

**Sorina Chiper** is a lecturer in “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași (Faculty of Economics and Business Administration) where she teaches Business Communication in English and Intercultural Communication. Her PhD thesis was awarded, by the Romanian Association of American Studies, the title of Best Dissertation in the field of American Studies defended in the academic year 2011-2012. She is a Fulbright and CEEPUS alumna, was a member of two national research projects focused on the language of participatory democracy and on corporate social responsibility, respectively, and the director of three mobility projects for researchers. She had a postdoctoral research grant in Israel, and has presented the results of her research in more than 50 conferences, in Romania and abroad. Her fields of expertise are: 20<sup>th</sup> century American autobiography, sociolinguistics, translation studies, intercultural communication, professional communication in English, and academic writing.

Sorina Chiper, *Performative Selves, Performative Poses: Gertrude Stein, Norman Mailer and Philip Roth as Autobiographers*

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Iași, str. Grigore Ghica Vodă nr. 13  
euroedit@hotmail.com; www.euroinst.ro

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SORINA CHIPER

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of implicit or explicit gestures of refusals, of which the most prominent, probably, is the refusal to fit generic standards, patterns of experience or standards of writing.

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diversities of American experience or the richness of American memories and imaginations (Stone 1982: 1). In "Autobiography and America", published in James Olney's *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (1980), Sayre argues that the genre is closely connected to the development of America as a nation, from the early Protestant times, and he linked different types of autobiographies to different ideas of America, as they were expressed in canonical American autobiographies by Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams, Frederic Douglas and Walt Whitman. Last but not least, in *American Autobiography: The Prophetic Mode* (1979), Thomas Couser builds the case for prophetic autobiographies as a specifically American genre.

*Chapter One*

**Performative Beginnings**

*"An interest in beginnings is often the corollary result of not believing that any beginning can be located"*  
 (Said 1985: 5)

**1.1 Introduction**

Beginnings and endings stand in a dialectical relation: we tend to view beginnings as containing the seed that will find its fruition in the ending, and from endings, we trace back imaginary trajectories that lead to origins, roots, initiations, inaugurations, sources, points of departure, seeds. The fascination of beginnings lies in their pool of potentialities: they pull attention, emotional investment and ritual behavior through the richness of yet unknown possibilities. The fascination of endings resides in how they relate back to beginnings: as explanations, as unexpected surprises, as logical consequences, as reinforcements for the logic of events, or as ends that begin something new. A false start does not count as a beginning; nor do seeds that fail to germinate count as good seeds. A beginning, therefore, always implies a defining adjective that characterizes it as "good," "proper" or "appropriate."

Critical investigations into the nature of narrative, and especially the literary criticism of novels, have focused extensively on narrative endings. Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* [1966] (2000) spurred interest in the topic through its illuminating forays into fiction, myth, millennial thinking and the apocalyptic imagination. *Narrative Endings* (1978), a special issue of *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, continued the path opened by Kermode through a series of essays on endings of nineteenth century novels, as the corner stone through which not only nineteenth century literature, but also the entire society could be understood.

In parallel, scholars interested in the study of autobiography were drawn more to beginnings as the site of generic differentiation. Philippe Lejeune's groundbreaking "Autobiographical Pact" defined the genre of autobiography through the reading contract that is established between the author and the readers at paratextual level, on the threshold of the autobiography as a print product, in public circulation. For Lejeune, to write and publish an autobiography means to enter into a contract with readers. Autobiographers make a pledge to tell the truth of their lived experience; readers acknowledge the writer's right to tell their story in their own terms, yet preserve their own right to question the truthfulness of the account and to check its historical viability. Although autobiographers might fail to meet the terms of the contract and to provide an ultimate account in agreement with historical facts, the initial contract and the pledge to tell the truth cannot be questioned. In a contract between two reasonable subjects (the author *qua* narrator *qua* main character, and the reader *qua* recipient and judge of the narration), both parties are responsible: the former assumes the responsibility to tell the truth, the latter assumes the responsi-

bility to give a reasonable interpretation of the facts presented to his or her consciousness.

E. S. Burt reads Lejeune's theory of the autobiographical pact as an insightful recourse to performativity theory: "Lejeune saw in the performative a means to limit the runaway subjectivism uncovered by Gusdorf and to settle the hovering of all first-person narratives between autobiographical document and fiction by grounding them in a signed pact" (Burt 2009: 3). In referencing Georges Gusdorf, Burt invokes the former's study on the conditions and limits of autobiography which are ultimately squared by the predicaments of human subjectivity, self-knowledge and linguistic representation: everything and everyone represented in autobiography are subject to the autobiographer's perspectivism and appropriation as the objects of his or her desires, love, admiration, hate, envy or jealousy.

Through his theory of the autobiographical pact, Lejeune drew the line between novels written in the first person and autobiographies, as a further step in his efforts at generic differentiation. These efforts led him to draw clear taxonomies and fixed boundaries between the diary, the memoir, the autobiography, the biography and the novel in the first person, and to a now classical definition of 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" (Lejeune 1982: 193). This definition places autobiography in a referential mode, and envisions it as a narrative produced at a certain moment in time when the fully-developed autobiographical subject retraces, in retrospect, the cumulative steps in his formation. To the chronological description and interpretation of one's individual life, Lejeune adds – without calling it so – a performative element, through the constitution of the auto-

biographical pact. This performative aspect, briefly mentioned by Burt in his unpacking of the pact as a relationship between “one” (the autobiographer) and “the other” (the reader), is the key concept around which this chapter is built, and whose relevance extends to subsequent chapters as well.

## 1.2 The performative in theory

The concept of the performative has had a long and sinuous journey in the humanities. It originated in John Langshaw Austin’s philosophy of language, which broke away from the traditional understanding of language as purely referential and descriptive of “the real” to argue that language can also create “the real”. In the William James lectures delivered at Harvard in 1955 and printed in 1962 as *How to Do Things with Words*, J. L. Austin brought into focus a type of utterances that had been ignored or, at the most, marginalized by both linguists and philosophers of language: utterances that are neither descriptive or constative (which were the linguists’ sole concern), nor non-sensical (in the philosophers’ understanding of the term). They “do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or state anything at all, are not ‘true or false,’ and [...] the uttering of the sentence is, or is part of, the doing of an action, which [...] would not normally be described as saying something” (Austin 1962: 5). These utterances, formerly relegated as “masqueraders” (Austin 1962: 4), are called by Austin performatives because rather than referring back to something that already exists, they bring something into existence. Austin’s classic examples are the naming of a ship, betting, and the acknowledgement of vows in the marriage ceremony.

These examples which include a verb in the present tense simple, in the indicative and in the first person are, in fact,

“explicit performatives” (Austin 1962: 5). They cannot be judged according to their truth value because the criterion of truthfulness does not apply; instead, they can be analyzed in the context in which they occur as “felicitous” or “infelicitous,” successful or unsuccessful performances of the actions that they designate. The successful or “happy” performance of the action depends on whether the context provides the appropriate conditions for its carrying out and on whether the “I” who performs the action through speech is entitled to carry it out, completes it according to pre-existent norms and does it in good faith. It also depends on whether the other participants involved have the required thoughts or feelings, the intention to conduct themselves in a certain way, and later they do act precisely upon those intentions (Austin 1962: 14-15). Otherwise, the act misfires or is null.

The test of an explicit performative is the possibility to insert “hereby” between the subject (“I”) and the verb in the present tense: “I hereby promise...,” “I hereby declare...,” “I hereby appoint you...” Austin’s attempts to draw a list of performative verbs stumbled over instances where one performs an act, in speaking, without recourse to a first person singular, present indicative, active verb. These instances concern utterances in the second person, in the plural or in the passive voice, such as “You are hereby authorized to pay...”, “Passengers are warned to cross the track by the bridge only,” “Notice is given that ...” (Austin 1962: 57). Such examples undermined Austin’s grammar and vocabulary-based criteria to recognize performatives and highlighted the fact that performatives are implicit rather than explicit. In regular – or “serious”, as Austin would say – language use, any utterance is an implicit performative, which can become explicit through expansion (Austin 1962: 61). For instance, an utterance such as “I was born in October” can be expanded into an explicit performative

by using the pronoun “I”, the adverb “hereby” and a verb: “I hereby affirm that I was born in October,” or “I hereby declare that I was born in October.” Thus, from designating a marginal set of utterances, the performative came to stand for an aspect of language in use, one of the “senses in which to say something is to do something” (Austin 1962: 91).

Going beyond the dichotomy between constatives and performatives, Austin established a triad of acts that occur simultaneously in speaking: the locutionary act, the illocutionary act, and the perlocutionary act. The act of saying something is a locutionary act. By saying something, a speaker also does something, and the performance of an act “*in* saying something” is an illocutionary act. Furthermore, *by* saying something and *in* saying something, a speaker produces “certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons,” i.e. he or she performs a perlocutionary act (Austin 1962: 99-100). For instance, by saying “The term autobiography is a misnomer” I argue that “autobiography” is an inappropriate name and I may perform several perlocutions: I may question a certain understanding of the term, I may confirm doubts, contradict or persuade someone that it is so.

Austin’s investigations into language use took descriptive sentences as the unit of linguistic analysis and cast a new light on language as a creative force. In choosing his examples, he insisted on the “serious” use of language – language as occurring in real life, not “said by an actor on the stage, or introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy” (Austin 1962: 9). Jacques Derrida identified this choice of examples as a limitation of Austin’s work and argued that literature is a performative act *par excellence*: literary utterances create situations and characters, ideas, concepts, and emotions. As such, literature is an

inaugural act, similar to issuing a constitution, declaring political independence or performing other political acts of inauguration, whose success depends on a combination of performatives and constatives: “Literary works claim to tell us about the world, but if they succeed they do so by bringing into being the characters and events they relate” (Culler 2000: 510).

Apart from bringing literature out of the twilight zone of “non-seriousness” for discussions of performativity, Derrida also took issue with the presumption in Austin’s “pure” performatives that they are unique and original acts occurring in the deictic “now” and in a total context (“a context exhaustively determined, in theory or teleologically” (Derrida 1988b: 14)). In addition, he developed one idea that remained minor in Austin’s second lecture: the first condition for the “happy” functioning of an explicit performative – postulated Austin – is the existence of “an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect” which includes the uttering of “certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances” (Austin 1962: 14).

Derrida pointed out that the success of a performative (in speech, for Austin and in writing, for Derrida) is ensured by iterability – by the possibility of utterances to be cited, i.e. reinserted into a new context where they can perform the same function as in the “original” contexts. Pure performatives succeed because their formula repeats a coded utterance that can be identified as a citation, in agreement with an iterable model. Iterability is, for Derrida, the essential condition that makes communication possible, and takes away some of the weight that had been put on context in deciphering communication. It is also the mark of writing, whose readability endures “in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of receivers” (Derrida

1988b: 7). It is not only the receiver who is obsolete, or deferred; the situation of the writer is similar to that of the reader:

For a writing to be a writing it must continue to 'act' and to be readable even when what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, be it because of temporary absence, because he is dead or, more generally, because he has not yet employed his absolutely actual and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his desire to say what he means, in order to sustain what seems to be written 'in his name' (Derrida 1988b: 8).

In just one sentence, while further advancing iterability as the *sine qua non* of communication, Derrida deconstructs Austin's understanding of the performative as requiring conscious intention and commitment to act on it. For Derrida, literary acts perform independently of "what is called" their author, from his or her intention and commitment to honor the signature. I will return to the problematic nature of authorship, to intention and the signature later; for the moment, pursuing the journey of the performative to its next home in the humanities, I shall briefly turn to feminist theory and gender studies, which were catalyzed by Judith Butler's groundbreaking *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993).

*Gender Trouble* called into question the stability of gender as an analytical concept and looked at how it is destabilized by sexual practice. If normative sexuality reasserts and reinforces normative gender, one is a woman to the extent that one functions as a woman within the dominant heterosexual framework. To question that very framework may already mean

"to lose something of one's sense of place in gender" (Butler 1990: xi). This is just one form of "gender trouble." The political argument that Butler puts forward is that the policing of gender is sometimes used, in practice, as an interventionist instrument to secure heterosexuality and maintain sexual hierarchies. Implicit in such violent acts of gender policing are essentialist and universalist notions that gender is based in biology and directly translates one's sexuality. *Gender Trouble* does not contest the existence of biological differences between the sexes but suggests that gender can be "the cultural interpretation of biological difference" (Culler 2000: 512). Butler counters the normative view that identifies gender with sex by rallying the concept of the performative to redefine gender on the basis of social acts: one becomes a man or a woman by the everyday performance of repeated acts that depend on socially iterable conventions.

However, as Butler shows in *Bodies That Matter*, gender is not something that one puts on as a mask or performs as a role, in a staged performance where free choice is possible; in refuting the misreadings of her arguments in *Gender Trouble*, Butler makes it clear that the notion of performativity that she has used has nothing theatrical about it: to see gender as a "choice," a "role," "a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning" and to presuppose that the existence of a non-gendered self that "goes into the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be" on a particular day has nothing to do with the reality of the co-construction of gender in the assertion of subjectivity. When one is constituted as a subject, he or she is already constituted as a boy or a girl. Gender, therefore, is not a consciously chosen after-effect, but a predicament embodied through the re-enactment of obligatory, iterable norms.

Derrida's citability, as well as Butler's performative gender, imply the existence of an active cultural memory that enables performatives to perform and gendered selves to be recognized as such. What is more, for Butler, the repeated citation of norms generates the authority of a mode of speaking, and thus reverses Austin's argument that one needs to be in a position of authority in the first place in order to utter an explicit performative. Thus, from philosophy of language to literary studies and to gender studies, the performative as a traveling concept has changed from being considered one type of utterances that bring about that reality which they designate and then an aspect of all language in use, to a way of understanding agency, the relationship between the individual and social change, identities and identity construction, as well as the routine functioning of social norms. In the study of literature, the performative can account for the dynamics between literary conventions which, through their iterability, account for generic distribution and delimitation, and the original act of inaugurating and creating a new literary world and work. This dynamic relation between convention and original acts will become evident in my subsequent discussion of beginnings in the autobiographies that constitute my corpus.

### 1.3 **Autobiography as a genre: literary conventions**

Phillippe Lejeune's research on autobiography has been credited as the most systematic attempt at generic definition and generic differentiation so far, undertaken by a single author. After surveying a large corpus of mostly French autobiographies, Lejeune formulated a definition which captures the regularities that he strove to identify: retrospective narrative in prose that

usually retraces the development of one's personality from birth to the moment of narration. This narrative is produced by a real person, whose existence can be checked in public records, and who retells events that happened to her or to him, as an individual. As a result, the autobiographical "I" is a triumite one: it stands for the author as producer of the text, and who exists outside the text; the narrator as the voice through which events are narrated; and the main character who undergoes changes and developments, experiences the world through his or her senses and thinks his or her experience through.

The retrospective perspective distinguishes autobiography from the diary, which is written in parallel or immediately after the events lived, and registers mostly facts of one's inner life; the focus on the history of one's individual development sets it apart from memoirs, which register the history of external events as they were lived by the memoirist; the first person narrative differentiates it from biography, which is the story of somebody's life, researched and written by someone else, in the third person, but it may create confusion between autobiography and "le roman personnel," i.e. novels narrated in the first person. In order to dispel this confusion, Lejeune introduced another defining element: the autobiographical pact.<sup>8</sup>

The pact is an engagement taken by autobiographers to tell the story of their life (or part of it) "dans un esprit de vérité" (in the spirit of truth) (Lejeune 2005: 31). Yet, as Wagner-Egelhaaf noticed, the pact concerns not only the author, but also

<sup>8</sup> "Le pacte autobiographique" has two certified translations: "the autobiographical pact" and "the autobiographical contract." I prefer the former translation because it sounds closer to the original and because it is more frequent than the latter.