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THE USES OF FIRST PERSON WRITINGS
AFRICA, AMERICA, ASIA, EUROPE

LES USAGES DES ÉCRITS DU FOR PRIVÉ
AFRIQUE, AMÉRIQUE, ASIE, EUROPE



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The Uses of First Person Writings on the “Longue Durée” (Africa, America, Asia, Europe)¹

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Genesis of a research

This book is the last production of a research program begun in 2003, when the French National Center for Scientific Research accepted the proposition written by Jean-Pierre Bardet and François-Joseph Ruggiu to create a group dedicated to the “écrits du for privé”³. Its ambitions were initially circumscribed. Historians and archivists that inspired this project, were interested in texts written in the first person. They wished to have a census of all these types of texts held in French public archives. Even if it was not exhaustive, such a census would be at least better than those that they were separately making by browsing through library catalogs or inventories of manuscripts. This task has been carried on, and around two thousands texts, found in archives

¹ The manuscript of this paper has been revised by Alexandre Cayrouse who I thank heartily.

² This book derives from a three days seminar held at the University of Paris-Sorbonne (30 June-2 July 2011). I would like to thank here all the institutions which supported this event and its publication: Ecole Doctorale II (University of Paris-Sorbonne); Centre Roland Mousnier (UMR 8596, CNRS-University of Paris-Sorbonne); and Ecole nationale des Chartes. Elisabeth Arnoul and Raphaëlle Renard-Foultier have superbly managed the organization of the seminar and I would like to warmly show them my gratitude here. Besides the participants to this volume, Arianne Baggerman (Erasmus University Rotterdam); Rudolf Dekker; Christine Nougaret (Ecole nationale des Chartes), Sylvie Mouysset (Université de Toulouse 2- Le Mirail); et Danièle Tosato-Rigo (Université de Lausanne) were present and participated to the debates and to the final roundtable.

³ Groupe de Recherches du CNRS n° 2649: « Les écrits du for privé en France de la fin du Moyen Âge à 1914 ». This research group has also greatly benefited from the support of the Direction des Archives de France.

repositories or libraries located in Paris and thirty-five other *départements*, are now inventoried on a website: www.ecritsduforprive.fr⁴.

The second objective of this research group was to develop a scientific program about these texts and it published several collective books suggesting different perspectives about the “écrits du for privé”⁵. The simplest form of these kinds of texts is the plain “livre de raison”, where the *pater familias* just entered the dates of birth or deaths of members of his family or sometimes described the main events that the family went through. “Diaries” are a second form that entails the recording of the ordinary aspects of life on a regular basis. Diaries are similar to the various sorts of “journals”, whether spiritual, military, diplomatic, medical, or travel journals. “Memoirs”, “recollections” and “autobiographies” are the most complex and literary forms of *écrits du for privé* and became more and more common during the 18th century. By some aspects, forms of correspondence, especially the familial ones, bear a resemblance with diaries and could be considered as an *écrit du for privé*.

These texts thus form a very heterogeneous group about which researchers – either specialists of literature; historians or archivists; even sociologists – know that nevertheless it has cogency. The common feature of these texts was to have generally been produced by all kinds of people. The writers are mainly ordinary people, who wrote for themselves and their families. They were not asked to write by an administration or in an official context. Most writers were men, even if women wrote occasionally during the early modern period, then more and more often, during the 19th and 20th centuries. Many texts were written by nobles, professionals or clergymen: but the existence of a significant number of writings produced by tradesmen, craftsmen and peasants was first noticed by James S. Amelang, in his seminal book, *The Flight of Icarus* (Amelang, 1998). Finally, the majority of these texts were not originally aimed to be published but, quite the contrary, they were due to be kept inside the family homes. Nevertheless, more and more of them found their way to the press either due to the will of their author, or due to a late edition.

The expression “écrits du for privé”, which is not easily translatable, was coined by Madeleine Foisil, during the 1980s (Foisil, 1986). The

⁴ The project has also been endowed by the French *Agence Nationale de la Recherche* (ANR-07-CORP-020) and developed in collaboration between the Universities of Paris-Sorbonne; Picardie-Jules Verne (Scarlett Beauvalet); Nancy II (Philippe Martin); Pierre Mendès France- Grenoble 2 (René Favier); Limoges (Michel Cassan) and Toulouse 2-Le Mirail (Sylvie Mouysset).

⁵ Bardet and Ruggiu, 2005; Cassan, Bardet and Ruggiu, 2007; Bardet, Arnoul and Ruggiu, 2010; Mouysset, Bardet and Ruggiu, 2011.

word “écrits” obviously signifies that our group worked on texts, sometimes published, especially memoirs or recollections, but more often manuscripts. It sets it within the main trend of research which considers reading and writing as cultural practices which transformed all aspects of Western societies from Middle Age to nowadays. The term “for” derives from the Latin “forum”, that is to say a public square. It designated, during the Middle Age, a court of canon law, and was used by theologians in order to distinguish between the external and the internal “for”. The former was the tribunal of men, either the secular or the ecclesiastical ones. The latter described, during the Middle Age, a place inside each believer, transparent to God, where the inner sins, that have not found arose yet a public expression (Chiffolleau, 2006; Haroche, 1995). The last word, “privé”, underlines the links of these texts with the formation of the public and private dimension of life in the early modern societies in Europe. The expression “for privé” links, perhaps too strictly, the texts to the expression of intimacy or privacy by the Europeans from the early modern and modern period.

Of course, we are not the first historians who approach these texts and search how to use them in order to write history. In France itself, they have been intensely scrutinized, and published, at the end of the 19th century and during the 1970s and 1980s (Cassan, 2005). They have been identified everywhere in Europe. In Italy, several important books have been devoted to “ricordanze”, or “libri di famiglia” (Mordenti, 2004). In Poland, the commonplace books of the early modern nobility – the *silva rerum* – are not unlike the *livre de famille*. “Ego-documents”, a term coined by the Dutch scholar Jacques Presser, and used in Netherlands by a research group led by Rudolf Dekker and Arianne Baggerman, is currently the most popular (Dekker, 2002). In Germany, or in Switzerland, they are called “Selbstzeugnisse”. So these sorts of texts are present all around Europe, often since the end of the Middle Age, especially in Western Europe, (and) a reflection is being built at a European scale.

After ten years, I am not sure anymore that the term, we are using in France (“écrits du for privé”) is wholly appropriate. It tends to reduce the texts we want to study together, to just one of their dimensions, that one which paves the way towards the construction of modern self, which is a simplistic view. Like Kaspar von Greyerz, who has criticized the notion of “egodocument” (von Greyerz, 2010), I am coming to the conclusion that the term “écrits du for privé”, although effective in the French context, obscures more than it helps communication on a European scale. It seems now that if we wish to continue the comparison between texts in Europe, and the collaboration between different European scientific communities, we should abandon it. This leaves a

major problem: what term could we adopt? Kaspar von Greyerz suggests “self-narrative” or “personal narratives”. It is not certain however that these are more robust concepts than “egodocument”. Adam Smyth, although he retained “Autobiography” as the title of his book says, in his introduction, his preference for “life-writings” (Smyth, 2010). We used, on a European website designed to popularize the idea of a continental project on the subject, the term “first-person writings” and perhaps it is worth to continue to use it (<http://www.firstpersonwritings.eu/>).

The historical uses of the first person writings

When reading our productions, and those of different European specialists of these texts, whatever the name they give them, it appears very clearly, that we, as historians, have very different ways to use these texts. It is the very meaning of the title of this book. I would like to underline four main uses of first person writings. First, some of us employ the historical material they offer for doing political, economic or social history, or to explore new sub-fields of history, like gender studies, family history or history of sexualities; history of affects or emotions; environmental history and ecology, especially in the case of the history of natural disasters (floods, earthquakes...); history of health and diseases, especially seen from the patient’s point of view. Whatever the difficulties caused by the observation of representations and values of individuals within a given society through writings (thus discourses), the historian cannot renounce to propose a reconstruction of it without giving up his vocation. As highlighted recently by Kaspar von Greyerz, it is possible not to fall either into the trap of the false evidences offered by the sources, nor in the aporia opened up by the assertion of the impossibility to collect experience history (von Greyerz, 2010, 276).

Others members of our group pay more attention to the texts in a perspective of cultural history. They investigate their morphology and their materiality; they analyze the different sub-types of first person writings (*livres de raison, diaires, mémoires, autobiographies...*) and the chronological evolution of each of them, especially through the decline of family books and the rise of autobiographies; they focus on the writing skills or the cultural level of their authors; they study them as a tremendous pool of words and phrases or as the place of subtle games between languages. They situate the multiplication of the “écrits du for privé”, as a part of the development of written culture in early modern and modern Europe, which permeated all areas of society well beyond the ranks of the literate.

Several very important findings have taken place here. The first is the influence of the material form of the support on which the text is

written – a quire, a notebook, a loose sheet, or even the margins of a printed book – on its content. The second is the strong hybridity of these texts. It is, for example, not uncommon that a diary contains some passages resembling an autobiography or an urban chronic. A lot of texts contain material from others texts produced by the government, the administration or circulating through the press. The third one is that we have to, then, take into account the influence of the printed world on these personal forms of writing. The authors of personal texts often did not limit themselves to this genre but did compose poems, histories, and even plays or novels. On the whole, we have thus slowly learned to treat these texts not only as historical sources, but also as discourses, following the lead given in France by Roger Chartier or Christian Jouhaud for example. The notion of intertextuality, borrowed from the specialists of literature, has, in this case been particularly useful.

The very term “family book” refers to the family dimension of theses writings, that is often highlighted in their opening pages, where the writer explains his intentions and said that the first and, in his mind, the only recipients of his writing are family members. But the family books written by urban merchants or craftsmen, like the merchant tanner of Barcelona, Miguel Parets (Amelang, 1986), or the Abbeville haberdasher, Georges Mellier (Ruggiu, 2011), show how much their social destiny was linked with that of the civic community to which they belonged. The social and gendered study of these writers could be linked to the study of the contents of their texts to help to build a history of social identities. Many of these texts show, indeed, that the writer could belong to different groups: family, kinship, neighborhood, religious community, class, or, especially during the 19th century, nation. Throughout the text, the writers refer, explicitly or implicitly, to the different groups they belong to and they allow us to see how their personal identity is linked to them. The transmission of memory – of a family, of a lineage, of a community or of a nation – is then a fundamental element of these writings. These different groups of belonging that we mentioned above are not nested in one another. They sometimes overlap completely, causing a relative unity in the commitment of the writer. Sometimes they overlap only partially and these different commitments force the writer to manage a shattered identity and to cope with any conflicts that may arise. The writers then reveal a degree of agency: the capacity for action whose all social actors are endowed with, even those most dominated but that varies by gender, age, education, their level, their character and, of course, the social context in which they operate. The ordinary writers’ practices therefore reflect the daily tensions that the felt for adjusting their internal and external behaviors to the different universes in which they had to evolve.

The last main development linked with first person writings, revolves around the notions of personal identity and of self, its experience and its discursive expression. It was the focus of the last conference of our research group, whose proceedings were only recently published (Mouysset, Bardet and Ruggiu, 2011). The *écrits du for privé*, in particular autobiographies, constitute the material used by the participants in three fundamental debates for the western thought, at least since the 19th century, and which try to describe the major evolutions of the relation between man and society in the Western context. The first one is the separation between the public and the private. The second one is the emergence of the individual, that the sociologists, the psychologists or the philosophers also name “individualization” or “individuation”. And the last one is the formation of the self. Researchers who approach the *écrits du for privé* are thus ceaselessly confronted with an immense bibliography which guides them, almost against their will, towards these questions. They are made all the more complex by the fact that no stable definition of these keys concepts – public/private; individual; I/self – is possible. It is not rare that researchers, especially those who come from disciplines little sensitive to the historic dimensions of these concepts, study the formation of one of them, for example the self, using a loose or, and that is worst, a contemporary definition of the concept of individual or of the public/private couple.

These researchers have built, in the perspective of a traditional history of ideas, great narratives describing the rise of the individual, the formation of the “modern” self or the establishment of a clear distinction between private and public. They generally used a limited corpus of famous authors, from St. Augustine to Jean-Paul Sartre, passing through Montaigne and Rousseau. Like the art of portrait, the growth of the different *écrits du for privé* in Europe, from the late Middle Age, could be a testimony of changes in the status of the individual in Western societies, who appear to acquire more and more autonomy, and of the formation of the self, as an inner authority inherent to the human person and able to give a meaning to his actions, a meaning which is constant through the different ages of the life. From the influential work of Jacob Burckhardt, the Renaissance has generally been identified as the main period where this new sense of a personal singularity has developed in Europe in a way unfamiliar to other cultures.

For many years now this great narrative has been contested in two different ways. The first challenge came from the specialists of the Middle Ages who have remarked that some features of the triumphant individual of the Renaissance and early modern period, could be easily found in the fourteenth or fifteenth-centuries and even earlier. The

second challenge was waged by philosophers, like Michel Foucault, or specialists of social sciences, especially sociologists and psychologists, who reckon either that the autonomous individual is a fiction embodied in language or that the inner self is less unified or coherent than affirmed but, rather, fragmented and uncertain. It has been finally affirmed that the individual fully provided with this inner self was generally an elite, or middle class, male, well entrenched in his community, and that the selves of all the persons who did not belonging to this narrow category are more difficult to identify.

Toward a global dimension

To overcome this stalemate, we are persuaded that we have to consider the first person writings – and these three related questions of the self, the individual and the private/public debate – in a broader perspective. As the *écrits du for privé* seem so deeply linked to the formation of the Western individual, the confrontation with the written forms of personal, intimate and autobiographical self, which may have existed within the various Asian, African, or Near Eastern cultures, could, hopefully, help us. The developments of cultural exchanges in the wake of the first globalization during the early modern period, and the rise of European colonies around the world, have also been able to promote the circulation of Western models and therefore changes in other cultures. The study of the writings within various colonial cultures is, from this point of view, particularly interesting.

We have been encouraged towards this internationalization, which is also a “désoccidentalisation” of our concept (Roulleau-Berger, 2011), by three recent events. The first one is the publication by a major French historical journal, the *Annales, Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, in July-August 2009, of a special issue devoted to the written culture in Africa, with two wonderful papers on personal writings (Barthélemy, 2009; Mbodj-Pouye, 2009). They used a vocabulary and an approach close to ours without establishing a link with us but it was clear, when reading them from our perspective, that such a link could be very fruitful. The second fact was the publication, in the journal *Histoire Urbaine*, of a paper from a Japanese scholar, Reiji Iwabuchi, studying the diary of a samurai describing his activities in Edo (Iwabuchi, 2010). Such a diary looks a lot like many diaries written by landowners, or magistrates, or professionals at the same period in Europe. The last fact, and the most important one, was the activities, at the Freie Universität Berlin, under the supervision of Pr. Claudia Ulbrich, of a DFG Research Group called “Selbstzeugnisse in transkultureller Perspektive”. This transcultural perspective immediately appealed to us.

So the purpose of this book is to gather specialists of personal writings in Near East (Nelly Hanna, Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, Asli Niyazioğlu), Africa (Karin Barber, Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye), colonial America (Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela, Karin Wulf), Far Asia (Reiji Iwabuchi, Emmanuel Lozerand, Etienne Naveau) and Europe (Giovanni Ciappelli, Dominique Deslandres, Christa Hämmerle, Claudia Ulbrich), and to draw from their analysis, parallels, oppositions, continuities and particularities of first person writings in different cultural contexts. Even if our survey is incomplete, with the absence of countries with an ancient and powerful tradition of such writings, like China (Will, 2008-2009, 2009-2010) or India, several highlights can already be observed from these encounters and wait now for further investigations.

The most obvious of them concerns the worldwide dissemination of the western models of first person writings. As Giovanni Ciappelli has reminded us, this question is also relevant in regard to the diffusion of the different types of personal writings across Europe. Beyond, the influence of the European models is evident in many parts of the world especially due to colonial expansion. Karin Barber demonstrates, for example, how the writing of diaries by Yoruba speakers in colonial West Africa was informed by the model of spiritual journal brought by Protestant missionaries. In late 19th century Japan, as well as in Indonesia from the middle of the 20th century, the western autobiography provided a powerful model which inspires the pioneers of the genre in both countries.

But in Africa as elsewhere, these uses never go without adaptations or transformations. Observing the genealogical practices in British North America, Karin Wulf shows the particularities of these writings in colonial context, like Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela about the spiritual texts produced inside nunneries in Spanish America. Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen also acknowledges the impact of the European autobiographies in the Islamic world from the end of the 19th century, but she also underlines the constant reuses of former Islamic codes, especially those of traditional hagiographies. Such remarks open a history of these transfers and adaptations with a specific attention to the authors who served as bridges between the different cultural contexts.

But a diffusionist theory, even mitigated, has its limits. In Japan, during the Edo period, from the beginning of the 17th century to the second half of the 19th century, western influence was almost non-existent. The Westerners, or more precisely the Dutch, were confined to the island of Deshima, in the bay of Nagasaki, and all cultural exchanges were carefully supervised by the authorities. However the familial sources left by samurais, merchants, or even farmers, as it is exposed by Reiji Iwabuchi, are extremely close to those left by their

European counterparts. These personal diaries appear amongst familial correspondence, family history or accounts books and some of them spanned wide periods of time. It seems thus that the same social or personal objectives – to preserve the memory of family (or *ie*); to consolidate its status inside the community; to keep remembrances of the daily chores and joys of an existence – triggered the same kind of writings in Europe and in Japan. And these writings were likewise the responsibility of the head of the family, especially in the upper classes, where writing and sketching were amongst the marks of the leisured life. The same question related to the balance between diffusionism and functionalism, occurs about the material structure of these texts. The very form of the texts written by the members of the Malian associations studied by Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye, by the schoolmaster Boakye Yiadom, in Ghana, or by the Japanese merchants examined by Reiji Iwabuchi echoes to those written by farmers and tradesmen of early modern France (Mouysset, 2007).

So our aim cannot be limited to reconstruct the progression around the world of the European models of life-writings. Separate traditions of personal narratives exist in cultural contexts very far away from those initially described by Jacob Burckhardt and his followers. With this discovery, it is a comparative history of first person writings which is presented to us. It may activate an endless flow of matching between texts picked in the different cultural contexts we are investigating. But once more we do not wish to limit ourselves to do comparative history, and to map endless similarities and differences between the first person texts we are uncovering in these contexts, and those produced in the Occident. I am persuaded that we have the possibility to open something akin to a global history of personal writings.

The social backgrounds and the trajectories of authors is a good example of the vast fields of enquiry which are ahead of us. In Europe, ordinary writers receive for example more and more attention, exactly as, in the Arabic world members of new social groups – soldiers, merchants or tradesmen, as remind us Astrid Meier and Nelly Hanna. It also could be worth to investigate specific groups in different contexts. It appears thus that in Europe, as well as in colonial America or in the Muslim world, catholic priests and nuns, protestants ministers or Muslim ulama, who have a particular relationship to reading and writing, are often keen to keep personal narratives. Women's writings, which are nowadays thoroughly investigated in Europe, as demonstrates Christa Hämmerle, similarly form a fascinating comparative subject as Reiji Iwabuchi, Emmanuel Lozerand and Étienne Naveau – who emphasizes on Raden Ajeng Kartini, as the true founder of personal writings in Indonesia – tell us that they are not uncommon in Asia.

Comparison could be extended to the forms of writings: choice of supports; addition of signatures and different forms of sketches (drawings, crosses, coats of arms...); role of marginalia; erasures, crossing-out. The different way of mixing languages, vocabularies, cultural levels and types of discourses also offers an infinite field of research. Comparison could, finally, encompass a wide range of particular topics like dreams studied here by Aslı Niyazioğlu and which have already been approached for example by Mechal Sobel in the colonial context (Sobel, 2000; Gantet, 2010).

And this also implies to integrate in our own research about Europe some of the methods and topics brought forward in other cultural contexts. It appears, for example, that personal writing does not occur only in the genres usually investigated in Europe: family books, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies or personal journal. We learn, especially from Nelly Hanna, Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, Astrid Meier and Aslı Niyazioğlu, that genres which were almost left untouched in Europe, because the presence of the writer is not ostensible, can now be integrated in our corporuses. Some studies, especially by Adam Smyth, on accounts books or commonplace books (Smyth, 2010), or Philippe Martin, who has studied notebooks full of copied religious texts (Martin, 2010), have already been very fruitful but we can clearly do more. All our contributors seem to agree with Karin Wulf when she writes that “the choices that an individual made about what to notice, what to underscore, and what to write in a margin or in the interleaving illustrate the kinds of context in which that person wished to be shown or perceived”. Nelly Hanna and Aslı Niyazioğlu also insist on the study of dictionaries, where authors did not hesitate to introduce personal accounts or memories. And Dominique Deslandres and Elisa Sampson brilliantly demonstrate that a common voice can be detected in nunneries annals. In these last examples, the question of multiple authorships came on the foreground.

The link between first person writings and genealogy, which is underlined by different contributors, forms another field of cross-enquiry. For Karin Wulf, to keep the memory of a familial genealogy, in the New World context, where the family connections could not be much extended, was an essential function of personal writings in colonial America. Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen and Karin Barber show how personal identity arises from the writing of familial genealogy or even from academic genealogy linking master and disciples through centuries. A second link which could be efficiently investigated is between autobiography and biography. Giovanni Ciappelli notices that commercial biographies, which became more and more common during

the early modern history, were a model for personal writings, something also spotted in Asia at the end of the 19th century.

And reading specialists of other areas confirms that it is useful to separate the European first person writings – especially autobiographies – from the quest of individuality or of the self even if they have been united since the seminal work of Jacob Burckhardt. Giovanni Ciappelli reminds us that first person writings generally located the individual in wider contexts, either the family or the religious or civic community. This recognition has more and more impacts on historiography (Kormann, 2008; von Greyerz, 2010). It is clear that the first person writing allows to work on social actors as well as on autonomous subject. They unveil their aptitude to fulfill the social role that their communities shape for them. Etienne Naveau told us very clearly that the social and individual identities seen from the Indonesian memoirs are not uncertain because they confound themselves with the social role assigned to them. Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye also notices, that the type of texts she has read, are strongly linked to a status: head of family; owner of a farm; or student. But they also unveil the agency of these actors i. e. their capacity to act and to make choice inside the limits of this social role especially if they have been unable to fulfill social expectations. Reading of contributions about Africa, America, Near- or Far-East gives thus to specialists of European texts a wide collection of paths to follow and no doubt that more books will be needed to explore them.

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