactively altered by the present. For her, in “(...) treating history as developmental or evolutionary, a process with a beginning and an implied goal or telos, Freud could be seen as the inheritor of the great explanatory narratives of the nineteenth century” (ANDERSON, 2011: 58). That way, the past “creates the foundation of the present and future and illuminates the flaws and diversions as well as the normal pattern for individual growth” (ANDERSON, 2011: 58). Hence the past “can enter the present only as repetition or intrusive memory, disrupting linearity and giving rise to a more complex temporality” (ANDERSON, 2011: 58).

As for Barthes, Anderson concludes that his autobiography – *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1997) – is in fact his attempt to “write an autobiography ‘against itself’” (ANDERSON, 2011: 66). In other words, Barthes’s book “deconstructs from

within the major assumptions underlying the genre” (ANDERSON, 2011, p. 66) whilst it claims to be an autobiography. As she plausibly argues, the way multiple subjects arbitrarily exchange positions in Barthes’ autobiography is both a marked departure from tradition and an “(...) attempt to reinforce the effect of distance between the writer and the written text” (ANDERSON, 2011, p. 66). With this, Barthes attempts to resist and dismantle the ideologically illusory construct according to which the subject hides a profound essence that awaits revelation. Hence, the subject for Barthes can only be redeemed in the discourse in which “(...) he constructs and deconstructs himself” (ANDERSON, 2011: 67).

Linda Anderson’s arguments are spot-on when she affirms that Derrida pushes Barthes’ rejection of autobiographical convention to its limit and “(...) scatters autobiography as a motif or theme throughout his work” (ANDERSON, 2011: 74). As she plausibly argues, autobiography for Derrida operates by deconstructing its putative theoretical or rational foundations. It is a “(...) demand for unmediated selfhood [seemingly] doomed to reiterate itself endlessly as text” (ANDERSON, 2011: 74). Yet this should not imply that autobiography has ceased to exist for Derrida. On the contrary, her analysis shows that for Derrida autobiography continues to exist with a different meaning. In her words, “Derrida wants to think about autobiography as operating in a new space in a completely different way” (ANDERSON, 2011: 76).

In the third chapter, Anderson tackles what she calls “other subjects”, and addresses topics as diverse as gender, modernism and autobiography, as well as postcolonial subjects. Anderson devotes special attention to the critical engagement of Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) with issues concerning the writing of women’s lives. She highlights Woolf’s massive influence on present-day debates about writing and sexual difference. This influence, she argues, is a direct consequence of Woolf’s questioning

“(…) from a feminist perspective [of]traditional accounts of the subject” (ANDERSON, 2011: 86). Anderson’s premise in this chapter is that Woolf nurtured an ambivalent relationship with autobiographical writing. Woolf was simultaneously fascinated by autobiography as a genre and resistant “(…) to many of its assumptions and values” (ANDERSON, 2011: 86). Anderson goes on to argue that Woolf has “(…) emerged as a pre-eminent ‘deconstructionist’ feminist” (ANDERSON, 2011: 88) because she established a connection between difference and discourse. Indeed, her experimentation with language and literary form makes room for “(…) something new to emerge; she defers meaning, opening up a space of difference within discourse” (ANDERSON, 2011: 89). And this creates affinities between Woolf’s writing and poststructuralist thinking. In the words of Anderson, for Woolf lives and books cannot be separated; nor can identities from their representation. Hence “(…) much of what we think of as ‘true’ or historically given, is really an ideological construct; in other words, a fiction” (ANDERSON, 2011: 90). By implication, “(…) the unity and confidence of that universal ‘I’ claimed by the masculine subject” (ANDERSON, 2011: 95) is brought into question and de-centered.

Still in the same chapter, Anderson writes about postcolonial subjects and investigates the notion of ‘hybridity’. For her, “(…) hybridity is produced as an effect of colonial power which must endlessly produce difference in order to justify its authority” (ANDERSON, 2011: 107). Hence, hybridity never allows the “(…) return to a ‘wholeness’ which exists prior to the colonial encounter” (ANDERSON, 2011: 107). The concept of hybridity is therefore crucial for postcolonial criticism in that colonialism generates crossovers and mobility as a consequence of diasporas. Yet if the endless production of difference is the precondition to colonial authority, then the logicity of a postcolonial identity can be questioned. In Anderson’s words,

“postcolonial ‘identity’ could be seen as a contradiction in terms, therefore, seeming to arrest the movement of differences and gather under one heading a multiplicity of countries and locations” (2011: 107). In view of these gender and postcolonial issues, she concludes that “the autobiographical subjects are cast adrift from patriarchal origins and must endlessly reinvent themselves, their location and community along with new forms of autobiography” (ANDERSON, 2011: 107).

Chapter four, “Narrative”, focuses on contemporary memoir writing. In this chapter, Anderson sets out to inquire into the limit between the private and the public in such type of text. According to her, the obsessive self-exposure and cult of personality in contemporary culture has made memoir writing from the 1990s onwards analogous to “(...) contemporary developments in other popular documentary forms such as reality TV” (ANDERSON, 2011: 114). The analogy here is as clarifying as it is thought-provoking. Anderson argues the case that memoirs and reality TV overlap in their need to “(...) find provisional settings which can both extend and confirm the meaning of the individual and the personal” (ANDERSON, 2011: 114). Indeed, both forms of entertainment do construct a reality that is at once “(...) codified and commodified, both ‘real’ and ‘fantastic’” (ANDERSON, 2011: 115). Despite her stringent take on memoirs, Anderson admits that these texts can be vital to uncover taboos and secrets. They can do so by “communicating painful experience, extending the reader’s sympathies or allowing them therapeutically to face their own anxieties and fears through the courageous openness of a surrogate” (ANDERSON, 2011: 115). To support her arguments, she scrutinizes significant contemporary memoirs, and concludes that the death of parents is a key trope in these narratives. She also gives a compendious account of the relationship between memoir and blogging that reiterates the importance of Adriana Cavarero’s description of “narratable selves” in this universe. Anderson deems Cavarero’s notion

relevant because these subjects are “(...) making a home for themselves in the ongoing process of telling their stories, narrating themselves without end” (2011: 124).

In chapter five, “Practising autobiography”, Anderson readdresses the interrelationship between criticism and autobiography and sees the latter “(...) as a form of witnessing which ‘matters to others’” (ANDERSON, 2011: 130). She tacklestestimony from a poststructuralist perspective and concludes that it is a “(...) discursive practice, a speech act which draws meaning from its reception” (ANDERSON, 2011: 130). This is so because the resolution and the validity of its status rely heavily on a verdict. Indeed, the isolation imbricated in the nature of personal experience underlying testimony can only be overcome when the listener shares the “(...) ethical responsibility of bearing witness to what testimonial writing cannot directly represent” (ANDERSON, 2011: 130). As the listener’s position, race, history, moral, and ethical codes inevitably influence the way testimony is received, Anderson concludes that whilst “autobiography supplies few certainties or answers, its study leads us to engage with some of the most intractable and important cultural questions of our time” (ANDERSON, 2011: 139). Her statement addresses matters of truth and interpretation as it simultaneously justifies why the study of autobiographical writing in all its forms and variations is of relevance for contemporary literary theory and criticism.

In conclusion, Linda Anderson’s *Autobiography* presents a concise and balanced overview of the recent discussions in the studies on autobiography, the main theoretical challenges and ethical issues. Anderson combines successfully solid theoretical discussion with a style that is mercifully free of jargon. And this makes her book especially informative and extremely pleasurable to read. All things considered,

Autobiography is ideal for critics and scholars who want to start to explore the fine nuances and idiosyncrasies of a genre that persistently defies easy categorization.

References

ANDERSON, Linda. **Autobiography**. 2.ed. London: Routledge, 2011.