

Emotions in Academic Autobiographical Writing

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Abstract: The reflection proposed provides insights on contemporary first person life writing by academics in the field of literary studies. Academic memoirs improved multiple transformations in subject and form, especially during the 1990s, with significant impact on actual knowledge production in institutional contexts. Literary critics and theorists in the space of academe as well as in the role of the traditional intellectual in the public sphere, became increasingly investing in the realm of intimacy, crossing boundaries between the (normally) impersonal position in their professional life and the space of personal experiences and feelings. Attention to the entanglements between the private and the political, between emotion and rationality, in contemporary knowledge production, reveals new attitudes and commitments beginning to change the intellectual climate crossed by controversial struggles about power and privileges, including discontents about reigning discourses and theoretical repertoires. Under such a frame I focus on recent autobiographical experiments in the field of literary historiography that emphasize expressions of emotion and affection in the mediation of psychic aspects, social systems, cultural behavior and political choices, thus revealing the co-presence of a range of acting feelings in the very construction of their theoretical models.

Key words: academic autobiography, literary theory, historiography

1. Introduction

New kinds of academic autobiographies by scholars in the field of literary theory and historiography provide interesting insights on the disciplinary field of literary studies influenced by important paradigm changes and specific political contexts, inside and outside the academia. The emphasis on self-reflection and observation in scientific investigations and their resonance on transformations in the field of human and social sciences is affecting, in distinctive ways, their theoretical presuppositions, practical investigations and forms of writing. Explicit questionings by historians about their usual invisibility and neutrality imposed by their scientific community have given space to kinds of self-fashioning by using the first person in the production of historical knowledge in opposition to positivist traditions. Under this “epistemological awakening”, the outcome of a collection of essays of ego-history, *Essais d’ego-histoire*, organized by Pierre Nora in 1987 — breaking a kind of silent taboo that historians do not confess themselves by virtue of their professional commitment to produce objective facts, presupposing exemption, impartiality and neutrality in their processes of observation — has been responsible for a crescent expansion of hybrid forms on the edge of the biographical, autobiographical, historiographical and self-fictional writings.

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Under such a frame my focus complains authors deeply involved with self-fashioning experiments in literary theory and historiography by exposing, and mixing up, in autobiographies of literary scholarship, spheres of their private lives, of professional convictions, institutional participations and ethic and political commitments, combining the rationality of scientific knowledge production with unreflect and silent zones of feelings and sensations.

2. Biographical Configurations in Histories of Literature

The role of a self-reflecting observer will have a significant prominence in these historiographical-autobiographic configurations. When Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, a critic, theorist, and historian of literature and culture, published *Eine Geschichte der Spanischen Literatur* (A History of Spanish Literature) in the early 1990's, in Germany, he was inaugurating a new historiographical style. Instead of a regular subtitle, we find the following explanation on the cover: the title of this book underlines only what should be evident today anyway; therefore, it is almost a tautology: there cannot be observation without an observer (Gumbrecht, 1990). In other words, there cannot be stories independent of their author, which justifies the emphasis on *one* history. The introduction itself, summed up in the title-query "*Noch eine Geschichte der Literatur?*" (Once more *another* Literature History?), points towards one of the possible reasons to write and one of the possible reasons to read histories of literature and culture. For Gumbrecht, historiographies are fascinating because they promise to make present a time already past before our own existence. This convergence with curious desires and private feelings is reinforced by the author's confession that *his* history of Spanish literature is also entangled with "fragments of his own biography"¹ (21). This accent explicitly carries out the attitude of a nervous, mobile or flexible observer, adjectives which underline the consciousness of the inseparable bound to the observed object of investigation. At that time, however, the autobiographical incursions remained restricted to the professional universe, underlined by the argument that any question about the reasons of his writing a history of Spanish literature would make public, in the pages of the book, a part of his private life that should remain private and cannot be of any interest to readers who bought it to learn about the history of Spanish literature (14).

A decade later, in 2002, it is precisely this intimate and delicate sphere of the autobiographical genre, outrageously present in his biographies of five of the greatest German romanists — Karl Vossler, Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach and Werner Krauss, in *Vom Leben und Sterben der grossen Romanisten* (From Life and Death of the Great Romanists), inaugurating a new hybrid genre in the inter-spaces of history-memory-biography and autobiography. Gumbrecht himself considers this attitude as *semi-distant* on behalf of the permanent oscillating between sympathy, criticism, condescendence, irony, obsession and perplexity, literally taking up the role of a *sentimental* biographer (Gumbrecht, 2002, p. 208). In this case, the author establishes singular relations by linking the professional trajectory of a small group of philologists to both, the crises of their private lives, the intellectual atmosphere in the field of humanities, the construction and defence of a given theoretical repertoire for literary studies in the institutional academic community, and also, the troubled political history during the Nazi era in Germany.

Gumbrecht himself analyses his own mixed feelings by choosing, in 1968, the disciplinary field of Romanistic studies, as satisfaction for his fascination for these distant cultures and as doubt as to the convenience of such an alibi to justify a voluntary distancing, internal and external, from catastrophic political issues

¹ The translation of this quotation as well as of all the other quotations from texts originally written in German are my own.

concerning the history of German national socialism in the years between 1933 and 1945, not possible to be bypassed by any student interested in Germanistic philology. Even today little is really known about the concrete tensions that have marked the divergent concerns between German studies as the country's national philology and the Romanic studies, inevitably hybrid from an ideological viewpoint. Gumbrecht points out that for the discipline's self-confidence, the circumstance that the most admired literature scholars — up to the 1970's — had nearly all been Romanists was a very significant fact. This observation, almost like a marginal note, surreptitiously reveals the strive for self-staging supported by the wish to inhibit his own identifications as an isolated intellectual from the political viewpoint. However, at the same time, the author fortifies the idea that the observer merges inevitably with the object of his observation. In other words, the biographical discourse is pervaded by autobiographical gestures and feelings in the construction of a specific knowledge, in this case, in the disciplinary sphere of literary studies.

3. Fictional Strategies in Academic Historiography

In the light of these arguments, looking at another two (auto) biographical experiments will be helpful to understand distinct intentions and questions underlying the essays by Peter Bürger and Christa Bürger, teaching literature theory disciplines, for decades, in the German universities of Bremen and Frankfurt, respectively. In their private life a married couple, these intellectuals and academics published in the interval of ten years, two books exposing their particular view on different paradigmatic turns marking the emergence of contradictory theoretical projects for literary studies since the 1960's. Both intended to write a history of their discipline from an autobiographical viewpoint, opting, however, for distinct strategies in its formal configuration and in the accents of thematic choices. Their unequal gestures, on the one hand, suggest specific circumstances responsible for the privilege conferred on forms of decentralizing ego-histories by way of a narrator who hides his own speech and his personal and institutional experiences, employing either the voice of a third person singular or opting for self-representation models that reveal emphatically a presence of the self.

In 1993, *Die Tränen des Odysseus* (The Tears of Ulysses) by Peter Bürger — one of the most renowned literature scholars in post-war Germany, especially after the publication in 1974 of *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Theory of the Avant-garde) — intends to be a manifest of the deep self-understanding crisis in literary studies.² The crisis is seen either as a regrettable deviation from the path of the modernity project taken up by Critical Theory and clearly expressed in the maxims of ideology criticism, or as an extraordinary opportunity to self-examine convictions established in view of new disturbing uncertainties. Thus, it made room for rearranging the disciplinary field and for urgent reflections on the changing conditions and expectations relating to our actual world. The intellectual atmosphere in Germany concerning the place of literary theory in the early 1990's, may be described as confrontation between a rationalist illuminist tradition and its French inspired post-structuralist questioning, in view of an eventual third way legitimized by distinct epistemological instruments. In this theoretical and ideological debate, Bürger's text bets on theorization forms provocatively contiguous to the strategies of fiction. This artifice suggests significant transformations in the qualification of theories normally guaranteed by evidence criteria, for when characterizing theories as narratives, they change their status being articulated with subjects that ostensibly take on their role of narrators. Whereas the subject of traditional

² See the analysis of an experiment in autobiographic historiography of literary theory made by Peter Bürger in Olinto, Heidrun Krieger, 2003, *Pequenos ego-escritos intelectuais*, *Palavra* 10, pp. 24–44.

theoretical construction, as centre and origin, represents a general instance of discourse — and, in this condition, deprived of the passions and contingencies of everyday life — the fictional subject of the narrative is inseparable from the theoretical frame responsible for regulating its universe. According to this perspective, the author proposes a new intellectual (auto) biographical style as he writes his own theory history assuming the insurmountable paradox of the contemporary narrator's condition, who, while speaking about himself, knows about the impossibility of really speaking about himself. The option for speaking about oneself as another narrative person allows a much more far-reaching freedom than that conceded to the essayist whose text, in spite of its unquestionable experimental character, remains dependent on the construction of a centred *self*. It is in this sense that Bürger's historiographical experiment with these new insights and transformations of theory can be located in the interstices of the auto-fictional and autobiographic form. Moreover, it is in this sense too that there is a especial flavour in the powerful suggestion of classifying Peter Bürger's work — which focuses on the imaginary (?) perplexities of a literature theory professor, brought about by post-structuralist thinking — as a book that could have been a novel but did not want to.

By transforming theory into narrative and understanding autobiography as the invention of a self as narrative instance, promoting thus a threshold space between fiction and reality, the insecurities of this literary theory professor — expressed in the form of a first person singular notes in a small school notebook that configures an autobiographic historiography of literary theory's trajectory in the second half of the twentieth-century — emerge constantly in this self-reflexive observer who is concerned with the vanishing historical forces, becoming invisible. In this sense, he attacks the pathetic style of post-structuralist ideas that dangerously fascinates his students, assuming the attitude of a critical intellectual committed to Frankfurtian thinking and its scepticism in relation to adhering, in the 1970's, to the newest French post-structuralist thinking, which he denounced himself as "luciferous" (Bürger, 1993, p. 16). Even though the first person singular dominates all these notes, it is the ever present wish to strengthen the link between his own "sincere" private ideas and contemporary thoughts that prevail over the desire to look for nexus between his self-centred rational discourse and possible feelings and affections. Statements like "I do not intend to retouch any of the ideas that come up to my mind. It is not a case of my person or my mind, since they represent only the accidental place for storing the thought of time" (17), emphasize repeatedly the intent to overcome a history of ideas in favour of concerns with history's concrete dimensions.

4. Autobiographic Experiments in Writing Literary History

The focus on Christa Bürger's autobiographic historiography, reveals at once the effect of the 10-year chronological gap separating her arguments from those of Peter Bürger's *Die Tränen des Odysseus*. Her taking up autobiographic writing as an intellectual historiographical experiment coincides with her dismissal, in 1998, from the University of Frankfurt, where she had taught for three decades as a German Literature and Literary Theory professor, starting as a secondary school teacher in the troubled historical-political times of the Higher Education Reform and the student movements of the late 1960's. Her inhibition until then to speak for her own sake in the first person singular is justified as follows: "I was so imprisoned in the taboo that science imposes on everyone who deals seriously with it: the prohibition to speak in one's own name. In that situation, I had forgotten how to question the hidden *I* in the grammatical form that was intertwined with writing and teaching" (Bürger, 2003, p. 10). Her *Mein Weg durch die Literaturwissenschaft* (My Trajectory through the Science of Literature) was

idealized as a personal testimony of her academic activities and the experience of deep paradigmatic shifts in her disciplinary field of Literary Studies, reflected in her concerns to renew the agenda of literature courses, and at the same time, pointing towards greater demands in terms of democratization in the public sphere at large.

In this sense, the issues she raises in her book suggest the wish to tune teaching with an explicit involvement in the educational reform and with a political militancy at the edge of the academic sphere and the outer spaces where the preferences for certain theoretical proposals cross with specific political projects. “The Red Bürger” — as the young professor of German Language and Literature began to be known for a time together with her political colour, started to wave the feminist movement banner as well.

The shape conferred to the methodological history of literature science as a history of memories from personal experiments corresponds to the new consciousness of the intellectual’s possible role as a second order observer. Thus, Christa Bürger offers an alternative model to historiography by exploring the narrative form allowing the investigation of her own specific conditions of learning, teaching and writing (10). On the one hand, she states her intense preoccupation with the women’s movement and, on the other, the fear in face of political forces disrupting the still incipient German democracy during the post-war years. Her reasons highlight the link between this concern and the proposal of confrontation using weapons within easy reach, that is, a literary theory equipped since long with the tools of the Critical Theory, a criticism of ideology, and finding for herself alternative options: “I wanted to tell my students, so long involved in our discussions about the importance of gender differences for literature and for literary theory, about the intense scientific and political debates along the last decades of the 20th century, the circumstances that influenced me to substitute the criticism of ideology by a practice of writing that allows the investigation of women’s discourses located beyond the horizons of literature” (10).

The discomfort she felt with classical methods of immanent interpretation, legitimized by the conviction that a writer “should not bother us with his own person, feelings, ideas and experiences” (18), already in the 1950’s, seemed to be a perfect alibi to stay away from concerns about recent German history, as it allowed the preservation of a guardian’s status for a timeless property, founding literary studies on the separation between art and life, by a systematic mechanism to neutralize reality. To Christa Bürger, the most problematic aspect of this kind of literary criticism, is the vanishing of any critical reflection, and also the disappearance of history itself from the horizons of any academic debate. At this particular point, there is a clear agreement between her intellectual autobiography on the transformations of theoretic studies since the 1960’s and Peter Bürger’s ideas about the history of literary theory. Both are deeply concerned with the oscillation of those projects in relation to the Critical Theory, acutely felt as success or failure of the political projects presented under the banner of democratization. In this sense, the two theorists incorporated for a certain time the classical role of the modern intellectual committed to ethical projects supported by political and moral capital in tune with the illuminist repertoire that, in its modern shape, is expressed by critical principles including self-reflexive acts and interventions within the own disciplinary field and, sometimes, beyond it.

A critical analysis with emphasis on new intellectual autobiographic writings intended to be a history of literary theory by women, should underline a particular characteristic of Christa Bürger’s proposal revealing repeatedly an insistent employment of the pronoun *we*. This first person plural form does not relate to her scientific community but shelters an extremely unusual alliance in academic universe: Peter Bürger, her husband and, like her, a university professor in the field of literary studies. And this *we*, despite a certain impression of rhetoric staging, allows one to link a professional and political militancy to personal experiences, emotions and intimacy generally displaced in academic disputes, where debates and confrontations have their place in the realm

of ideas, with no space for sentimental involvements in the field of scientific knowledge production. Yet, in Christa Bürger's intellectual autobiography, this *we*, without disputing with the singular pronoun, is responsible for creating a rare atmosphere of belonging and intimate complicity. These moments are especially alive at moments of frustration, for example, when still in the position of a secondary school teacher, Christa Bürger is passed by in professional promotions because of her forward, questioning, left-winged standing, responsible for a long time for the above-mentioned tag of "The Red Bürger".

Yet, this repeated presence of *we* allows an unexpected eminence to her activities in the movements of women's emancipation. Her remembrance of the impact caused by the reading of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe*, unleashed a disturbing self-reflection concerning her own situation as a woman and scientist over the background of the Sartre-Beauvoir alliance, crossed by insecurities, useless rivalries and inferiority complexes confessed by Simone from her condition as a woman. At the end of her work, the literature theorist is once again lost in questionings about her long trajectory through theory, which was responsible ultimately for her change from ideology criticism to essayism and, in this crossing, she underlines the possibility of looking for, in the grammatical subjects of her own scientific treaties, the *I* hidden in them. A difficult undertaking because "it defended itself, reacting with various symptoms, sometimes with headaches, sometimes with cramps in her feet hurting when walking" (Bürger, 2003, p. 225). These ways of questioning her life story as a woman, scientist, activist, companion at singular historical and political moments and as a part of a couple, at leisure moments, in morning walks through their city's municipal park (190) or reading Adorno's *Minima moralia*, sitting on the turf along a path surrounded by birch trees (84), are contiguous or juxtaposed without preference or synthesis. Moreover, they come into a disturbing competition in her autobiographical narratives, in which reality and memories (not always precise) tend to attenuate a part of their frontiers.

5. Final Observations

The chosen example highlights the performance of these intellectual ego-histories by crossing the lines between the subjective self-enactment of a literary theory professor and the critical ideas of his own time, and the changes brought about by the emergence of new theoretical preferences that challenge the field of literary studies but also the tendency in his scientific community towards transdisciplinary interests, and in the public space of political order, the crossing of national frontiers.

In short, the merit of these new intellectual ego-writings must be seen in the extraordinary capacity of making visible a network of infinite relations characterizing this emergent writing, radically assumed in the first singular person, breaking with the classic taboo imposed on the profession of scientists compromised with rationality. Today, on the contrary, they have begun to make a point of confessing themselves, assuming expressly the first person singular and a sentimental way of thinking in a subjective perspective. At the same time, these confessions remain controlled by specific interests that shape this hybrid form of self-fashioning. Nevertheless, it is exactly in this delicate junction of contradictory interests that the academic autobiographic writing is located as a poignant staging of tacit desires, feelings, passions and sensations that inform and impregnate this gesture of intellectuals circulating in the universe of a scientific community, also, in search of professional and personal gratification. And these efforts to find an adequate equilibrium between rationality and emotion in the construction of knowledge that does not jeopardize their scientific reputation, their recognition and distinction by their own peers, are independent of any gender troubles, though realized with more or less conviction, generosity or hostility.

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