

The Autobiographical Contract Revisited: The Case of Høeg and Rifbjerg

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In 1975, Philippe Lejeune published a book on autobiography entitled *Le pacte autobiographique*. The book consists of a number of studies on French autobiographical texts by Rousseau, Gide, Sartre, and Leiris, on which I will not comment in this paper. Instead, I wish to focus on the first essay of the book, which bears the same title as the book itself, The Autobiographical Contract, and I will discuss some of Lejeune's points in relation to a discussion in Denmark concerning the famous author Peter Høeg and his book *Borderliners*, published 1993.¹

Is it possible to define autobiography? This is the initial question raised by Lejeune, and in his search for an answer, and, of course, a definition, his point of view is that of the contemporary reader, "trying to see order in a mass of published texts, which have in common the fact that they tell the story of someone's life". This limits the scope of the definition to modern, i.e. post 1770s, European literature, but more importantly, it emphasizes the role of the reader and his expectations when confronted with a text, a fact to which I shall return later.

Lejeune defines autobiography as: "a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality". This definition involves elements from four different categories:

1. Linguistic form: (a) narrative; (b) prose.
2. Subject treated: individual life, personal history.

¹ , Copenhagen 1993. The author was without doubt the Danish author of the 1990s, having sold more copies abroad than any other modern writer, and his novel *Miss Smilla's Sense of Snow* was turned into a movie by director Bille August. The fact that Høeg has reached an unheard of success certainly played a part in the debate, which arose following the publication of *Borderliners* and which I shall return to.

3. Situation of the author: identity between author (whose name designates a real person) and narrator.
4. Position of the narrator: (a) narrator and protagonist are identical; (b) narration is retrospectively oriented.

To fully be an autobiography, a text has to meet all of these demands; otherwise it falls into neighbouring categories (biography, first person novel, diary, self-portrait etc.), but in some cases a text can be deemed autobiographical if the conditions are largely although not fully satisfied. The only demands which cannot be tampered with are 3 and 4(a): there must be identity between author, narrator, and protagonist, and this identity must be explicit. As Lejeune puts it: “Autobiography is not a guessing game; in fact, it is exactly the opposite.” This is due to the “autobiographical contract” between writer and reader, which is “the affirmation in the text of this identity, referring in the last resort to the *name* of the author on the cover.” As can be seen in fig.1, the identity or non-identity between narrator and protagonist is decisive in distinguishing between autobiography and biography, while the question of the grammatical person used (first, second, or third) is used to distinguish between different sorts of biography and autobiography.

| Grammatical person | I | YOU | HE/SHE |
|------------------------|--|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Identity | | | |
| narrator = protagonist | classical autobiography | second-person autobiography | third-person autobiography |
| narrator protagonist | first-person biography (eye-witness account) | biography addressed to the subject | classical biography |

Fig. 1

One can of course discuss the accuracy of the autobiography, i.e. whether or not the events described in the book coincide with how other people have experienced the same events, but

this does not affect the existing contract in itself. The book may be an inexact, or false, autobiography, but it is nevertheless an autobiography.

As a logical counterpart to this autobiographical contract, Lejeune poses the fictional contract, which has two aspects: an overt practice of non-identity between author and protagonist, and an attestation of fictivity, expressed through the subtitle “novel“ or the like, leaving no question of genre to the reader. With these two variables — type of contract and identity or non-identity — Lejeune sets up a classification of “all possible cases“. (Fig.2).

| Contract | Name of protagonist ≠ name of author | = 0 | = name of author |
|------------------|---|---------------|------------------|
| fictional | novel | novel | |
| = 0 | novel | indeterminate | autobiography |
| autobiographical | | autobiography | autobiography |

Fig. 2

In this classification, two combinations are ruled out as impossible: the autobiography, in which the name of the protagonist is not the name of the author, and the work of fiction in which the name of the protagonist is the name of the author. The first case, i.e. that of an autobiography in which the protagonist and the author have two different names, is ruled out as a consequence of Lejeune’s definition of autobiography: if there is no identity between the author, the narrator, and the protagonist, it is not an autobiography. If an author, however, chooses to use the word “autobiography“ as a paratextual guideline for the interpretation of a book, although the name of the protagonist is different from that of the author, he stirs up an uncertainty in the reader. The reader will always wonder, whether he is reading a novel or an autobiography, and, Lejeune claims, the result will be that the text is read as neither-nor: it is no novel and no autobiography, but a “Pirandello-like game playing with the ambiguity“. And, as Lejeune says with a

considerable amount of contempt: “To my knowledge, this is a game which is practically never

The other impossible combination is that of a work of fiction in which the name of the protagonist is the same as the name of the author. “This“, Lejeune states, “by itself excludes the possibility of fiction. Even if the narrative is, in historical terms, completely false, it will be a *lie* (which is an autobiographical category) and not fiction.“ Of course, there is nothing preventing such a combination from being tried out by an author, but if such a case were to happen, “the reader has the impression that there has been a mistake“.

Thus, according to Lejeune, the two “impossible“ combinations will result in a (moral) rejection by the reader, either because it is a “game“, and thus not literature, or because it is a “mistake“, and thus a case of muddled identities. In both cases, the book is a violation of a contract between writer and reader concerning the sincerity and reliability of the relations between “reality“ and “fiction“. Lejeune does not say it explicitly, but to me he is one very small step from calling these violations morally corrupt.²

But to the best of my knowledge, readers do not react in this way when confronted with violations of the autobiographical or fictional contract, and one may actually question the very existence of any contract of that kind. Two Danish books, Peter Høeg’s *Borderliners* and Klaus Ribjerg’s *March 1970* are good examples of the intricate relations between autobiographical facts and fiction.

In 1993, Peter Høeg published his fourth book, *Borderliners*, with the subtitle *Novel* (in Danish: *Roman*). The narrator, who is also the protagonist, tells the story of his school days, and without going too deeply into the plot, one can describe the book as a strong attack on some pedagogical ideas which flourished in the Danish educational system in the 1970s. The narrator is writing down his story in 1992 or 1993, when he is 35 years old, married with one child, and the process of writing is his attempt to deal with his past and the horrors and misunderstandings brought on by teachers, social workers, psychologists, and the like. The narrator remains

² A parallel may exist between this normative theory of contractual obligations and Habermas’ theory of communicative behaviour in their negative views on deliberate use of indeterminacy.

nameless for the first 190 pages, when he, accidentally it seems, is revealed as Peter³. A further 50 pages ahead, it turns out that Peter was adopted by strangers in 1973, when he was 15 years old, thereby acquiring the family name of Høeg⁴. The protagonist, who is also the narrator is, in other words, called Peter Høeg...

When the book was published, the readers reacted in two ways: some read the book as an autobiography, in spite of the paratext *novel*, and some read it as pure fiction, in spite of the protagonist's name. The first group was strongly discouraged by Peter Høeg himself after some months, when he felt forced to make it absolutely clear that he was *not* adopted, while the other group which included most of the critics and reviewers, began a discussion of *why* Høeg had used this strategy. Why did the author in this book, which was clearly a work of fiction, use his own name as the name of the protagonist? Some critics were rather severe, accusing Høeg of foul play. Up till then, Peter Høeg had been very quiet about his own personal history and private life, in spite of the interest shown by the media subsequent to his rising international success. Now, the critics claimed, he used this interest in his person to sell an otherwise mediocre novel, well aware of the fact that most readers would ignore the paratext and see the novel as an autobiographical account of Peter Høeg's fight against the "system".

Peter Høeg never commented on this critique; instead he withdrew and remained silent for 30 months, committing himself to his work on a new novel. The question thus remained unanswered as to why he had made this "fake identity", but in a later interview, he tries to

Borderliners, I felt that I had touched upon something very personal, something true, and as I spoke to a very limited number of readers [his success with *Smilla* was yet to manifest itself, O.V.], I felt that they would fully understand why I included my own name in the book. And furthermore, I did it because I am, amongst many other things, a joker. I like the confusion, created by art when it is vibrating on the limits of reality."⁵

³ A message comes through on the public address system in the school: "A message to all classes. If anyone has seen or sees Peter from the seventh grade, August Joon...". (Page 191, own translation).

⁴ "... Karen and Erik Høeg found me and adopted me in 1973, at Sandbjerggård, when I was 15 years old, for which I will be greatfull to them forever, and without which I would have been annihilated." (Page 247, own translation).

⁵ Poul Blak: "Den svære barndom", *Morgenavisen Jyllands-Posten*, 24 March 1996.

The identity between the name of author and protagonist was thus a way of telling the readers that the story was “true“ in its way of depicting the school, the teachers, the whole educational system, at least as it was experienced by Peter Høeg, while the label “novel“ was meant to signify that the plot and the actual persons were fictional. And despite certain misunderstandings, this was in general the way in which most readers read it: as a novel based on personal experience.

When Klaus Rifbjerg published his novel *Marts 1970 (March 1970)*, the reaction from the press and from the cultural élite in Denmark was strongly negative. The book, most critics agreed, had no artistic value whatsoever, and was only yet another example of Rifbjerg’s megalomania, his obsessive self-promotion, and of the general lack of intellectual debate in Denmark.

In his foreword, Rifbjerg himself explains what he has done, and why it could arouse such negativity amongst the intellectuals. In this book, he says, one could have the same disclaimer as in American movies: that any similarity between characters in this book and living or deceased persons is a coincidence and accidental. Only the other way round.

The characters in the book are all, with one exception which is the protagonist, equipped with names of intellectuals, writers, professors, etc., of that time. It is, however, clear to any reader that the events of the book are purely fictional: all inhabitants of Denmark wake up with terrific hangovers, as an experiment with flouride in the tap water has had the unforeseen sideeffect of turning the water into pure alchohol. From then on, the chain of events develops rapidly, involving a youth uprising, an occupation of the universities, and a love affair between Olof Palme, the Swedish prime minister, and Princess Margrethe of Denmark, where the young lovers to avoid interference by the authorities have to escape over the rooftops of Copenhagen.

The book bears no subtitle, but is clearly a novel, and it is thus, according to Lejeune’s categorization, to be filed under the fictional contract. But all readers of that specific context – Denmark in the late sixties – saw the non-fictional character of the way in which Rifbjerg had portrayed the persons. All those who had read some of the texts by e.g. Niels Egebak, an eminent literary critic and scholar, recognized his francophilia and his disappointment with almost everything in Denmark compared to France. Of course this scholar never tried to flood

the state library in Århus in real life, but who knows if he did not really ask Roland Barthes if he knew the Danish poet Bjørnvig, and had he done so, the answer would without doubt have been the same as in the book – “Non, je ne connais pas Bjørnvig!” – and Egebak’s despair would most probably have been the one described in the book.

So where does this novel fit into the categories of Lejeune? All characters, except the protagonist, are a mixture of fiction and non-fiction; their names are the names of actual people, but the events are purely fictional. The novel was read as a novel, not as a *roman à clé*, where intimate details of the lives of public persons are revealed in a thin disguise of fictionality. Instead, it was read as a fictionalized version of what actual people had said and of their opinions, sometimes grotesquely exaggerated. In other words: a satirical mixture of fiction and non-fiction.

Now, Lejeune might claim that “satire” is not a part of the real fictional category, and that works of satire are functioning due to another kind of contract between writer and reader. We would thus have an autobiographical contract, a fictional contract, and a satirical contract. But this does not seem as a solution to the basic problem of Lejeune’s theory; it is more like an attempt to keep the patient alive overnight than to actually cure him. One feels that it might be necessary to introduce further “contracts” to be able to explain other kinds of texts and not puncture the theory of the autobiographical contract.

To me, one of the problems of Lejeune’s categorization lies in his use of the very word contract. A contract is an explicit agreement between two parties concerning a specified object. In this case, the author and the reader should have signed an agreement as to whether a book was autobiographical or fictional. Now I, for certain, know that I have never signed any contract involving any book, I was about to read, and I doubt that others have! Saying this, I am not trying to poke fun at Lejeune and to ridicule his use of words,⁶ but I believe that the process of interpreting a written text is of a more unregulated and uncontrollable nature than that of the signing of contracts.

⁶ Actually, the French title is even more interesting: *Le pacte autobiographique* adds a certain seriousness and a metaphysical aspect to the whole question of writing and reading – an aspect which I am not sure is of any benefit to writer nor reader.

A book, no matter what the title and the explicit category, holds a potential for “meaning“. In the process of reading, the reader produces a “meaning“; one could say that he actualizes the potential. But as many critics have shown, reading a text is not the same as reproducing the intentions of the writer. The writer is, of course, not without influence on how his text is interpreted. He constructs the text as an intricate semiotic object through his choices, and this he does on the basis of his own aesthetic ideas and ideals, and with the reader’s response in mind. The choice of linguistic and literary style has to be understood in relation to other texts and to people’s expectations of texts written in this genre. To some, this is a limitation of the freedom of literature, but it is, one way or the other, a fact to be reckoned with: a writer can hardly expect this book to be the first book ever read by the reader. But it also gives the unique possibility of using this intertextual knowledge to play with and to challenge the expectations. In literary criticism, this play with the reader’s expectations with regards to genre and style has been seen as a trademark of postmodern literature (although no one could agree, as to when postmodernism actually first manifested itself in literature), but it is in fact a feature which has always been used by writers, whether to humour or to counter the expectations of the reader.

The choice of paratextual label is also a tool in the hand of the writer, but it is a tricky one. The paratext, which in this case apart from the subtitle also includes the name of the author, is a relatively autonomous part of the text, which is used to guide the reading in a certain direction. For example the subtitle “travel journal“ tells the reader that this book contains accounts of things the writer has experienced during some specified period of travelling, but also that these accounts may be intersected by whatever the writer feels like writing down: stories told to him by others, dreams, philosophical reflections on what he has seen, etc. Thus the reader is indirectly told to not necessarily interpret everything in the book as pure facts – a guideline which can be strengthened by other paratextual features, such as the division into chapters, differing print types, etc.

The subtitle “novel“ is a paratextual guideline for the interpretation of the text which follows. But what does the guideline actually say about the interpretation? “Novel“ indicates that you are dealing with a work of fiction, but this in itself is a problematic concept, as we all have the intuition that nothing written by any author is completely without relation to the “real“

world in which we (and especially the author) live. “Pure“ fiction is, in other words, not possible, and if it were to be produced, it would be uninterpretable. Fictionality is thus a question of degrees, or perhaps more precisely of certain aspects of a text; the label “novel“ is normally meant to tell the reader that the characters are not identifiable in the “real“ world. But if “identifiable“ means “100% identical“, there is still the possibility of partial identity. And this partial identity can only be established through an interpretation which highlights certain aspects of the persons involved, which means that even if a text carries the label “novel“, there is still no way of guaranteeing that the text be read as purely fictional – as a matter of fact, the reverse is more likely, as the text, if it is dealing with the world in which the reader lives and which he knows, will be read in accordance with this world, which means that the reader will try and find parallels between the characters in the text and living persons in the “real“ world. In short, the world of the reader meets the world of the text, and the results can never be completely foretold.

If we try and look at *Borderliners* by Peter Høeg once again, it is deemed impossible in the categorization of Lejeune, and although technically possible, it is artistically undesirable, and in fact morally corrupt, as it represents a violation of the very idea of a fictional or an autobiographical contract. But seen in an interpretive perspective, what has the author actually done, and what are the results?

The book claims to be a novel, i.e. a work of fiction. This is stated on the front page, and some of the events in the book are clearly impossible or very unlikely in the world as we know it. The description of the Danish society in the 1970s is recognizable, and the critique of the pedagogical ideas also fits into the general picture of a realistic novel, based on thorough research and own experiences, but featuring fictional characters and events. When the name of the protagonist is introduced, an uncertainty is produced in the reader: all other indicators guide the interpretation towards the acceptance of fictionality, but the nominal identity between author and protagonist puts this interpretation on hold. The overall interpretation of the book thus wavers back and forth between the autobiographical and the fictional, and the result will probably be something like this: the book is a work of fiction; so it says on the front page, and the events described are too unlikely to be absolutely true. But on the other hand, the way in

which the schools and the society at large are described is very realistic, so we are probably dealing with a fiction based on personal experience. And the protagonist is called Peter Høeg can it be autobiographical? No, it is too unlikely. But why has he then given his main character his own name? There must be some kind of relevance of this fact; perhaps he wanted to show that the story bears resemblance to his own life?

The resulting interpretation is not fixed in its categorization of the novel. Instead of the dichotomies of “either/or“, as proposed by Lejeune in his structuralist attempt at clear-cut categories, the reader is left with the undecidability and the insecurity of “neither/nor“, of

⁷ – neatly summed up in the oxymoron “true lies“.

So when Lejeune states, as I quoted earlier, that his view is that of the reader “trying to see order in a mass of published texts, which have in common the fact that they tell the story of someone’s life“, he is indeed blind to the actual interpretive process carried out by the reader. To postulate the existence of any sort of contract, be it autobiographical or fictional, is to postulate an “ideal“ situation, where the writer is always explicit about his strategy and always sticks to clearly defined genres, and the reader is always relying on the author’s explicit claims. This is, I dare say, rather naïve, but what is worse is the fact that the model totally neglects the process of interpretation as a productive force in the construction of meaning.

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⁷ This is one of Paul Ricœur’s main points in his critique of structuralism as expressed in e.g. *vive*. I have dealt with this important difference between semiotics and hermeneutics in my book *Interpretationsbegrebet i hermeneutikken og semiotikken: Paul Ricœur & A.J. Greimas* (Aalborg 1993).