

THE TREND OF MEMOIR-NOVEL

Colas DUFLO, Professor in French Literature, Paris Nanterre University

Audrey FAULOT, Research fellow (CSLF/Lit&Phi), Paris Nanterre University

Part 1 – Characteristics of Memoir-Novel

CD: The Memoir-Novel is a novelistic form developed at the beginning of the 18th century, which influenced the whole period and, in a way, is still the dominant form today. To understand what a Memoir-Novel is, I invited Audrey Faulot, a specialist of the genre who wrote a doctoral thesis on the Abbot Prevost and his *Memoirs*. Audrey Faulot good morning, thank you for being with us today in this beautiful lounge of the hotel of Soubise. What is a Memoir-Novel?

AF: Good morning Colas Duflo and thank you for inviting me. What we call a Memoir-Novel is very simply a novel written in the form of memoirs. Memoir-Novels are a narrative genre in which an individual, often with a relatively important place in society, revisits at the end of his life the events he witnessed or even participated in. We can mention for example the *Memoirs* of Saint-Simon, which revisit Louis XIV's reign. In these memoirs, an author writes a text that he presents as memoirs, but the narrator of the story has never existed, he or she is a completely fictional character.

The Memoir-Novel therefore has three main characteristics. First, it is retrospective: the memorialist character has already got to the end of his life when he writes about his adventures. Then, it is reflexive: the character scrutinises himself by investigating his past. He writes in the first person. Finally, it is fictitious. The story has been invented from start to finish, even though it can incorporate historical events.

Part 2 – The Memoir-Novel's models

CD: So, before the development of this form of the memoir, weren't there already narratives using the first person that the novel would have taken as a model somehow?

AF: Yes, there are several models. We can first mention authentic memoirs, to which Memoir-Novels are widely related. In some Memoir-Novels, everything is made to give the reader the impression that the text really was written by a historical figure. You can sometimes find a dedication or a foreword explaining how the manuscript would have been bequeathed to another character asked to publish it.

There was at the time what is called pseudo-memoir, a second model. There, the narrator is a historical person but isn't the one actually writing the memoirs. An author renders them authentic. Courtilz de Sandras is a master in the genre. He writes, for example, the *Memoirs of Monsieur d'Artagnan*, looking at the story of the soldier who today everyone knows, but who was at the time a very obscure figure. Courtilz de Sandras creates his story by mixing historical sources and fictional invention.

The Memoir-Novels takes elements from its models and deepens their fictional aspect. For example, in Prevost's novel entitled *Cleveland*, the text opens on a narration in which a character only named as "Man of quality" explains how the hero passed on to him the manuscript of his father's memoirs after his death. The significance here is to be able to give a meaning to the text's transmission, as it would be for authentic memoirs. The novel, a decried genre, thus seeks to acquire a legitimacy, but let us not fool ourselves, readers are perfectly able to recognise these processes as they become mainstream, especially since many of these readers are well aware that the character who collects the memoirs of Cleveland, the famous "Man of quality" is also a fictional character.

As we can see, Memoir-Novels draw on authentic memoirs by using some of their codes, but they are also able to subvert these codes. Finally, we must acknowledge a third model, the picaresque novels. These are narratives in which a picaresque hero, which means vagabond or marginal, tells his story. The genre was developed in Spain in the 16th century and spread to France with works like the *Gil Blas de Santillane* by Lesage. It tells the story of a young boy born in poverty who ends up experiencing some social climbing and who comments on all the social circles he had the opportunity to integrate. The picaresque novel had an important influence on the Memoir-Novels because unlike in memoirs, the hero does not occupy high office, has no legitimacy and therefore must prove his value, especially by putting pen to paper and daring to speak about himself.

Part 3 – Memoir-Novels' potential

CD: What advantages does this style of writing in first-person narrative bring to the novelist?

AF: Choosing a total stranger as protagonist is not without consequences for the narration. The hero or heroine of Memoir-Novels can't put forward the historical interest of the book since this history is fictional. Often, he used to occupy a place of great significance in society. Prevost's heroes generally are uprooted nobles, bastards, exiles and defectors. Because of this identity problem, the memorialist narrator will have to prove its own worth, he will have to appeal to the reader with his subjectivity. Then the choice of the first person allows the writer to explore the hero's inner life.

The character gives thought to his feelings, he also tries to understand, with the benefit of hindsight, why he acted in a particular way. He can also develop personal reflections based on his experience. In Marivaux's *Life of Marianne*, for example, the heroine often digresses to comment on what she sees: coquetry, hypocrisy, the surprise of love, etc.

There is a distance in Memoir-Novels between the character telling his story and the character living it. It is the same character, but a temporal distance separates the narrative instances. The genre lends itself remarkably to psychological and philosophical analysis.

CD: Well, I see it's time to read Prevost and Marivaux. Audrey Faulot, thank you very much.