

THE «I» AND THE AUTHOR IN MODERN FRENCH
AUTOBIOGRAPHY MARGUERITE DURAS
AND ANNIE ERNAUX

*El «yo» y el autor en la autobiografía francesa
moderna de Marguerite Duras y Annie Ernaux*

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RESUMEN: La emergencia de lo individual ha dominado durante algún tiempo la esfera pública francesa. Esto es especialmente notable cuando se trata de la escritura autobiográfica. Las obras de Marguerite Duras y Annie Ernaux se centran en el individuo y la relación entre el «yo» y la figura del autor en términos generales, y nos proporcionan diversas claves sobre la importancia de la escritura autobiográfica en relación con sus vidas y personalidades. En el análisis de lo individual en su obra son especialmente relevantes los múltiples estratos de autoconsciencia.

Palabras clave: Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux, Autobiografía Francesa, Lo Individual, Autoconsciencia.

ABSTRACT: The emergence of the individual has for some time now dominated the public field in France. This is especially visible when it comes to autobiographical writing. Marguerite Duras's and Annie Ernaux's works address the focus on the individual and the relationship between the «I» and the author in general, and also hold various clues to the importance of autobiographical writing to their lives and personalities. Especially relevant in the examination of the individual in their writing are the multiple layers of self-consciousness.

Key words: Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux, French Autobiography, Individual, Self-consciousness.

The emergence of the individual has for some time now dominated the public field in France. This is reflected in the number of internet blogs and other confessional stories which have become media phenomena in recent times. Literary circles have also been influenced by this tendency. Especially noteworthy is the increasing visibility of authors. Their position has begun to resemble that of public figures who express opinions not only on their own work but also on various fields of society. Nowadays an author does not inevitably conform to the Romantic image of a lonely writer who creates masterpieces in his or her study, but is more so an individual whose character is an integral part of the reception of his or her literary work. This is not exclusive to French literary culture, and can be recognized in various European (and other) countries as well.

One particular genre that highlights individuality is autobiography. Autobiographical writing has become notably popular and contributes to the emphasis on individuality in current French literary culture¹. From those authors who have passed away one should mention at least Marguerite Duras, Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet as writers who were interested in the self. Noted contemporary French autobiographical authors include such personas as Anna Gavalda, Frédéric Beigbeber, Michel Houellebecq, Virginie Despentes, Hervé Guibert, Camille Laurens, and Marie Darrieussecq. Many of these authors are known both for their sensational subject matter as well as for their active media participation. Finnish researcher Päivi Kosonen, who focuses on autobiography, characterizes this literary phenomenon

1. The interest in autobiographical writing is not merely a contemporary phenomenon in France –as attested by some of the major works of its literary past which introduce the I as narrator: Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* (1580), in which he discusses various topics from a personal perspective, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Les Confessions* (1770/1782), which inaugurates the rise of the self through the relation of personal experiences and feelings.

as «the renaissance of the literature of the self». This tendency has been interpreted both positively and negatively: either as a salvation of the far too experimental French modern novel or as an egoistic enterprise that forgets community altogether (Kosonen, Meretoja and Mäkirinta 2008, 28). Although the word salvation might be somewhat of an exaggeration, it may still be highly relevant here. Mieke Bal states that «[w]e no longer believe that works of art can be considered out of context, that they can “speak for themselves”» (Bal 2002, 216). Perhaps after focusing on the *form* of the novels instead of their *context* it is time to reach out from pure narrative towards the creator of the text, the author: in other words, to the emerging self.

When it comes to particular novels, a similar pattern of self-emphasis is detectable. One of the most essential characteristics of autobiography as a genre is the emphasized position of the «I» and the relationship it has with its creator, the author. To put it simply, the autobiographical «I» usually stands for the textual «I» that is presented in the autobiographical text. However, since contextualism and questions of referentiality have been gaining popularity in literary research it is justifiable to take even more into account the actual author of the text –the person with whom the «I» shares a referential relationship–. The relationship between the «I» and the author can be discussed in more general terms concerning autobiography, but this essay concentrates more precisely on the way in which this relationship is fundamental in modern French autobiography.

Naturally, autobiography has always concentrated on the individual. As Philippe Lejeune’s now classic definition of autobiography states: «Retrospective prose narrative written by “a real person” concerning his own existence, where the focus is “his individual life”, in particular the story of “his personality”» (Lejeune 1989, 4; emphasis added). The key concepts in the context of this essay are the emphasized ones: «a real person», «his individual life», and «his personality». Furthermore, despite its efforts to question the boundaries of fiction and reality, in modern French autobiography the position of the «I» is even more fundamental than in the previous, more conventional forms of autobiography². The reason for this, as this essay strives to show, is that in various pieces of modern French autobiography the position of the author (authorship) is often referred to metatextually. In other words, the text can be fundamentally aware of its own maker and of the process of creation. The work of the authors I wish

2. A genre that is rooted in the experimental novel, *nouveau roman* and new autobiography.

to discuss here, Marguerite Duras (1914-96) and Annie Ernaux (1940-), holds various clues to the importance of autobiographical writing to their lives and personality. For example, Duras seemed to live in a symbiosis not only with her autobiographical works such as *L'Amant* (1984), *La Douleur* (1985) and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (1991), but also with her writing in general; whereas Ernaux concentrates on issues stemming from her experiences for example in *La Place* (1983), *Passion simple* (1991) and *Les Années* (2008).

It should be noted that Duras's work includes fictional novels as well. In addition to this, the authors' autobiographical texts cannot exactly be categorized as *autobiographies* as such; they could be referred to, for example, as autobiographical novels or autofictions³. This essay will settle for a loose definition of the following excerpts as autobiographical writing. However, the genre of autobiography remains as a background and a point of reference when it comes to the overall discussion on the emergence of the individual.



The usage of the first-person pronoun functions obviously as a preliminary and the most essential clue to the self appearing in the text in autobiographical writing. However, there are further and also more interesting ways in which the «I» can be emphasized in autobiographical writing. The means that will be discussed in this essay include thematic choices as well as metatextual commentary—which can actually be accounted for as one and the same. For example, if the author takes herself as the theme of a paragraph in the novel, she often ends up commenting on her authorship, writing in general, or the writing of the particular novel. Metatextuality is from a certain point of view an inherent characteristic of autobiography, in that autobiography makes reference to its writer and also because autobiography inherently explores the borderline between fiction and reality and the ability of fiction to reach reality. From this perspective one might even conclude that autobiography *is* metatext⁴.

3. For definitions for the subgenres of autobiography, see for example HERMAN, JAHN and RYAN (2005, 36) and SCHELLINGER and DEARBAUM (1998, 80-82).

4. Defining metatext varies from one research and critic to another. In this essay the term stands simply for writing that is self-aware, self-conscious and self-reflective. The term *metafiction* is not employed here, since the focus is on autobiography, which is a referential text and thus not to be considered as fiction (which is, by Dorrit Cohn's definition, «a literary *nonreferential* narrative» [COHN 1999, 12; emphasis added]). For example, where the

According to Linda Hutcheon, there are two kinds of metatext: overt and covert forms. Overt metatext means that self-consciousness and self-reflection are evident in the text, whereas covert form that metatext is structuralized and internalized. The most overt form of metafiction would include narratorial commentary (Hutcheon 1991, 23 and 28-29)⁵. When it comes to autobiographical writing, especially the kind in which the «I» is an author by profession and discusses writing in the given text, narratorial commentary is not an adequate concept to describe the self-awareness displayed. In this case it is more a question of «authorial presence». Autoreferentiality to the self and writing are apparent in Marguerite Duras's essay-style novel *C'est tout* (1995), which is actually dictated by the dying author to her lover, Yann Andrea. The novel is an illuminating example of the effect of thematic choices since it is unconventional autobiographical writing despite the various references to the actual world and to Duras's life. The speaking subject in the novel is not the autobiographical «I». Instead, the text consists of an ongoing dialogue between Marguerite and Yann which is structured as interview-like paragraphs. In the novel Marguerite Duras seems to reveal the secrets that have been dictating her life and profession throughout the years. In a brief, yet illuminating passage, Duras answers her lover's question about her identity:

Y.A. : Vous êtes qui?
M.D. : Duras, c'est tout.
Y.A. : Elle fait quoi, Duras?
M.D. : Elle fait la littérature.
(1999, 36-37).

M.D. seems to think one word, Duras, is enough to determine her whole being. In addition to this she puts all her qualities in one definition: she does literature. The word «does» instead of «makes» is chosen for the translation since while the latter may refer refer to making a single object, the former seems to designate a more holistic action in terms of identity. Duras «does» literature, and performs herself, her identity, in the process.

critics Linda Hutcheon or Patricia Waugh refer to metafiction, this essay uses the concept of metatext.

5. Hutcheon also notes that in addition to narratorial commentary the thematization of the self-awareness of a text can take the form of plot allegory or narrative metaphor (HUTCHEON 1991, 23).

In an excerpt taken from *La Vie matérielle* (1987), another essay-style novel, Duras announces that she writes about women (something which has been seen as a sort of trademark of hers) only in order to write about herself:

Donc, voyez, j'écris pour rien. J'écris comme il faut écrire il me semble. J'écris pour rien. Je n'écris même pas pour les femmes. J'écris sur les femmes pour écrire sur moi, sur moi seule à travers les siècles (1987, 59).

A similar kind of declaration has been quoted by Pamela A. Genova: «Le seul sujet du livre, c'est l'écriture. L'écriture, c'est moi. Donc moi, c'est le livre».

Speaking about self-awareness or self-reflection seems an understatement of the emphatic way Duras refers to herself in the context of literature and writing. Naturally it remains unclear whether or not the fact that Duras herself declared, verbally or through her writing, that she is the subject of her novels (or that she *is* the novel) is valuable in terms of literary theory. However, since these instances occur in her autobiographical writing, they are a part of her work and as relevant to the analysis concerning authorial presence as more subtle usage of metatext. One can conclude that the aforementioned instances function as metatextual references to writing and literature, a device that is very literary indeed.

In Annie Ernaux's case the connection between the author and the novel is not as straightforward as with Duras, who declares her symbiosis with her writing in the alluded to forthright manner. However, Ernaux's way of writing has always been to make use of the ingredients of her own life, whether they were her relationship with her parents, conquering cancer, or her love life. For example, *Passion simple* from 1991 is an exploration of the emotional consequences a forbidden love-affair with a foreign, married man caused the main character—the author, Ernaux. In the novel, Ernaux takes note of the fact that by writing something autobiographical she stations herself under the inspection of the public eye. This is especially due to the transformation of the private, intimate, forbidden passion towards her lover to a public display of emotion:

Ce sont les jugements, les valeurs «normales» du monde qui se rapprochent avec la perspective d'une publication. (Il est possible que l'obligation de répondre à des questions du genre «est-ce autobiographique?», d'avoir à se justifier de ceci et cela, empêche toutes sortes de livres de voir le jour, sinon sous le forme romanesque où les apparences sont sauves.)

Ici encore, devant les feuilles couvertes de mon écriture raturée, illisible sauf pour moi, je peux croire qu'il s'agit de quelque chose de privé, de presque enfantin ne portant pas à conséquence –comme les déclarations d'amour et les phrases obscènes que j'inscrivais en classe à l'intérieur de

mes protégé-cahiers et tout se qu'on peut écrire tranquillement, impunément, tant qu'on est sûr que personne ne le verra-. Quand je commencerai à taper ce texte à la machine, qu'il m'apparaîtra dans les caractères publics, mon innocence sera finie (1991, 69-70).

The author-narrator comments on the situation and the process of writing and ponders on the upcoming speculations about the relationship between the experiences of the actual author and those of the «I» in the novel. In other words, the narrator is quite self-conscious about the relationship between reality and the novel in question.

Robert Alter defines the self-conscious novel in his *Partial Magic* (1975) as «a novel that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and that by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality» (Alter 1975, x). The definition does not distinguish self-conscious novel from fiction, which according to Dorrit Cohn (1999, 12) can be defined as «a literary nonreferential narrative». However, since autobiographical writing is inherently self-conscious in nature, it is able to question the seemingly clear-cut boundary between the textual and the so-called real world. It can also discuss the border between fiction and fact, imagination and the so-called truth. The interesting question here is how the boundaries of the life of the actual author and the textual «I» are blurred in autobiographical writing and whether this blurring emphasizes the fact that these two are separable entities or makes it harder to distinguish between the «I» and the author⁶.

The following extract is from the probably most known of Duras's novels, *L'Amant* (1984):

L'histoire de ma vie n'existe pas. Ça n'existe pas. Il n'y a jamais de centre. Pas de chemin, pas de ligne [...] je parle de celle-ci justement, de celle de la traversée de fleuve. Ce qui je fais ici est différent, et pareil. Avant, j'ai parlé des périodes claires, de celles qui étaient éclairées. Ici je parle des périodes cachées de cette même jeunesse [...] J'ai commencé à écrire dans un milieu qui me portait très fort à la pudeur. Ecrire pour eux était encore moral (1984, 14-15).

This is the kind of metatextual commentary on the process of writing which raises the question of whether or not the writing that is referred to belongs to the so-called real world or to the textual world. In addition

6. Some of the examples given ahead widen the perspective from the authors' person to past events of their lives, but the general focus remains on the «I», and is not meant to shift to the events themselves.

to this, the boundary between fiction and reality is blurred when the «I» speaks about the famous crossing of the river Mekong, when the 15-year-old girl first meets the Chinese man who is to become her lover, and about the clear and hidden times of her youth. Are the crossing and the parts of youth simply intra-intertextual references to other of Duras's novels dealing with these issues, or do they refer to an actual ferry crossing and to actual parts of the author's youth, who stands behind the textual «I»? The answer this essay proposes is: they are references both to the textual and the «real» world –to the heroine of *L'Amant* and to the young Marguerite.

In Ernaux's *Passion simple* the metatextual remarks on the border between textual world and reality can be found almost on every page of the novel. In the following excerpt Ernaux clearly points out the linkage between the text and reality:

«Je pourrais m'arrêter à la phrase qui précède» et faire comme si rien de ce qui se produit dans le monde et dans ma vie ne pouvait plus intervenir dans ce texte. Tenir celui-ci pour sorti du temps, en somme prêt à lire. Mais tant que ces pages sont encore personnelles, «à portée de main comme elles le sont aujourd'hui», l'écriture est toujours ouverte. Il me paraît plus important d'ajouter ce que le réalité est venue apporter que de modifier la place d'un adjectif (*Passion simple*, 71; emphasis added).

The intimateness of the written pages makes them connect with reality. The writer feels obliged to have real experiences at hand when the novel is not quite finished yet. If she would renounce the influence her own life has on the text, she would be pretending something that is not true.

The matter of reaching reality is further complicated by an instance in *Passion simple*, in which the author-narrator-protagonist compares her passion to a novel: «Souvent, j'avais l'impression de vivre cette passion comme j'aurais écrit un livre» (1991, 23).

How and why does the extract alter the interpretation of the linkage between the textual world and reality? Patricia Waugh states about self-conscious narratives that «[i]n providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text» (Waugh 1982, 2). The statement refers to the conception of the reality we experience as real being, in fact, equally constructed and experienced through and not merely with the help of language. The narrative frames participate to the construction of life as well as novels, and it is impossible to fathom where one frame ends and another begins. As a teacher and a professor of literature, perhaps, Ernaux seems to be highly self-conscious about the literary frames that for their

part form life. Thus it is not a question of a simple authorial presence, in other words, the author's invasion of her autobiographical writing and emphasizing herself in the process, but also of the textual world invading her own life. When Marguerite Duras declares «I am the book» she admits that she also identifies herself with a literary object. And what have narrative frames to do with the emphasis on the «I»? The answer is simple: whether it be the textual world of autobiographical writing or the «real» world of the autobiographical author, the main character, the heroine within the narrative frames, is the «I» at the centre of attention.

The title of Linda Hutcheon's study on metatextuality, *Narcissistic Narrative*, might suggest that self-awareness and egotism are somehow connected. Hutcheon (1991, 1) herself makes it abundantly clear that it is a narrative text, and not the author, that is described as narcissistic in her study. However, since I am discussing autobiographical, in other words self-referential writing, I am inclined to attach the narcissism of the text also to its producer. As was stated in the beginning of this essay, in addition to the reflections on the relationship between the author and the «I» in her autobiographical writing, the stress on the individual is a phenomenon that takes place in the so-called real world as well. The reading public or the media are not the only ones that take an interest on the author as a prominent figure: the author herself can be almost obsessively interested in her own publicized image. In real life Duras was a writer not only determined in her work, but also in building and maintaining her image as a public literary figure. She referred to herself as «La Duras» («the Duras») and was absolutely convinced of her own significance and talent. This confidence prevails in *C'est tout*:

Moi, je peux tout recommencer.
Dès demain.
A tout moment.
Je recommence un livre.
J'écris.
Et hop, voilà!
Moi, le langage, je connais.
Je suis très forte là-dedans (1999, 52).

The voice is riddled with a frank narcissism and self-admiration. In the passage she confirms her belief textually by the use of metatext and, furthermore, links it with her writing in general. The example thus demonstrates the fact that metatext can refer, in addition to the particular text in question, also to writing as a process in general or to writing as

the author's profession. In this case, self-awareness relates to Duras's unwavering self-confidence when it comes to literature and writing.

It is, of course, not uncommon for the interviewers to address the issue as to what extent the authors make use of their own lives when writing novels. The subject is raised often enough in academic writing as well. In Ernaux's case making use of the ingredients of her own life has always been an integral part of her writing, as was mentioned in the discussion of the encounter of private and public in *Passion simple*. The interviewers are often interested in her personal life when discussing her novels –for example, in 1988 Claude Goure inquired about details of Ernaux's relationship with her parents in an interview concerning the recently published *Une Femme* (1987) and *La Place*. However, at least compared to Duras, Ernaux's media personality is not exceedingly self-emphasizing. From other contemporary French authors, who probably project a more narcissistic image of themselves, one could mention Virginie Despentes, who writes about her former life as a prostitute, or Frédéric Beigbeber, whose media personality includes much more than his profession as an author.



One needs no academic training to conclude that the «I» is what autobiographies are all about. As this essay has striven to show, there are further ways in which the «I» is emphasized in modern French autobiographical writing. In addition to it being inherently metatextual, since it basically makes a reference to its writer, autobiographical writing tends to reflect upon various sides of authorship and the process of writing, as well as upon the possibility of transmitting textually to the reader components from the so-called real world –such as the personality that is the author. Self-consciousness is about both the connections between the textual and the real world and the obstacles that stand in the way of making these connections. Thus, in self-conscious autobiographical writing both the theme of novels and writing and the act of deliberating on it form authorial presence –presence of the «I». In addition to self-reflective devices in the writing of Ernaux and Duras the emphasis on the «I» is apparent in the performance of their public image: in Ernaux's case through the perspective the interviewers and the reading public have in terms of the importance of her private life in her writing, and in Duras's case, also through her own act of focusing on herself.

Kosonen states that the centrality of the self in the contemporary French literature of the «I» may be yet more evidence of French egocentricity, but it may as well portray a more general willingness of the French reading

public and the authors to anchor themselves to the changing world and history: to search for one's own place in the world, to create a story and a history for oneself, and to find one's roots. This could also explain why the popularity of family chronicles and stories about childhood (such as J. M. G. Le Clézio's *Onitsba* (1991) and Amin Maalouf's *Origines* (2004) have been increasing in recent years. Also, more than ever, the ordinary public has been keen on writing their own memoirs and autobiographies. These are collected in designated memoir banks, such as the Association de l'autobiographie et le patrimoine autobiographique, and they are also widely published by the writers themselves and by various small publishing houses specializing in autobiographies (Kosonen, Meretoja and Mäkirinta 2008, 32-33).

Of course, it is also essential to note that the concentration on individuality is not merely a French enterprise, but a characteristic of literature in other European countries as well. In the wake of cognitive studies the interest in the human mind has been increasingly popular. Furthermore, discussing the individual is not precisely and merely a *literary* phenomenon, but also a part of the contemporary development towards more and more pronounced individuality in European culture. The discussion on autobiographical metatextuality in this essay can be extended also to recognizing this. As Hutcheon proposes: «But I would want to argue that the formal and thematic self-consciousness of metafiction today is paradigmatic of most of the cultural forms of what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls our «postmodern» world, from television commercials to movies, from comic books to video art. We seem fascinated lately by the ability of our human systems to refer to themselves in an endless mirroring process» (Hutcheon 1991, xii). Hutcheon's note is taken further by Waugh, who claims that the historical period we are living through has been self-questioning and culturally pluralistic (Waugh 1982, 6). Waugh refers to the 1980s, but the tendency can be applied to 21st century as well. Perhaps the never-ending self-reflective social and cultural enterprise is a way of escaping and/or grasping the insecure pluralism of contemporary life: «If metafiction is to be seen as a positive stage in the development of the novel, then its relevance and sensitivity to the increasing and diverse manifestations of self-consciousness in the culture as a whole have to be established», Waugh continues (Waugh 1982, 28). This essay demonstrates the variety of self-reflection and self-emphasis in both contemporary autobiographical literature in particular and culture in general by linking together metatextuality on a textual level and self-consciousness as a wider tendency in contemporary culture.

One of meanings linked to emergence is related to various transformations of the literary landscape. The emphasis on the «I» is not precisely a «transformation»

of the literary landscape in France, since obviously the individual, the self, has been at the focus of attention on various occasions in literary history –autobiographies have been written since Michel de Montaigne and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and the whole concentration on the self behind the text derives from the (pre-)Romantic tendency of celebrating the author–. Perhaps, then, instead of referring to a «transformation» one should perhaps refer to an «expansion» and a «re-emergence» of the interest in the self.

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