Narratives, Identities, Selves: Intercultural Perspectives on Autobiography and First-Person Narrative

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Summary

Over the years an ever-growing number of studies on autobiography as a genre concerned with the Self of the author have appeared all over the world. Autobiography as a (mainly) first-person genre and first-person narrative in general (fictional and non-fictional) are not just a formal matter, but also seem to affect the text structure. Depending on the readers' norms, the first-person narrative either underlines the authenticity of the story told, or it is used to reinforce the illusion of reality, as a realistic device in the first-person fictional and nonfictional narrative. In the paper three points are presented. First, some reflections are made on identity and the Self in relation to what is considered different, alterity. In the second part the question is asked how Self and Other have been imagined from African perspectives. In the third and last part of the paper some forms of first-person narrative in African oral and written literatures are being discussed. Serious intercultural studies will be needed to provide more insight into the complex ways Selves and stories are intertwined in first- person literary genres, from oral narratives to e-mail messages.

Opsomming

Oor die jare het 'n steeds groeiende aantal studies oor outobiografie as 'n genre wat gemoeid is met die Self van die outeur regoor die wêreld verskyn. Outobiografie as 'n (hoofsaaklik) eerste-persoon genre en eerste-persoon narratief in die algemeen (fiksioneel en nie-fiksioneel) is nie slegs 'n formele saak nie, maar affekteer oënskynlik die teksstruktuur. Afhangend van die lesers se norms beklemtoon die eerste-persoon narratief die outentisiteit van die storie wat vertel word, óf word dit aangewend om die illusie van realiteit te versterk as 'n realistiese middel in die eerste-persoon fiksionele en nie-fiksionele narratief. In hierdie artikel word drie punte voorgehou. Eerstens word daar gereflekteer oor Self en identiteit met betrekking tot wat as verskillend, alteriteit, beskou word. In die tweede deel word die vraag gestel hoe Self en Ander voorgestel is vanuit 'n Afrika-perspektief. In die derde en laaste deel van die artikel word 'n aantal vorms van die eerste-persoon narratief in mondelinge en geskrewe letterkunde in Afrika bespreek. Deeglike interkulturele studies sal vereis word om meer insig te verkry in die komplekse maniere waarop Selwe en stories vervleg is in die eerste-persoon literêre genres, van mondelinge narratiewe tot e-posboodskappe.

For academics as well as for many other people all over the world, a new, mainly first-person narrative genre has now become part of our daily life, thanks to the use of the personal computer: the genre of the e-mail messages we exchange with colleagues and friends. No doubt interesting sociological and narratological studies could be carried out on the concepts of Self those messages reveal. And e-mail has intertextual connections with all sorts of other narratives we are exchanging orally or in written form, from academic presentations to jokes, from newspaper articles to letters, tales, novels or life stories. In the future it will certainly affect the main genres of first-person narrative.

Theoretical frames, concepts and tools are indispensable for the description, the analysis and the comparison of the (inter)cultural communication process that literature is. If the theory comes from a specific cultural origin, it will need to be checked and it has to be adapted (or rejected for that matter) when applied elsewhere.

Comparative literary studies can be divided into 1) historically related traditions (contact relations and mutual influences) and 2) historically unrelated traditions (typological relations). In the latter case insight can be gained in the relative uniqueness or universality of cultural phenomena, e.g. texts of a certain kind such as creation myths, epics, lyrics, tragedies or novels, certain themes, or the various concepts of the Self in literary texts. Due to the globalisation process unrelated traditions will become evermore exceptional, while in the past they formed the majority of literary traditions.

Intercultural research involves elements from more than one culture. These include, for example, concepts or methods from one culture that are used in the study of another culture. This immediately poses a problem: where does the other culture start? The delimitation of culture varies with one's perspective. The demarcation line between cultural insiders and outsiders can be very subjective, as I have argued in my recent book *Imagining Insiders* (1999). In each case, it is necessary to specify the cultural criteria being adopted for deciding who are the insiders and who do not belong.

Intercultual studies oblige researchers to be aware of and critically take into account their own legacy of taking things for granted. The concept of subjectivity has certainly to be dealt with in our discussions.

In the Western part of the world, literary theorists and comparatists have a long and respectable experience of studying Western written texts, but, some individual researches excepted, it was at a relatively late stage only that they have begun to look beyond their own Western horizon. Significantly, the discussion on cultural relativism was introduced into literary studies late in the 1960s only, i.e. about half a century later than in anthropology.

Self and identity are an enormous field of research, and we have to decide not only about the definitions to be used but also about the boundaries to be drawn. If we are going to consider the Self as "identity", we will have to define our ideas about what identity is, and to decide whether we want to approach the concept individually or collectively, culturally, nationally, internationally or globally. Another question is whether the main aim of the project will be restricted to the field of literary studies, in our case intercultural literary studies. If the answer is yes, we could further narrow the scope to narratives concerned with the Self (I am convinced that all narratives are to some extent). We then have to decide whether to concentrate in our research on autobiographical narratives only. Criteria have to be established for the selection of the texts we want to deal with. Our aim could be to map out and describe the forms in which the Self is expressed either in first-person narrative form or in autobiography as a particular genre in as many countries and cultures as possible. This is still a huge project which would certainly give us invaluable insights into the rich varieties of humanity's ideas about the Self, its origins and developments, in the cultures and cultural histories concerned.

As I said at the Intercultural Studies Committee meeting at the ICLA Conference in August 1997, in Leiden we have had university staff seminars on autobiography which resulted in a first book in Dutch about the subject entitled *Ik is anders:Autobiografie in verschillende culturen.* [I am Different: Autobiography in Various Cultures] (1991) which includes essays on, amongst others, African, American, Latin, French, Dutch, German, Russian, African-American, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese and Indonesian autobio-graphy). That modest and limited project made clear how widely different the approaches and material can be. It is difficult indeed to bring unity into the materials as well as the ap-proaches. Here I will share with you a few theoretical and practical questions on matters of Self and identity in general and on African issues related to those concepts in particular.

All narratives, in my opinion, reveal elements of the Self of the author and his or her culture; and first-person narratives do not necessarily coincide with what we consider autobiographical forms of expression. Indeed, autobiogra-phers may prefer to hide their intentions, and to "neutralise" their personal information by means of a third-person presentation or even by presenting the story of their Self as a fictional text. Moreover, contemporary authors may present a narrative as their autobiography, while their text is a piece of complete fiction. I will come back to this point.

Over the years an ever-growing number of studies on autobiography as a genre concerned with the Self of the author have appeared in Europe and

elsewhere. A number of the European studies have suggested that the autobi-ography is a "purely European literary genre" or a "creation of Western culture", as the German Neumann (1979) emphasised. And the English author Stuart Bates bluntly put it this way: "the autobiography manifests itself mainly in Europe and in the European sphere of influence – just like syphilis (Bates quoted by May 1979:17). Or, in Gusdorf's words: "If others than Europeans write an autobiography, then it is because they have been annexed by a mentality which was not theirs"(1975: 957; my translation).

Today even people in the West are no longer so sure about how to define such a European or Western mentality. From Asian or African perspectives, or from an intercultural-studies perspective, we may be inclined to question this idea of the autobiography originally being a European genre. People in the West may simply have jumped to conclusions much too easily.

In *The Chinese Novel at the Turn of the Century* (1980) Milena Dolezelová-Velingerová has presented Asian contributions to what she considered as the genre of autobiography and she does indeed point out that obvious changes due to Western influences are to be found in Chinese literature. The tendency toward subjectivation, she states, had already developed in China to some degree since the seventeenth century: "Instead of editing various previous sources into sagas exemplifying Chinese history and accepted ideology, novelists began to relate their individual experiences and views drawn from personal observation of society or their own private lives" (1980: 15). She argues that the first-person personal narrative mode – that is, the narrative in which the "telling I" is at the same time the main character – is undoubtedly an innovation in the history of Chinese vernacular fiction. She refers to the example of Wu Woyao's *Strange Events* as the first occurrence of first-person narrative in *baihua* literature. Wu Woyao was an author who had read many Western novels and who always advocated the reading of foreign literature. According to Dolezelová-Velingerová, the appearance of the first-person narrative in the East is especially significant in comparison with Western literature "where first person narrative has been well established since classical Greece" (p. 66). She also observes that the autobiographical first-person narrative as a distinctive genre in Japanese literature had a relatively late start as well. The first examples "caused a sensation in Japanese circles because the hero was apparently a self-portrait of the author and because the real-life models of the other characters were readily identifiable" (p. 70). The first Japanese autobiographical first-person narrative was published in 1890, while in China these new forms manifested themselves around the turn of the century (p. 70).

It has often been argued that the change from the third-person to first-person narrative is not a question of pure formality but indeed affects the text structure. Depending on the readers' norms, it may underline the authenticity of the story, or it may be used to reinforce the illusion of reality, as a realistic device in the first-person fictional narrative.

However that may be, the first-person narrative in which the narrator is also the hero attests to a considerable dose of individualism, as it concentrates more on the narrator's personality and its growth than on the group to which he or she belongs. In Chinese fiction it seems to have represented a fundamental development which took some time: "it was only in the twenties and thirties [of the twentieth century] that the process leading to the full variety and artistic maturity of first-person narrative was accomplished" (p. 72).

According to Dolezelová-Velingerová this change in Chinese literary history seems to have been a product – as it usually is – of the marriage between inside traditions and outside influences: elements from the intro-spective and lyrical tradition of first-person narrative and the extroverted and social-minded tradition of vernacular fiction were combined with the deeper psychological description from the Western and Japanese first-person novel.

Does this mean then that Europeans such as May or Gusdorf or Stuart Bates were right in their observations about Europe as the cradle of autobiography? Of course the above represents only one (Dolezelová-Velingerová's) perspective on some developments in Asian autobiographical writings.

I now want to do three things: 1) present some reflections on identity and Self; 2) discuss some African perspectives on Self and Other; 3) briefly look into African forms of first-person narrative and autobiography.

1   *Identity and Self*

Identity is a widely discussed, controversial and complex concept. It can only be defined in relation to what is considered different, alterity, whether personal or collective. A renewed interest in cross-cultural research on the self and society has led to more extensive study of the formulations and ideas people have about themselves, as expressed in language and metaphors linked to their culture (e.g. Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Brewster-Smith 1985). Our project is not only relevant for the study of literature but also for the social sciences and for insights into the functioning of people in society, since it contributes new data about people's and cultures' self-understanding. It will inform us, in the words of Brewster-Smith (1985) on "how people construe

themselves and how their constructions are culturally phrased":

> [This information] should interest us not only because they are humanly inte-
> resting for their own sake, and scientifically interesting for their bearing on
> general personality theory, but also because as reflexivey conscious creatures
> people are influenced by their self-conceptions. Their metaphors of selfhood
> become in part self-fulfilling prophecies. A fuller understanding of this process
> would seem to be high in priority as knowledge that potentially contributes to
> human liberation.
>
> (Brewster-Smith 1985: 84)

In cross-cultural research as well as in social role theory in general, either the emic or the etic approach to patterns of cultural and social order and change can be emphasised as observation from the outside – etic – or from the inside – emic (e.g. Rossi 1980; Marsella, De Vos & Hsu 1985). In the latter case, one studies individual experiences as they are communicated by the participants themselves. This is the case in literature: authors create characters on the basis of the cultural and social experience, norms, and context they have internalised. If in the past people's reflections on themselves have not played a large enough role in the social sciences as far as conceptualisations of identity and Self are concerned, then certainly literature can play a role in this respect, as already suggested by Marsella et al. in their interesting book *Culture and Self: Asian and Western Perspectives* (1985).

In complex societies, one has to take into account the relations between the superordinate community and the various subordinate communities. Influential significant groups make the social and cultural identities of other groups vulnerable. In keeping with the emic/etic distinction, I consider *identity* as related to the question of the difference between us and others *as seen by ourselves*: difference in culture, social class, sex, religion, age, nationality, living area, etc.. From all these different combined identities, views are developed on Self and Other. As soon as people feel threatened about their identity, they attach greater importance to what characterises them as a group and distinguishes them from others: identity is always based on what lies outside it, on what does not belong to us (or me). Awareness of the existence of others is indispensible in defining who we are.

Identity can be analysed on the basis of individuality or collectivity. Collective identity is based on ideas about culture, gender, race, class, or all these (and other) aspects together. The normative system upon which it is based presents rules for individual behaviour.

Stock knowledge of social norms and roles underlying individual and collective identities is distributed in the process of socialisation (Berger & Luckmann [1966]1973). This is everyday knowledge, standard knowledge characterised by the fact that it is usually not questioned. As long as it is not questioned, the norms and roles associated with this knowledge are often considered by those concerned as universal and generally valuable, and therefore justified and legitimate. This will affect people's Self and the ideas they develop about social and cultural identity.

Guy Michaud (1978: 112) has schematically worked out the concept of collective identity, highlighting a cultural point of view: 1) experienced subjectively and confirmed by the members of the group; 2) derived from the consciousness of belonging to a certain group; 3) determined in general by defining the boundaries with the Other, and in particular by marking out the differences with certain groups; 4) understood by means of a system of relatively intuitive images (of the Self as well as of the Other), determined by a set of negative (avoidable) and a set of positive aspects. The positive aspects (presented by the group as an ideal model) constitute a kind of defensive ethnocentrism, resulting in chauvinism, nationalism, patriotism etc.; 5) a relatively coherent ideology can be established on the basis of these characteristics and attitudes, and can be studied in the discourse of the group, which is expressed in all kinds of texts.

As I have argued elsewhere, these characteristics apply not only to "foreign" cultures or so-called minorities, but to all collective identities. The subjective is a determining factor in human behaviour. There is always a difference between how people view themselves and their group, and how they see others. The cultural interpretations of one's own identity and its surrounding world merge from childhood; they are experienced as natural, that is, if not disrupted (Erikson [1959]1980; Goffman [1963]1986). Ideally, we should be able to consider ourselves against the background of others, in just the same way as we put others against our own background. For more details about the Self and Other discussion, I refer to my book on insiders and outsiders (Schipper 1999).

For our purpose, we will have to discuss whether a distinction should be made between the concepts of identity, social role, and the Self respectively. In my view social role and Self both play a role in the way people experience their identity. According to cultural psychologists, however, the Self must be considered apart from one's social role, because "behavior is often a result of continuous conflict between experiences of self and one's social role expectations" (Marsella et al. 1985: 6). The fact that the Self is in constant interaction with others makes clear that its dynamic qualities have to be emphasised, as

cultural psychologists have argued (e.g. Brewster-Smith 1985).

All kinds of selves in their respective searches for identity can be studied by means of the cultural analysis of texts: characters and their developments are emically presented in narratives. In those texts we can study the underlying social norms and roles which either confirm or question the dominant patterns in the culture and/or society concerned. In fictional as well as in other texts we find shared values and interpretations of events as well as conflicts based on norms and roles in society – norms related to cultural, racial, social, gendered and other aspects of identity (or alterity for that matter). Emphasis on particular norms always seems to become stronger in times of conflicting interests between representatives of different groups.

Identity, the Self, the personal as well as the collective, are expressed in language and can therefore be analysed in texts, we said earlier. New texts combine elements from past and present literary traditions, and also from the stock knowledge of everyday life in the culture and community concerned. All such materials are combined and structured into a new text. This text will be conditioned by genre conventions and traditions, and by the norms and roles available in the social context. This holds not only for texts confirming literary, social and cultural norms, but also for those questioning or rebelling against the norms.

Norms are requirements for behaviour, and deviation from the norms leads to sanctions for those who deviate. Social norms are not isolated, they form clusters determining social roles, and a social role is a complex of role norms associated with a social position (Hegenbarth-Rösgen 1982). For example, in Caribbean writer Maryse Condé's (1976) novel *Hérémakhonon*, the main character, Véronica, is criticised because she refuses to respect the cluster of gendered as well as cultural norms prescribing her social role of obedient black bourgeois well-behaved girl.

In the process of socialisation, the mechanism of social roles is internalised so that girlhood, marriage, motherhood and so forth are seen and accepted as the "normal" woman's way. Collective identity is modelled by sets of norms and roles as experienced in the totality of one's "self-construal". The sociocultural environment is a product of history, institutions, works of art and knowledge. Literature influences and is influenced by the sociocultural environment. If one has a positive self-image, there is little reason to explore role alternatives. In the negative case, there is. Problematic heroes and heroines, characters struggling with their selves and their personal and/or sociocultural identity problems make much more interesting reading than those who conform to the prescribed norms.

If we want to discover the norms associated with particular roles in a text, we have to look for: 1) regular required behaviour; 2) deviant behaviour; 3) sanctions, positive as well as negative, pertaining to specific issues. In Maryse Condé's (1976) novel, *Hérémakhonon*, for example, the main character Véronica, struggles against the role her parents and the black bourgeois community try to impose on her. As an intelligent girl, her task is to prove that blacks have the same values as whites. She is expected to choose a "normal" boyfriend and her parents introduce appropriate black males to her. She "deviates" when she starts a relationship with a mulatto. The sanction is her environment's contempt. The "norms" here are the norms of the black community she belongs to by birth and upbringing. She disappoints her cultural group by refusing the role it has in mind for her: a "normal" girl obediently follows the social norms for a girl's role.

Another example from the same novel presents a very different required pattern of behaviour. Véronica has moved from the Caribbean, via Paris, to Africa, in search of her true Self by trying to find and relate to her lost ancestors. Her African colleagues and students appear to have different norms. They are revolutionaries who strive for justice and socialism in their country. Véronica breaks the norms by falling in love with their enemy Ibrahim Sory who happens to be a torturer and murderer. Her deviant behaviour is followed by sanctions from colleagues and students who are shocked and angry with her. These are not racial, but political norms, and the required role associated with these norms is one of action and commitment to the political ideals of her intellectual African friends. She naively believed she could keep politics out of her life. As a child of a history of slave trade she is only interested in finding her African ancestors, but she looks for them in the wrong social group, as she realises in the end when she decides to go back to Europe.

In many, perhaps in most, texts one of the elements in the cycle of 1) norm prescription, 2) deviant behaviour and 3) sanction is lacking. In such cases we need to consult (social, historical and other) sources outside the text from which we can deduce the norm complexes defining the social roles. In order to describe the social roles as presented in the text, one looks for sociocultural norms by means of the reconstruction and classification of norms in clusters.

In the case of Véronica in Condé's novel, we find a continuous confrontation between the main character's ideas and the norms prescribed by the communities she is part of, such as her parents and relatives in Guadeloupe; other Antillians in Paris, African colleagues and students in Africa – the very norms that can also be reconstructed from the context of Afro-Antillian history.

The Self depends on collective identity and is positively or negatively associated with it. I cannot go into the narratological approach to texts, so indispensable for the analysis of the various norms and norm systems as they are presented in speech, focalisation, description and action of characters in texts (e.g. Bal [1985]1997).

In texts, norms and roles are opposing, reinforcing or undermining each other as emerges most clearly in passages where crises and controversies (deviations and sanctions) are occurring in the conflicts and confrontations between characters which result in a loss or gain of sociocultural identity and Self. It is fascinating to study the conflicts underlying those losses and gains in relation to the cultural contexts they are referring to. The theory and practice of identity and Self are expressed in language, but an interdisciplinary approach is needed.

2   Imagining Self and Other in Africa

The answer to the question who belongs to "us" has to do with people's interests. Emphasis on in-group identity often results from fear of outsiders' domination.

Various ideas about Self and Other, insiders and outsiders, not only leave traces in literary texts, films, and cultural movements, but also in academic debates. If we look into the problems and issues associated with the concept of cultural identity in the African context, a first question is: Who are the imagined insiders and who the constructed outsiders in African narratives? Another important issue is the debate on the required qualifications of researchers in the field of "other" cultures in general, and literatures in particular. What exactly are the advantages cultural insiders have? What should outsiders refrain from?

All people divide the world into patterns of *us* and *them*. What is true and what is not true, who does belong and who does not, is decided preferably on the basis of one's own established cultural norms. Us and Them, Self and Other, the drawing of demarcation lines in culture and academia, and the reactions of those who are kept outside, have been familiar topics for a long time, and scholarship has gradually started to take this history into account.

Africa is a continent where the mapping of cultures, literatures, and identities has become considerably more complex over the years. Some see the whole area south of the Sahara as a relevant cultural unity, while others take the line between forest and savannah in a certain region as a relevant boundary. Africa has also been perceived as a loose conglomerate of separate

ethnic units. National culture can be considered as a delineation, and language is seen as another demarcation of a culture. In Africa, language, nationality and culture do not usually coincide, and give rise to endless linguistic and cultural discussions, whether it is about a cultural identity that manifests itself across borders in different countries or about the intercontinental phenomenon of the *Francophonie*. The concept of Black identity refers to a common culture of Africans and people of African descent, and there with, if not exclusively, at least partly, to a biological delineation. On the other hand, in the continent of Africa itself the national awareness in the separate countries has enormously increased over the past decades, as it appears from numerous African publications in the field of national literary history. This nationalism is nowadays in discussion once again. In all cases it is important to retrieve the cultural criteria employed. In these matters it is of importance to view culture as a construction which never stands apart from the people who (wish to) see it as their reality. Because colonisers had emphasised that culture was exclusively Western, colonised people held a reversed, exclusive point of view: thus "black culture" had to be put against "white", and African literature as a large unit against "European".

Advocates of Francophone, Anglophone and Lusophone African literature, or of separate national literatures, have other realities in mind. Such realities exist as long as people experience them as real. Every literary history has to begin with a specification of time and space.

Cultural references in and about literary works contain a wealth of information on cultural identities as expressed by authors, readers and re-searchers. Such data generate significant cultural meaning about selves and identities.

In African literature written in European languages, for example, the con-scious insertion of words from an African language can serve as an emphatic means of expressing a certain identity. The importance of a Self as anchored in a local or national culture can thus be stressed. The existence of such varied linguistic and cultural codes within one and the same text has to do with ever-increasing intercultural relations in the twentieth century, both interregional and intercontinental.

Perspectives are unavoidable, but they are also reversible and changeable. Writing offers the possibility of unsettling what is written by writing back; thus, as Salman Rushdie observed, "the empire writes back to the imperial centre" (Rushdie quoted by Ashcroft, Griffith & Tiffin 1989). This has been done to an increasing degree by those who had been discarded on the basis of dominant scientific or cultural criteria. From a Western perspective writing back has been called discourse of the "Other". For quite some time, the

"Other" became so fashionable that words such as "difference" and "otherness" came to function – in the words of Edward Said – "as a talisman, serving to guarantee political correctness" (1989: 213 ff).

Western cultural domination and prejudice have provoked all sorts of cultural reactions in the history of African oral and written literatures. Orally transmitted African myths, for example, explained how the difference between black and white people came about. Such stories of origin often date from after the arrival of the Europeans (cf Görög-Karady 1976). In their novels and poetry, African writers have written back, often in the first person, to the Western stories of the "discoverers", and to colonial novels with mainly European characters in search of Eurocentric selves. The African novels and autobiographies presented African visions of Africa against European visions of Africa, while in the poetry of Africans and of people of African descent in the diaspora, the belief in a common Pan-African identity was professed. That belief has been expressed in cultural movements such as indigenism, Harlem Renaissance, Negritude, Black Arts and the Black Consciousness Movement. These movements often went back to an idealised past, or anticipated a utopian future, in order to make the colonial present bearable. Sometimes authors produced a direct reverse discourse in which the African cultural Self was presented as against a Western "Other".

African manifestations of Self can be found in all kinds of narratives, from fictional, to autobiographical, to academic. In the context of the European conventions, "real" autobiographies have mostly been presented as necessarily confessional and as such they have generally been written in the first-person narrative form. The subjects and objects of such texts have to be authors whose names are on the cover as well as referred to in the narratives: they themselves tell and reveal (or pretend to tell and reveal) their selves to others, or explore their own past life experiences in order to get to know themselves. There are certainly other reasons for autobiographical writing than just individual confession or personal soul-digging. Even in the Western context, many other reasons have motivated autobiographical writing, as argued by Spengemann (1980); May (1979); or Lasch (1979) among others.

On the other hand, autobiographers may prefer to "neutralise" their personal autobiographical information by means of a third-person presentation or even by presenting it as a fictional text.

In my essay "Who Am I?" (1985), I have dealt with the different forms of African first-person narrative and their relations with the genre of autobiography. I will briefly discuss some points presented in that paper, such as the main genres and various techniques used in African oral and written literatures in the I-form.

3 *Forms of First-Person Narrative in African Oral and Written Literatures*

First-person narrative does not necessarily coincide with autobiographical forms of expression. In fact, as it has been argued in narratological theory, all narratives are first-person narratives. If we look at the oral traditions, we could easily say that all oral literature is told in the first person, since, inevitably, the narrator presents his or her story to the audience which is present right there. It is important to distinguish clearly between the *real author*, who presents the "text" orally or in print, and the *narrator*, who belongs to the text as a narrative transaction. At the other end of the communication line, there are the *narratee* and the *real audience/readership*. The "narratee" is the agent which is at the very least implicitly addressed by the narrator ... always implied, even when the narrator becomes his own narratee" (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 8-9).

We can even go a step further and say that the real author is always a first-person agent, whether announcing orally, "I am going to tell you ...", or, silently, in the written form, transmitting his or her text in book form as a gesture, "I am herewith presenting you my story". In both cases the text can be presented either in the first or in the third person or (rarely) in the second person.

Frontiers of the oral text are often marked by means of special formulas or expressions which announce the real beginning of the narrative: "Here comes my story"; "Once, long ago"; "How did it happen?" and so forth. The same holds for the end: "And they lived happily ever after", or, "This is the end, not of me but of my story." Such beginnings are rare in written texts, because they are felt as superfluous. Still in texts composed of "written orality" they can be found, for example Fagunwa [1968]1982.

"Who speaks?" and "Who sees?" are crucial questions in the cultural analysis of the Self. First-person narrators can take different positions with regard to the narrated events, while focalisation can shift from one character to another. It is therefore an important device in its contribution to the effect a character may have on the reader. If we are not aware of that, we are easily manipulated in our opinions, as Eleanore Wachtel has argued in her analysis of Kenyan novels written by male authors (1977: 59).

Narration and focalisation can coincide in first-person narrative, but they can also be separate, as they often are in first-person retrospective narratives. It is important to be aware of the ideological facet of focalisation. It can help us to understand the norms of the text, from where the events and the characters are evaluated. It can be presented through a single dominant perspective, that of the narrator-focaliser, whose ideology is then considered "authoritarian". In the first-person retrospective narrative, one often finds the latter's view as superior to the narrator-character's earlier views recalled by the older "I", many years afterwards. If other norm systems are presented as well, they are generally evaluated in comparison with the narrator-focaliser's ideological authority.

The norms of the text may be presented through statements by the narrator and/or one or more characters; norms can also implicitly be given with events and behaviour as they are narrated and perceived by narrator or characters. The device of shifting the focalisation among the different characters or from narrator to character always affects the meaning of a text. When the focalisation shifts regularly in the text, we may get a rather broad idea of the various aspects of a conflict or problem. This technique may produce the suggestion of the narrator's neutrality vis-à-vis the various characters and their relations, as is often the case in the realistic novel. The way focalisation is handled definitely contributes to the effect a character (and in fact the whole text) has on the reader: we are more inclined to share views or to sympathise with a character when the story is presented mainly from his or her particular view, feeling, ideology.

For more practical aspects of first-person genres in Africa, such as a differentiation in factual versus fictional text genres, as well as for criteria determining autobiographical genres and their mixtures, I refer to my earlier descriptions (1985). Just one last point: in Western literature the intense preoccupation with the Self has led to what Christopher Lasch calls *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), in which "the convention of a fictionalised narrator has been abandoned in most experimental writing. The author now seems to speak in his own voice, but warns the reader that his version of the truth is not to be trusted" (1979: 53). The text then becomes a sort of parody

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in which the author no longer wants to be taken seriously, according to Lasch at least, who therefore sees confessional writing "degenerate into anti-confession" (p. 54).

This may be a trend (or rather one of the trends) in the West, but does parody of the Self also play a role in other parts of the world? It is always risky to generalise about trends even in the context of one country or culture. As for Africa, it is impossible to make general statements about autobiography as well as about cultural identity. No less than people in other cultures, people in Africa construct and reconstruct Self and identity all the time, along the lines of their changing perspectives on culture, gender, social class, and many other aspects. One of our tasks, it seems to me, would be to compare African autobiographical first-person narratives with similar genres in Asian, Arabic or Latin-American literatures with regard to the Self and the device of the parody of the Self. And there is the question of the responsibility of the writer and the function of literature in different cultures and societies: to what extent is literature a matter of commitment or, preferably, of art for art's sake in the texts concerned?

With regard to Chinese literature, Dolezelová-Velingerová stated that

> the first-person narrator's experience is combined with the search for his own identity in a world wider than his private universe. The basic question "Who am I?" obsessive in Western fiction, is in China overshadowed by the query "Who am I in my society?"

<div align="right">(Dolezelová-Velingerová 1980: 73)</div>

This question is indeed also a central one in African literature where the search for identity is an important theme and quite often moulded in the first-person narrative form.

From the above modest reflections I would like to conclude that serious intercultural studies will be needed to provide more insight in the complex ways Selves and Stories are intertwined in literary genres from oral story to e-mail message.

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