

The Elusive I

Jane Brierley

Volume 45, Number 1, avril 2000

La traduction littéraire au Canada
Literary Translation in Canada

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/002142ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/002142ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

0026-0452 (print)

1492-1421 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Brierley, J. (2000). The Elusive I. *Meta*, 45(1), 105–112.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/002142ar>

Article abstract

In the light of knowledge gained in translating autobiography, the author reviews recent critical theory concerning the genre, and looks briefly at two translations of Stendhal's *La Vie de Henry Brulard*.

The Elusive I

JANE BRIERLEY

Translator, writer and editor

RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur partage avec ses lecteurs les connaissances acquises lors de la traduction d'une autobiographie et traite de théories récentes sur ce genre littéraire. Elle termine avec une brève analyse de quelques passages tirés de deux traductions de *La Vie de Henry Brulard* de Stendhal.

ABSTRACT

In the light of knowledge gained in translating autobiography, the author reviews recent critical theory concerning the genre, and looks briefly at two translations of Stendhal's *La Vie de Henry Brulard*.

MOTS-CLÉS/KEYWORDS

Stendhal, autobiography, memoirs, literary translation

Early in my literary translating career I chose to do an autobiographical work (de Gaspé 1988). While a great fan of this type of literature, much of it in translation, I had never considered it particularly as a genre and certainly never as one that required any special analysis. I soon discovered, however, that autobiography has aspects that are unique to it as a genre, and that the ability to recognize and understand the nature of these aspects is immensely helpful to the translator. This knowledge has also been useful in translating fiction and in recognizing passages where deep emotions may surface in fictional circumstances that clearly connect with some very personal experience on the author's part.

The great challenge for literary translators is to transmit the imaginative impulse behind the prose they are dealing with. They must understand the nature of what they are translating and be sensitive to the criteria that, according to critical theory, define the genre and give it depth. This is not the place to discuss nuance in translation; most readers of *Meta* are aware of the difference in underlying meaning that can be made by the choice of one word or phrase rather than another. I would, however, like to share some of what I have learned.

Translating autobiographical works, or parts of works that reveal themselves as deeply intimate, puts literary translators in a special position. They have a double responsibility. Not only do they need to know what is being said in the superficial sense, they need to be especially sensitive to underlying currents, to the writer's unavowed aims or preoccupations, and to the influences that surrounded him or her at the time of writing. This sounds like a tall order, but often translators develop this sensitivity because the author is a favourite and they have read much of his or her work and understand the period and the milieu. What many people don't realize is that the analysis of just what autobiography is all about has become something of a science in the last thirty years. The quest for "the elusive I," as I have called it, has

developed into a scholarly sub-genre. This has been fostered by the virtual explosion in modern literature of the number of real autobiographies, as distinct from memoirs, in addition to the now common phenomenon of first-person narration in fiction generally which has made us take this kind of writing for granted. Autobiography must be easy to write (and to translate), we think. The writer merely assembles his or her thoughts and starts. It sounds simple. We shall see.

Imagination

It is often the case with writers of fiction that, unable to express certain deep emotions, they funnel them, consciously or unconsciously, into their literary work. This has led to a branch of literary criticism that has produced many fascinating books in which the sources of events and states of mind are traced to circumstances of the novelist's life—often based on material that comes to light long after the subject is dead and perhaps forgotten.

We have a keen interest in the why and wherefore of writers' lives especially—a need to know where in the world they get their ideas. The writers themselves may protest that these are works of imagination, exasperated at their readers' lack of this faculty. "We made it up!" they cry, protesting that fiction is really a pack of lies and would we please give them credit for their ingenuity instead of insinuating that they merely dribbled bits of their life story onto the page or into their computers.

Imagination plays a central role in life, said the great Canadian teacher and literary critical theorist, Northrop Frye. We use it in to interpret what is said to us. For example, "suppose we're talking to... a woman... who's in a difficult mood. We're faced with the problem: does what she is saying represent her actual meaning, or it is just a disguised way of representing her emotional state of mind? Usually we assume the latter but pretend to be assuming the former." He points out that in society's eyes "the virtue of saying the right thing at the right time is more important than the virtue of telling the whole truth, or sometimes even of telling the truth at all" (Frye 1964: 136-7).

"True" autobiography

Why am I discussing fiction and imagination in a study of autobiography, you may ask? To begin with, we need to understand that autobiography is a kind of fiction (or "faction" as someone has observed). Writing autobiography requires the author to make the same kind of artistic effort as a novelist. ("What!" you say in shocked tones. "They make it up?") Well, not exactly. But, as Frye explains in *Anatomy of Criticism*, "Most autobiographies are inspired by a creative, and therefore fictional, impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer's life that go to build up an integrated pattern. We may call this very important form of prose fiction the confession form, following St. Augustine, who appears to have invented it, and Rousseau, who invented a modern type of it" (Frye 1957: 307). Incidentally, we shouldn't be surprised by the process of selection, whether conscious or unconscious, when viewing one's past. Modern critical theory allows us to feel comfortable with unconscious selection—what John Livingston Lowes, quoting Henry James, called "the deep well of unconscious cerebration" (Lowes 1927: 56).

But this is not all. Not only must there be a creative impulse at work, building up an integrated pattern out of selected events, resulting in “design.” British literary theorist Roy Pascal sees the genre as combining design and truth. “There must also be the need for, and the sincere attempt by, the author to represent a true picture of his personality. . . . Factual truth is not the yardstick by which to judge an autobiography,” he says, and goes on to enlarge on this phenomenon (Pascal 1960: 189-95).

Autobiography and memoirs

I mentioned earlier that autobiography and memoirs are not the same thing. Pascal points out that in genuine autobiography, “attention is focussed on the self, in the memoir or reminiscence on others.” However there are wheels within wheels, for in genuine autobiography, even when the author appears to deal with others, “the ostensible form and intention come to serve a different and truly autobiographical intention, since all these identities, these other people, become forces within the writer and are referred back, implicitly more than explicitly, to the writer, whom their impact shapes and who develops in subtle response to them” (Pascal 1960: 8).

Another theorist, Philippe Lejeune of France, has written extensively on the subject of autobiography. A groundbreaking work published in 1971, *L'autobiographie en France*, traced the history of the genre in France and set forth criteria for judging whether or not personal reminiscences constitute a “true” autobiography. It is Lejeune’s belief that writers of autobiography have been much influenced by the similar writings of others. In other words, when faced with the task of how to write about themselves, they adopt and adapt techniques that have been used previously, rather than just dashing it off, as one might a diary entry or a letter. He lists a number of authors who figure as forerunners of the genre, before it was taken so triumphantly in hand by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions*.

Among these forerunners was a now forgotten woman, Marguerite-Jeanne, Baronne de Staal (1684-1750), whose *Memoires de Mme de Staal-Delaunay*, giving an intimate view of French aristocratic life, appeared in the middle of the eighteenth century. This Mme de Staal is not to be confused with that swashbuckling lady of letters, the famous Mme de Staël—Anne Louise Germaine Necker, Baroness de Staël-Holstein (1766-1817). Mme de Staal was not herself noble, but became a sort of lady-in-waiting to the powerful Duchesse de Maine who arranged her protégée’s marriage to provide her with a position and an income, and generally bossed her about in a fond but imperious manner.

This book was widely read at the time, and according to Lejeune provided the model for describing individual sentiments and behaviour or manners *from the subjective perspective in personal memoirs*. He notes the influence of the new *romanesque* (novel-like) language of authors who used a narrator to tell their tale in the first person. He is referring to the popular British epistolary novels and the French “memoir” novels that appeared in the first half of the eighteenth century. Mme de Staal used this convention to recreate “the experience in life of a sensitive soul,” but with a difference—for here the narrator truly was the author. Quite apart from the glitter of court life and interaction with the great people of her world, what Mme de Staal transmitted to her readers was an engaging sense of involvement in her own modest life, with all its emotions, trials and small triumphs.

The success of Mme de Staal's work coincided with a new view of the individual in Western European thought, stimulated by the rise of the bourgeoisie (Frye 1957: 307; Lejeune 1971: 13, 65; Pascal 1960: 21). The new concept recognized the uniqueness of the individual and of each person's experience. Rousseau, of course, took this concept to a new plane with the writing of his *Confessions*.

Writing about I

It is perhaps difficult for readers in the 1990s to appreciate a writer's hesitation to talk about himself or herself, accustomed as they are to a literary convention in which the first person is predominant. Yet a truly great French writer like Stendhal was almost unable to bring himself to do so. "What eye can see itself?" he asks. The idea of writing about himself is "inviting," he records at the beginning of his *Life of Henry Brulard*, published fifty years after his death. "Yes, but that frightful quantity of *I*'s and *me*'s!" he wails. "They would be enough to put the most kind-hearted reader into a bad temper." In the very next paragraph he repeats his anguish about "writing his life": "I have had it in mind many times... but I have always been discouraged by that terrible difficulty of the *I*'s and *me*'s which will make the author odious; I do not feel that I have enough talent to get round it" (Stendhal 1955: 6-7). Luckily for us, he decided a few paragraphs later that the current taste (or lack of it) would have changed sufficiently in fifty years, and that it was worthwhile writing about himself after all, if only for a distant future audience. This question of taste is explained by one of his translators, Matthew Josephson, who noted that, "When the Romantic movement in literature (which he had helped to launch) began to embody excesses of style and an intellectual fuzziness that he could not abide, he stood forth as an anti-Romantic, addicted to dryness and factual precision. This was enough to earn him anew the opprobrium of critics who were in fashion" (and who had long been panning his books) "for alleged bad taste and subversive ideas. His books were little read by the public, and he was being forgotten in his own time" (Stendhal 1949: 7).

Stendhal's agonizing over whether or not to write about himself demonstrates an interesting phenomenon about autobiography: its writers have difficulty approaching the subject of themselves. (The self-styled Baron de Stendhal's real name was Marie-Henri Beyle and Brulard was a maternal family name. Referring to himself as Henry Brulard may have been a device to help him write with greater ease about himself.) This, however, was only one aspect of a hesitancy that was particularly marked as the genre developed in the early nineteenth century.

The autobiographical pact

Among the criteria that Lejeune applies for judging a true autobiography is the presence of what he calls "the autobiographical pact"—a statement of purpose early in the work that he or she intends to write his or her personal story. This statement is an apologia, as we saw with Stendhal, a defence thrown up against the reader/critic, who might bring charges of vanity or self-love against the author. Acceptable reasons for writing about oneself are put forward—instruction, providing a model for others, or the interest of the author as a representative of a class, generation or type. One of the few exceptions, says Lejeune, is Rousseau, who in his *Confessions* unabashedly states that he is interesting simply because he is uniquely himself.

The autobiography of the Canadian author Philippe-Joseph Aubert de Gaspé, writing in the 1860s, revealed the same hesitancy about introducing himself as the principal subject and the need to make some excuse for doing so. To begin with, he suggests that others have urged him to continue writing after the publication of his initial work, *Les anciens Canadiens*. By the fifth and sixth paragraphs of the chapter, however, he is stating unequivocally that, since he is his own oldest contemporary, he will have to write about himself in his “memoirs,” as he calls them, recalling all the details of his life since birth. “I cannot write the history of my contemporaries without speaking of my own life, bound up as it is with those whom I have known since childhood. My own story, therefore, shall be the framework upon which I hang my memories” (de Gaspé 1988: 6). This is his “autobiographical pact.”

Lejeune notes other criteria. The work must be written from a single standpoint in time, reflecting a coherent (although not necessarily true) view of the past. “But how many precautions are necessary to prevent oneself from lying!” sighed Stendhal (1955: 10). He need not have worried; the underlying truth of personality would inevitably come through.

The virtue of a single standpoint in time is that it enables an author to be systematically retrospective and to make a meaningful statement, in autobiographical terms, about his life and personality. (In diaries, by contrast, the standpoint in time is constantly shifting). However, establishing a coherent view of the past doesn’t necessarily mean telling a tale in chronological order. In fact, autobiographers are prone to note the unpredictable play of memory, says Lejeune. Memory is complex and disordered, not structured or linear, he feels. To stick doggedly to chronological order is difficult and indeed unnatural. Again, Stendhal is a case in point. He keeps starting and stopping, fretting about chronological order and complaining that he is wandering from the point—“I shall be unintelligible if I do not follow the sequence of time” (Stendhal 1955: 11). He tries, but two paragraphs later says, “I am wandering from the point again.” And indeed he wanders back and forth for a dozen more pages, finally drawing up a list of time periods in his life (or, as we now realize, trying to establish a coherent view of the past), until he finally ends his second chapter with the dry remark, “I will now be born” (Stendhal 1955: 23).

Born he may have been, but Stendhal, writing in the 1830s, was unable to assume a single stance or viewpoint in *The Life of Henry Brulard*, and for this reason offers us a telling example of the difficulties of autobiography. At the end of the book, which ostensibly covers boyhood and adolescence but is filled with references to later events and states of mind, Stendhal is still struggling with this central problem: “I do not want to say what things were—what I discover they were, for almost the first time, in 1836; but on the other hand, I cannot write what they were for me in 1800; the reader would throw the book down” (Stendhal 1955: 375).

One of the appealing things about *The Life of Henry Brulard* is the very fact of its engaging untidiness. We feel he is really talking to us. The reader or translator who understands the criteria of autobiography, far from feeling annoyed or frustrated by the somewhat chaotic nature of this particular work, will appreciate its conversational tone, its struggle to impose some order, and the wealth of introspection and information about Stendhal’s personality that tumble onto the page. This spontaneity is itself a sign of underlying truthfulness. As the translator Josephson notes in his introduction to Stendhal’s *Memoirs of Egotism*: “He had the faculty of surrendering

himself to some emotional experience, then recording it afterward with complete self-consciousness. A great forerunner of modern psychology, he tried to examine himself, and others, with the experimental and dispassionate attitude typified by the new scientists of the time, ... eschewing all bombast, or sentiment" (Stendhal 1949: 4). Josephson recounts an illustrative anecdote in which Stendhal, approached in a Paris salon by a stranger who asked what his business was, replied, "Sir, I am an observer of the human heart" (Stendhal 1949: 3-4).

The two substantial fragments of autobiography, *La Vie d'Henri Brulard* and *Souvenirs d'égotisme*, were found among Stendhal's posthumous papers and published some fifty years after his death (much as he had predicted) during the Stendhal revival that took place in France in the 1890s. *Henry Brulard* was first translated into English in 1925 by Alison Phillips. A second, more scholarly translation by Jean Stewart and B. C. J. G. Knight appeared in 1958. These two versions offer us a rare opportunity to sample two translations of the same autobiography. A brief comparison of these two texts, in the light of what I have been saying about autobiography, may be of interest. If nothing else, they demonstrate the difficulty of transmuting the vagaries of autobiography with the same *élan* with which it is written.

Stendhal begins his autobiography with the following sentences, immediately engaging the reader as a listener by recounting what had happened that morning:

Je me trouvais ce matin, 16 octobre 1832, à San Pietro in Montorio, sur le mont Janicule, à Rome, il faisait un soleil magnifique. Un léger vent de sirocco à peine sensible faisait flotter quelques petits nuages blancs au-dessus du mont Albano, une chaleur délicieuse régnait dans l'air, j'étais heureux de vivre.... Ce lieu est unique au monde, me disais-je en rêvant, et la Rome ancienne malgré moi l'emportait sur la moderne, tous les souvenirs de Tite-Live me revenaient en foule.... Ah! dans trois mois j'aurai cinquante ans, est-il bien possible!... Cette découverte imprévue ne m'irrita point, je venais de songer à Annibal et aux Romains. De plus grands que moi sont bien morts." (Stendhal 1973: 27-8)

Here is Alison Phillips translating in 1925:

I found myself this morning, the 16th October 1832, at San Pietro in Montorio, on the Janiculum, at Rome. There was a splendid sun; a light and almost imperceptible sirocco was wafting a few little white clouds over the Alban Mount; the air was full of delightful warmth; I was glad to be alive.... This place, I said to myself, musing, has not its like in the world; and, do what I would, the old Rome prevailed over the modern; all my memories of Livy came thronging back to me.... Ah! in three months' time I shall be fifty. Is it really possible?... This unexpected discovery did not annoy me, I had just meditated on Hannibal and the Romans. Greater men than I are dead and gone! (Stendhal 1955: 3)

And here, in a more scholarly vein, are Stewart and Knight:

I was standing this morning, October 16th, 1832, by San Pietro in Montorio, on the Janiculum Hill in Rome, in magnificent sunshine. A few small white clouds, borne on a barely perceptible sirocco wind, were floating above Monte Albano, a delicious warmth filled the air and I was happy to be alive.... There is no place like this in the world, I mused, and against my will ancient Rome prevailed over modern Rome; memories of Livy crowded into my mind.... Ah! in three months I shall be fifty; can that really be so?... This unexpected discovery did not vex me; I had been thinking about Hannibal and the Romans. Why, greater men than I have died! (Stendhal 1968: 1-2)

Despite its conversational tone, Stendhal's prose is lyrical, imbued with the personality of the writer, sensitive to beauty and mortality, yet terminating with wry humour. And curiously enough, the earlier translator has caught the spirit of it more successfully in English. She has understood the tremulous nature of the opening, the somewhat breathless quality, the adroit and evocative turn of phrase that is the hallmark of a practised writer. The later translators—in this passage at least—are not particularly lyrical in English, and occasionally downright ponderous (“ancient Rome prevailed over modern Rome; memories of Livy crowded into my mind,” instead of Phillips’ more sweeping rendition, “the old Rome prevailed over the modern; all my memories of Livy came thronging back to me”).

Josephson points out that in writing about himself Stendhal did not strive for the *mot juste*, but for “the exact communication of thought that he desired.” However he avoided being “literary” or indulging in bombast, and employed simplicity and unfeigned candour in his account of himself. In addition, says Josephson, he strove for speed, for a sort of automatic writing of impressions as they crowded in, “whether they seemed connected or disassociated. Thus he hoped to come ‘close to Nature’ in her most unforeseen or unconscious aspects” (Stendhal 1968: 20-1).

Let us look at another passage, in which Stendhal discusses his hated tutor.

Je ne me trouve aucune mémoire de la manière dont je fus délivré de la tyrannie Raillane. Ce coquin-là aurait dû faire de moi un excellent jésuite, digne de succéder à mon père, ou un soldat crapuleux coureur de filles et de cabarets. (Stendhal 1973: 114)

Here is Phillips:

I can find no trace in my memory of the way in which I was delivered from the Raillane tyranny. That rogue ought to have turned me into an excellent Jesuit, worthy to succeed my father, or a debauched soldier given over to women and wine. (Stendhal 1955: 89)

Here are Stewart and Knight:

I have absolutely no recollection of how I was delivered from the Raillane tyranny. That scoundrel should by rights have made an excellent Jesuit of me, a worthy successor to my father, or else a loose-living soldier, a frequenter of wenches and taverns. (Stendhal 1968: 76)

I for one feel that the contemptuous “ce coquin-là” conjures up a rogue more than a scoundrel, and that a “loose-living frequenter of wenches and taverns” is unnecessarily antiquated for someone writing in the 1830s, and indeed more likely to be found in Shakespeare than in the writing of someone as relatively modern as Stendhal, an author certainly not given to grandiloquence. However, it is perhaps unfair to pick holes in translations of what must be one of the most difficult autobiographies to render into another language. From the reader's standpoint, neither is entirely successful, each displaying at various points a lack of ease, possibly because the translators were somewhat daunted by the fame of the author and unwilling to be more free in order to recreate the spontaneity of the author in English.

But the translation of autobiography may be essentially a dangerous and thankless undertaking. On recently opening a McGill University library copy of André Gide's *If It Die*, the 1951 translation of *Si le grain ne meurt* by the noted translator Dorothy Bussy, I found the following discouraging comment penned opposite the copyright page by an irate reader (PQ 2613 I2 Z52 1951, if you want to see for your-

selves). The unknown expresses anger because some brief passages were left out (at the insistence of one of Gide's cousins), then fires a final, crushing salvo. I give this choice morsel verbatim, F-word and all:

This text is a bastardized version. If you don't want sexually repressed, uptight, moral editors fucking over you're [*sic*] reading, check out one of the more recent editions of this book. The translation is poor, not even approaching the beauty of the original. Read it in French.

Poor Dorothy Bussy! But as Plutarch said, "Where the lion's skin will not reach, you must patch it out with the fox's."

REFERENCES

- DE GASPÉ, Philippe-Joseph (1866), tr. by Jane Brierley (1988): *A Man of Sentiment: The Memoirs of Philippe-Joseph Aubert de Gaspé (1786-1871)*, Montreal, Véhicule Press.
- FRYE, Northrop (1964): *The Educated Imagination*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
- (1957): *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- LEJEUNE, Philippe (1971): *L'Autobiographie en France*, Paris, A. Colin.
- LOWES, John Livingston (1927): *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company.
- PASCAL, Roy (1960): *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- STENDHAL (Henri Beyle), tr. by Alison Phillips (1925; Vintage edition 1955): *La Vie de Henry Brulard*. New York, Vintage Books.
- (Henri Beyle), tr. by Jean Stewart and B. C. J. G. Knight (1958; Minerva edition 1968): *La Vie de Henry Brulard*, U.S.A., Minerva Press.
- (Henri Beyle), ed. by Béatrice Didier (1973): *La Vie de Henry Brulard*, Paris, Gallimard.
- (Henri Beyle), tr. by Hannah and Matthew Josephson (1949): *Memoirs of Egotism*, New York, Lear.