

Autobiography as Authenticity

BART BEATY

A three-page short story by Lewis Trondheim published in *Lapin* #26 outlines the stakes at play in contemporary autobiographical comics. Trondheim's autobiographical essay, "Journal du journal du journal," is a peculiar *mise-en-abyme*. Trondheim begins by depicting himself reading Fabrice Neaud's autobiographical novel *Journal (III)* (1999). On that page, Neaud depicts himself reading Dupuy and Berberian's autobiographical novel *Journal d'un album* (1994). At that point in *Journal d'un album*, Philippe Dupuy depicts a momentous intersection in his personal and professional life. Having chosen, with his partner Charles Berberian, to undertake an autobiographical comic book detailing the creation of the third book in their *M. Jean* series, Dupuy shows a number of early pages to his colleagues in L'Association. Their assessment of the work is rather rough, noting that the work seems to have lost its rhythm and that it could be done more concisely. Returning home, he falls into a despairing dream before being awakened by a phone call from his father informing him that his mother has passed away. The following page encapsulates his mother's life in just six images, recalling the advice that Trondheim offers in the story: "You could do it in one page."¹

Reading this passage in *Journal (III)*, Neaud is impressed by Dupuy's work, but finds himself engaged by the comments offered by the members of L'Association. He suggests that their inappropriate remarks may be a displacement of their inability to be interested in the lives of other people. Visually, through the use of a non-diegetic intercut, he associates the intemperate observations of the L'Association artists with the dismissive commentaries on his own work that are leveled at him by his close friend and love interest, Dominique, thereby casting aspersions on their motives.

Trondheim's essay is an exact replica of Neaud's page, drawn in Trondheim's style. Visually, the page's seven-panel grid is recreated, and the figures are placed in identical positions. Further, Trondheim duplicates the narration, shifting the details slightly from Neaud's commentary on Dupuy and L'Association, to Trondheim's commentary on Neaud's commentary on Dupuy and L'Association. Where Neaud was shocked that Neaud would make such basic judgments about their roles as editors and publishers. On the

second page of Trondheim's essay, which again visually reiterates Neaud's page, he rereads his own first page and finds himself shocked that he would make such a rash judgment of Neaud's work. The work potentially recedes to infinity as Trondheim comments on his own commentary regarding Neaud's commentary on L'Association's comments about Dupuy's self-reflexive work. The game is in play; the text is never finished but always ripe for reinterpretation.

Clearly, Trondheim approaches the question of the autobiographical essay in a satiric and toying manner, playing with the similarities between the titles of the books and the closeness of the content initiated by Neaud. At the same time, however, his work contains a few barbs that suggest it is something more than mere whimsy. Where Neaud depicts Dominique dismissing all autobiographical writing with the phrase "*The Diary of Anne Frank*, that pisses me off. I find it badly written,"² Trondheim reacts to L'Association president Jean-Christophe Menu's dismissal of the mainstream genre comics of Jean Van Hamme this way: "*XIII*, that pisses me off. I find it badly written."³ This transition re-centers the discussion away from the concerns of autobiography to those of the small press. This is an entirely apt displacement. Since the beginning of the 1990s, autobiography has become an increasingly prominent genre within the small-press and independent comics scene, with strengths in a number of European nations. Indeed, autobiography has become the genre that most distinctly defines the small-press comics production of Europe in its current revitalization. Specifically, a number of cartoonists have made the narrativization of comic book production a central signifier of authenticity in the contemporary European small-press scene.

Central to the study of autobiography has been the project of defining it as a genre distinct from biography and fiction. Philippe Lejeune's often-cited definition of the genre is widely regarded as normative: "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."⁴ Lejeune's definition has, of course, opened up number of challenges, and the policing of the boundaries of autobiography in relation to other literary forms has become a major undertaking. Indeed, it is fair to say that the study of autobiography is dominated by inquiries into the particular traits of autobiography and comparisons between autobiography and other literary forms.⁵ Paul de Man, writing in 1979, indicated how these assumptions had driven the study of autobiography down a dead end:

The theory of autobiography is plagued by a recurrent series of questions and approaches that are not simply false, in the sense that they take for granted assumptions about autobiographical discourse that are in fact highly problematic. They keep therefore being stryimed, with predictable monotony, by sets of problems that are inherent in their own use. One of these problems is the attempt to define and to treat autobiography as if it were a literary genre among others.⁶

For de Man and others, theories of psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and feminism have called into question the self-evident nature of the subject and knowledge. Post-structuralism in particular had deposited the unified subject of autobiography by positing discourse as preceding and exceeding the subject, calling the very basis of the genre's distinctiveness into question.⁷ Nonetheless, the study of autobiography continues to dwell

upon the questions that de Man sought to vacate, often complicating notions of “truth” and “self” in light of current theorizing, but proceeding with that work of definition all the same.

Two ideas predominate in the study of autobiography: the relation of the text to historical truth and the relation of the text to the conventions of biography. Timothy Dow Adams, for example, argues, “a promise to tell the truth is one of autobiography’s earliest premises.”⁸ He suggests that autobiography is an attempt to reconcile one’s life with one’s self and that therefore the core of autobiography is not historical accuracy but metaphorical truth. Philippe Lejeune identifies the “referential pact” as central to the process of autobiography:

As opposed to all forms of fiction, biography and autobiography are *referential* texts: exactly like scientific or historical discourse, they claim to provide information about a “reality” exterior to the text, and so to submit to a test of verification. Their aim is not simple verisimilitude, but resemblance to the truth. Nor “the effect of the real,” but the image of the real. All referential texts thus entail what I will call a “referential pact,” implicit or explicit, in which are included a definition of the field of the real that is involved and a statement of the modes and the degree of resemblance to which the text lays claim.⁹

This focus on the issue of truth—whether metaphorical or historical, simple verisimilitude or “resemblance to the truth”—fundamentally deadens the instrumentality of autobiography study. As critics have narrowed the debate to the precise definition of genre, it has become trapped in merely formal questions. The creation of autobiographical works, particularly in terms of how the form has been understood and mobilized by contemporary European comic book producers, is better thought of as a social process. Autobiography, with its implicit claims to replicate the “real world,” stands in stark contrast to a European comic book heritage that has celebrated adventurous boy reporters, wisecracking Gaulish adventurers, cowboys, astronauts, and other heroes of escapist literature. Indeed, the central issue relating to the use of autobiography in contemporary comics is not whether it can be demonstrated that L’Association actually criticized Dupuy’s comics or that Neaud reacted violently to reading these critiques, but rather how various authors have adopted autobiographical work as a distinctive device that sets them apart from the normative elements of the comics market. The importance of autobiography in the field of contemporary comic book production stems at least in part from the renewed importance of the genre in the field of French literature in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, autobiographical comics derive much of their importance from their insertion of modes of visibility into an increasingly legitimated literary genre. Writing about autobiographical tendencies in contemporary French painting, Monique Yaari suggests that the turning point for autobiography—which had been devalORIZED by modernism—occurred in 1975 with the publication of *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Georges Perec’s *W*, and Philippe Lejeune’s *Pacte autobiographique*. Subsequent years saw the release of Michel Beaujour’s *Miroirs d'encre* (1980) and autobiographies from noted French intellectuals Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet. Similarly, in the field of painting a number of shows using on the self-portrait also helped to revitalize

the genre in the 1970s.¹⁰ Thierry Groensteen has argued that French autobiographical cartoonists drew inspiration from this revitalization of the self-portrait and the autobiography, as well as from innovative forms of autobiographical cinema, such as those by Jean-Luc Godard, Nanni Moretti, and Cyril Collard.¹¹ If autobiography was in the air—and, more importantly, in the art schools—in the early 1990s, what did the new generation of cartoonists hope to achieve by adopting its form? Of all the neglected literary forms, why autobiography?

In the first instance, autobiography is the genre that offers the most explicit promise of legitimizing cartoonists as authors. The death of the author pronounced by Roland Barthes in the 1960s was confirmed in the decades that followed, as Janet Staiger has pointed out, by the prevalence of post-structuralist criticism and the ubiquity of a mass-mediated marketplace of ideas.¹² According to Michel Foucault, the author-function continued to exist to the extent that the concept upheld bourgeois sensibilities about art.¹³ For cartoonists, this assertion functioned as a promise. If cartoonists could assert their own identities as authors by conforming to these sensibilities and meet the expectations placed on artists in other fields, their social position could be improved. For cartoonists an important precursor in this regard was cinema, a medium in which the development of an auteur theory had created the social conditions under which film could come to be regarded as a legitimated art form.

At the same time, however, cartoonists were arriving late to the party, and the possibility existed that these doors had already closed. From this standpoint, cartoonists occupied an aesthetically marginal space in much the same way that certain social groups were—and are—marginalized politically. As Nancy Harsock has noted, “Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subject rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?”¹⁴ Similarly, Julia Swindells points to the way in which autobiography itself has served as a liberating space for oppressed peoples:

Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness—women, black people, working-class people—have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of “personal” voice, which speaks beyond itself.¹⁵

Swindells’s notion of the culturally displaced inserting themselves into culture might seem particularly appealing to comic book artists of the 1990s seeking to have their work valorized as serious or important. I do not intend to claim that cartoonists belong in the same category as those who are socially and politically marginalized based on race, class, or gender. However, in terms of artistic production and the processes of legitimation, and because their chosen métier has so long been regarded as a devalued subculture intended for children, the adoption of an autobiographical tone can be seen as empowering.

Autobiography, therefore, becomes a mode which foregrounds both realism (as opposed to the traditions of fantasy) and the sense of the author as an artist demanding legitimacy (in contrast to the view of the cartoonist as a cultural hack slaving away to turn

out mass-mediated product). In the field of contemporary comic book production, autobiography holds a promise to elevate the legitimacy of both the medium and the artist. Far from propounding the death of the author, as de Man would have it, autobiography in comics holds the possibility of giving the author birth for the first time.

Arguably the most important forerunners of the recent surge in European cartooning come from the American underground comics movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Harvey Pekar is probably the most representative figure, although the importance of Robert Crumb and Justin Green as innovators should not be minimized. Pekar's *American Splendor* series began in the 1970s and is often regarded as a major departure point for realist comics production, although Pekar is not particularly widely translated in Europe. The best-known—and best-regarded—autobiographical comic in Europe to have come out of the American underground comics movement was Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Part autobiography, part biography of his parents, Spiegelman's work dealt with the personal legacy of the Holocaust, and in particular with his parents' experiences of Auschwitz. Combining cartooning and the Holocaust allowed Spiegelman to develop a "personal voice" within the comics idiom, and his book is widely regarded as the most important "serious" comic book ever published, earning a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. The success of translated editions of *Maus* in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s was suggestive of the possibilities afforded to both autobiographical and non-conventional comic books. What the American underground demonstrated to European cartoonists was the possibility of creating comics that were primarily addressed to questions of personal subjectivity. The American underground movement was at once both a liberatory, personalizing visual aesthetic as well as a working model of authorial independence that favored personal expression above all else. The insertion of the self into the aesthetic and business practices of the underground movement suggested new possibilities for the promotion of the field of comics as an art movement, possibilities that played out in Europe in a different manner.

In the 1970s a number of cartoonists—such as Marcel Gotlib and Moebius—had begun to place their self-images into their work, often in an ironic fashion. Gotlib, for instance, frequently portrayed himself in *Rubrique-à-brac* (1970) as a megalomaniacal, beret-wearing "artiste" character. Other than such satirical efforts, however, straightforward autobiographical comics were rare in the 1980s. Readers could speculate about the relationship between the life histories of artists like Barn and Yves Chaland and the protagonists of seemingly autobiographical fiction such as *Quequette blues* (1984) and *Le Jeune Albert* (1985), but neither of these books explicitly signaled an "autobiographical pact." Their work pointed towards the viability of an autobiographical approach within the traditional full-color album format, but it did not mark the type of fundamental shift in perspective that is represented by the current generation. The precursor of that transition was Edmond Baudoin.

Baudoin helped to launch the field of autobiographical comics with his work in the 1980s for Futuropolis. *Passe le temps* (1982) and *Couma Aco* (1991) were central to the reputation of Futuropolis for publishing serious-minded, non-genre, and artist-driven works. In terms of delving into real situations and people rather than fantasies and adventure, Baudoin signified a growing sense of maturity in French cartooning, both in terms of audience expectations and personal aesthetics. With the death of Futuropolis as

a publishing house in 1994, Baudoin moved much of his artistic output to L'Association, where he continued to produce autobiographical works like *Eloge de la poussière* (1995) and *Terrains vagues* (1996). His autobiographical output largely frames the possibilities inherent in the genre for a number of European cartoonists. It is important that Baudoin is not merely chronicling the passage of his life. His works are framed within poetic narratives complemented by a very loose rendering style. As such, Baudoin primarily offers meditations on his life and his personal relationships, often with women, rather straightforward accounts of his activities and reminiscences. His books contain roughly equal parts eroticism and philosophy.

In 2002 Baudoin began a new project that is typical of his interests in autobiography. *Le Chemin de Saint-Jean* is an oversized (27 x 37 cm) black-and-white book that tells of Baudoin's connection to a mountain near his childhood home in Nice. The book is structured as a series of sketches of the mountain drawn at various points in Baudoin's life. There is no narrative as such, simply a series of notes regarding the feelings and memories that the metaphorical road of the title evokes in the artist. Further, the book—like so much of Baudoin's autobiographical work—is not fixed. Because Baudoin anticipates returning to this material throughout the rest of his career, the book is described as being in "permanent elaboration."¹⁶ The first edition of the book was given a relatively small print run of two thousand copies. Each subsequent reprinting of the book will contain new material as Baudoin develops it, allowing the text to mutate over time in much the same way that memories themselves develop and recede. Indeed, the second edition of the book (2004) was expanded in page count, but reduced to the more traditional size of the French album in L'Association's Collection Éperlette. Baudoin's poetic approach to the representation of his own memories and relationships marked a decidedly different approach to autobiographical cartooning than could be found in the work of previous European cartoonists, throwing open the door to contemporary autobiographical comics in Europe.

While Baudoin represents the most important precursor of European autobiographical comics, Marjane Satrapi better represents the critical and financial importance of autobiographical comics as a movement in Europe. Satrapi, termed the "Persian comics star" by the French daily *Libération*,¹⁷ is among the most commercially successful of the new generation of European small-press cartoonists. Her four-volume autobiographical comic book, *Perspolis*, has been translated into numerous European languages, and an English-language edition was published by Pantheon—the publishers of *Maus*—in two volumes (2003, 2004). The French editions of her book, published by L'Association, have sold more than 100,000 copies.¹⁸ Moreover, the third volume of the series was pre-published in the pages of *Libération* in the summer of 2002, giving the work the same kind of national media exposure that a famous novelist or essayist might expect.

Perspolis is the strictly chronological story of Satrapi's life from childhood to young adulthood. Born in Tehran to middle-class parents, Satrapi evokes the hardships that her family suffered under the Islamic revolution that swept through Iran when she was ten years old. The series recalls her efforts to circumvent the strict religious teachings in the devastation wrought by the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, her schooling in Vienna, and her return to art school and a brief marriage in Iran. Satrapi's books, which are presented with a spare, stripped-down visual aesthetic, define for many the contemporary

autobiographical comics movement. The wide exposure of her work, and its warm reception beyond the confines of the traditional comics reading public, has served to reinforce the association between serious subjects in contemporary comics and autobiography. Indeed, by dealing with her youth in autobiographical manner rather than through fictionalization, Satriapi's work draws upon common assumptions about autobiography and truthfulness for much of its power.

While Satriapi has achieved the greatest commercial success in the autobiographical genre, her work is by no means normative. The visual aspects of autobiographical approaches within contemporary European comics are remarkably heterogeneous and plural despite evidence of considerable overlap within the thematics of the movement. Moreover, because the narrative content of so many autobiographical comics is roughly analogous, it is primarily through the processes of rendering and visualization that these works differ from each other. In 1996, for example, Thierry Groensteen identified a number of traits common to the narrative component of autobiographical comics. The two most prevalent of these were recollections of childhood and a recounting of intimate or sexual encounters.¹⁹ These categories clearly encompass the work of Baudoin and Satriapi but also incorporate a large number of practitioners working in different contexts. Jean-Christophe Menu, whose own *Livret de phamille* (1995) is a central early text in the autobiographical comics movement, foregrounds his familial relationships—particularly to his wife and children—in his work. Swedish cartoonist Åsa Grennvall details her relationship with an extremely demanding and insensitive mother in *Det känns som hundra år* (1999), as well as her relationship with an emotionally and physically abusive boyfriend in *Stunde våningen* (2002). Maarke Hartjes portrays her quotidian life and her personal fears in *Maarke's GrootDagboekje* (2002). The 381-page Finnish anthology *Sartakunwainat* (2001) features twelve artists—including Kari Rapi, Karija Tulkanen, and Johanna Rojola—recording their diaries for a month apiece in comics form. Each of their pieces foregrounds the intimate in a very direct and highly personal manner. Frederik Peeters's 2001 book *Pihlaks bleus* addresses his romantic involvement with an HIV-positive woman and her young HIV-positive son. While each of these artists utilizes a different visual approach—Menu's loose cartooning, Hartjes's minimalist quasi-stick figures, Peeters's highly symbolic figures within a traditional page design—the intent behind their projects bears a considerable degree of overlap. Indeed, the social and narrative concerns of contemporary European autobiographical cartooning have been codified, even across national borders.

The most notable of all autobiographical comics publishers is France's Ego Comme X. Begun as an anthology publisher in 1994, Ego Comme X was started by students from the Atelier Bande Dessinée at the Ecole Regionale des Beaux-Arts d'Angoulême. Their stated desire was to highlight the importance of “the real” in contradistinction to the dominant comics aesthetic of escapist fantasy. While various other publishers had pushed autobiography to the forefront of the new comics scene in the 1990s—particularly L'Association and Cornélius—Ego Comme X was the first to make autobiographical comics something of an imperative. Writing in the first issue, Thierry Groensteen argued: “Still, at one time, the full-color adventures of irreproachable heroes were rolled out on glazed paper. They neglected reality, preferring to turn to any elsewhere, provided that it

The comic book has changed.”²⁰ The artists published by Ego Comme X—Aristophane, Xavier Mussat, Fabrice Neaud, Frédéric Poincellet, Matthieu Blanchin, Pauline Marini, among numerous others—share a common concern with detailing their intimate personal relationships, and often recollections of their childhoods, in the comics form.

Loïc Nehou and Poincellet take this tendency to the extreme in *Essai de sentimentalisme* (2001) in which Poincellet illustrates explicit stories of Nehou's sex life. The doubled disclosure that this effort entails—Nehou's openness to Poincellet, the artist's frankness with the reader—is unusual in the field and pushes the portrayal of the intimate to its logical extreme. Poincellet's visual approach is perhaps the least conventional in the field of autobiographical comics. Coming from a fine arts and painting background, Poincellet uses no traditional panels, and his pages are mostly composed of white space. Indeed, his work is an obvious bridge between the autobiographical comics movement and the avant-garde tendencies of Frémok (he published a book, *Livre de prières*, with Arnok in 1998).

If Poincellet's work is proof that, as Groensteen suggested, the comics had changed as a result of these formal and, more accurately, thematic lulls, it is also evidence of an increasing concretization of opposition to the heteronomous comics market. Autobiography, as a largely untapped genre offering the opportunity to speak directly for one's self as an author, represented to the new generation of creators a credible alternative to the fantasies that comprised the majority of European comics production. The diverse approaches that autobiography accorded the comics form served as a reinforcement of the idea, as another editorial in *Ego Comme X* indicated, that “a comics that reflects, wonders about its means, realized by authors conscious of being able to express themselves differently with a great deal of accuracy, becomes a language of its own.”²¹ At the same time, however, autobiography risked calcifying into a genre that was as formalized and structured as those that it sought to reject, becoming the small-press genre par excellence. The tension between the heteronomous regimes of fantasy comics publishing in Europe and the more autonomous sector of artist-driven autobiography is highlighted in a number of books published by Ego Comme X and L'Association. Specifically, the work of David B., Dupuy and Berberian, and Fabrice Neaud offers concrete assessments, within an autobiographical form, of the shaping of an independent or alternative European comics culture rooted in personal psychodynamics.

In outlining the common tropes in autobiographical comics, Thierry Groensteen suggests that a distinctively French aspect of the movement is a focus on “the chronicle of the professional life, the *mise-en-scène* of the author's trade in comics.”²² In the case of David B.'s six-volume *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* (1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2003), the author combines his childhood recollections, the history of his family, and his own growth as a cartoonist in order to place his life story in dialogue with his other comics work, genre-based fantasy comics. In an interview, David B. defined his particular approach to autobiography, which extends far beyond recollections of his own life:

Often, people in autobiographical comics tell their life. Period . . . Me, I try to tell another thing, I tell what has happened to my family. I also tell memories of my

of grandparents, great-grandparents. For example, the war of 1914 in the case of my great-grandfather, things like that. And then, I try to tell, parallel to that, the construction of my imagination and the influence that all that I lived could have on this imagination.²³

Indeed, the strong family element in David B.'s autobiographical comics is suggested when he says, "Of course, it is not a work that I undertook all alone, egotistically. It is a work that I make for my sister as well, for my parents and my brother."²⁴ The sense of producing comics not only for one's self, but for an entire family, is highlighted by the content of the books themselves. David B. has used *L'Ascension du Haut Mal* as a sort of explanatory text that provides insight into the mind that has created some of the most offbeat genre comics in recent publishing history. From this standpoint the distinction between autobiographical and fictional work in contemporary European comics production is revealed as more fluid than defenders of the genre might otherwise claim. It is clear, in fact, that autobiography is simply one strand of a complex web of possibilities that constitute the contemporary field of European comics production, albeit a strand for which particularly ideological claims have been regularly made.

NOTES

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4. Lewis Trondheim, "Journal du journal du journal," *Le Rab de lapin* 26 (2001): 33.
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6. William C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980): 207.
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12. Thierry Groensteen, "Les Petites Cases du moi: L'autobiographie en band dessinée," *9e Art* 1 (1996): 65.
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14. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," *The Foucault Reader*, trans. Josue V. Harari, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984): 107.
15. Nancy Hartscock, "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1999): 163–64.
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17. "Elaboration permanente," *L'Association Catalogue* (Paris: L'Association, 2004).

18. "Instantané," *Libération*, February 12, 2003: 7.

19. "La lutte des cases," *Libération*, January 23, 2003: 11.

20. Groensteen, "Petites cases," 66.

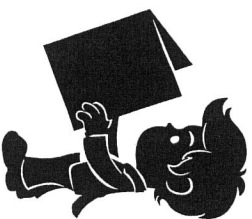
21. Thierry Groensteen, "Petit Manuel d'introspection graphique," *Ego Comme X* 1 (1994): 2.

22. Thierry Leprevost, "Edito," *Ego Comme X* 1 (1994): 2.

23. Groensteen, "Petites cases," 66.

24. "Interview David B.: *L'Ascension du Haut Mal*" (2000). <http://www.bdpardisio.com/intervw/davidb/indavid.htm>.

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