

# French Prose Of The First Half Of The 19th Century And The Problem Of Personal Writing

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**Abstract:** This article examines autobiographical texts (personal novels, memoirs, autobiographies, diaries, letters) by French writers of the first half of the 19th century as a unified whole, demonstrating their homogeneity and revealing the process of the novelization of genres within so-called «documentary prose.» It is important to consider that «fictionality,» as a feature of personal writing in Romanticism, does not necessarily imply falsehood or the author's deliberate fabrication of the self-according to literary conventions in order to conceal their true identity by replacing it with fictional «doubles.» Therefore, it is crucial to take into account the authorial intention, which is largely shaped by how Romantic culture of the 19th century conceived of the self. It is essential to avoid the danger of reducing literature to a mere game in which the individuality of the writer is lost. One must fully attribute to the realm of writing what constitutes the very essence of personal self-awareness, equating the writing «I» with the act of writing itself.

**Keywords:** - French prose, literature, genre, phenomenon of writing, personal writing, autobiographical text, biographical method.

**Introduction:** The question of personal writing in relation specifically to French prose of the first half of the 19th century did not arise by chance. During this period in French literature, novels appeared in which contemporaries recognized autobiographical narration, closely associating the hero with the real figure of the author. These works were later defined in literary studies as «personal novels» (*le roman personnel*). Traditionally, this genre includes works such as *Oberman* by Senancour, *René* by Chateaubriand, *Adolphe* by Constant, *Delphine* by Staël, *Indiana* and *Lélia* by George Sand, *Confession of a Child of the Century* by Musset, *Pleasures of the Imagination* by Sainte-Beuve, and *The Lily of the Valley* by Balzac. These novels reflect a symptomatic phenomenon characteristic of Romantic culture – the aspiration to turn one's own life into literature, testing the truth of the «self» through it.

In both Russian and French literary studies, questions continue to be raised regarding the nature of autobiographical elements and the ways of expressing the «personal» in these novels. The number of studies devoted to this issue is quite substantial. It can be noted that in both French and Russian literary criticism, when addressing the genre specifics of the personal novel, despite minor differences, fairly general positions are often repeated.

## MAIN PART

The phenomenon of the personal novel can hardly be fully explained through a purely generic approach. Therefore, it is appropriate to address the issue of personal writing by considering a new approach to defining both Romanticism and the phenomenon of writing itself, as well as the nature of literature. Turning to personal writing allows, at this new stage, to raise the problem of the character of autobiographical

elements.

At the same time, this is not about the biographical method—that is, identifying the real personality of the author behind the text (the degree of closeness between the hero and the author, their views, or biographical facts). The problem of fact versus fiction is consistently set aside, which requires a different perspective on the nature of the author and the hero, as well as the relationship between these interacting substantial entities within the boundaries of autobiographical narration.

It seems productive to define the nature of the personal novel through its connection with other genres of autobiographical prose. The question of the closeness of the personal novel to the diary and autobiography was raised, for example, by A. Oliver in his book *Benjamin Constant: Writing and the Conquest of the Self*. The issue of the relationship between the personal novel and the diary was examined by B. Didier in his work *The Diary*. The literary scholar starts from the question of the degree of fictionality, noting that, unlike the diary, the personal novel contains fiction that operates at the level of intrigue, organizing the development of the plot.

In personal writing, every thought expressed by the writer has a profound ethical foundation. Even if we admit that a narrative intended for publication involves some element of play, it is a play taken seriously. Personal writing is an act for which the writer bears full responsibility. The writer is fully aware that their statements about themselves progressively and coherently organize their life, constituting its very existential essence. For the writer, all statements about themselves form a unified whole (life is written like a book), which also justifies considering all texts in which the «I» acts as both the subject and the object of writing as a unified entity functioning in the closest interrelation. Every thought expressed by the writer about themselves somehow enters into a semantic connection with their previous statements about themselves.

Personal writing allows us to speak of the character as the embodiment of the writing «I», engaged in its own existence and shaping its own destiny. In other words, the writer remains a living «I», a unique individuality in its entirety. This corresponds to the goals set by modern literary studies and philosophy, which have grown out of Romantic culture: «To take a person... in the actions through which they express themselves, in the consciousness in which they recognize themselves, in the personal history in which they establish themselves. » The «I» in personal writing is consciousness that is always its own foundation.

Therefore, one must start from the laws of its own movement, try to define its activity from within itself, and see how it organizes itself in this activity.

Attempts have already been made to consider all the autobiographical texts of a single author as a unified whole. This applies primarily to the work of Benjamin Constant: his novel *Adolphe* is closely associated with his other autobiographical writings – *Cécile*, *My Life*, *Amélie* and *Germaine*. A perspective close to the issue of personal writing – where we aim to discover the living presence of the author – is found in the approach of M.-C. Valois, as presented in her book *Female Fictions: Madame de Staël and the Voices of the Sibyl*. The scholar speaks of the close relationship between life and literature in Staël's work, where she strives to approach the «living source of the text,» which, for her, is the spoken word.

Thus, the concept of the «author» is replaced by the notion of «voice»: «a woman does not write, she converses, she chats.» According to M.-C. Valois, Madame de Staël «introduces a special linguistic experience, in which the spoken word differs little from writing, and literature from life. Writing, reading, conversation, correspondence, and life form a single whole.» This approach to her creative work helps explain why, in Staël's case, «it is difficult to determine the boundaries between the simple transmission of emotion and its 'literary' expression, between lived experience and aesthetic reflection. When reading her youthful letters, one gets the impression that she does not know where the line lies between reality and fiction. Reading, life, and writing amplify each other and blend together as equally valid and mutually reinforcing modes of existence.»

M.-C. Valois believes that Madame de Staël experiences literature as fullness, as unity: «This tendency toward emotional eloquence, toward dramatization – this vibrating excess – interests us because of its distinctly literary character: the transformation of ordinary events and feelings into something more beautiful, more truthful, more emotionally resonant.»

In French literary studies, there is a strong and consistent tendency to unite various autobiographical genres in order to explore the specificity of the writer's self-expression. The term «personal writing» (*écriture personnelle*) generally refers to texts belonging to the genres of autobiographical prose – diaries, letters, memoirs, autobiographies, confessions, self-portraits, notebooks, travel journals, sketchbooks, and the personal novel. These are texts in which the «I» acts simultaneously as both the subject and the object of writing. What unites all these genres is the

phenomenon of the writing self – that is, the self being created through the word «I.»

The most widely used term in French literary theory to designate this phenomenon is *l'écriture de soi* (writing of the self), though less frequently one may also encounter *l'écriture sur soi* (writing about the self) or *parole de soi* (speech of the self). Alongside these, other terms appear, such as *l'écriture de moi* (writing of «me») or *l'écriture du Moi* (writing of the Self), the latter employed by Georges Gusdorf to emphasize the role of individuality. Philippe Lejeune uses the term *l'écriture intime* (intimate writing), and *l'écriture personnelle* (personal writing) is also commonly used, with both emphasizing the deeply individual, person-centered nature (*personne*) of the writing.

The concept of *l'écriture de soi* has found broad application in the analysis of texts from the 18th to the 21st centuries. It is used in reference to autobiographical genres, first-person narratives, or more generally, to any literary use of the «I» - marking the writer's search for self-expression through language.

Personal writing is a trans-literary phenomenon, extending into the realms of linguistics, philosophy, history, and psychology. The problem of personal writing inevitably raises the fundamental question of how fully language can express the inner self – a question that remains central to philosophical inquiry. In this regard, one may agree with Paul Ricœur, who, it seems, offered a certain conclusion to the long-standing debate on whether language belongs to the subject: «Henceforth, the position of the subject to which the entire tradition of the Cogito appeals must be relocated within language itself, and not sought outside of it.» In other words, the thinking «I» is a linguistic «I.» In our understanding, «I am» is equivalent to «I think» and «I speak/write.» On this matter, Ricœur remarked: «Language is capable of designating the foundation of existence from which it arises, and of recognizing itself as the very mode of being it speaks about.»

In examining the history of personal writing, it is essential to account for the deep connection between the texts and the cultural-historical epoch from which they emerge. This is precisely what Philippe Lejeune refers to when he observes that the intimate writings of a particular generation are often quite similar, since their authors are immersed in the same historical circumstances, confronted by the same challenges, and witnesses to the same events.

Ultimately, a key scholarly task lies in recognizing the author as a writing self – a consciousness identical with itself, thereby determining the internal unity of

everything they write about themselves. All personal writing can be understood as a single, unfolding text – one that continually becomes, developing according to its own laws within the temporal flow of writing (a time that is embedded within human life itself!). In personal writing, the «I» is in a constant process of self-reflection, through which it expresses the indivisibility of its own existence.

The verbal fabric of the text reveals the life-structuring meanings of the writer's being, who, in the very process of writing, discloses the deepest possible truth of their self.

The study of the tension that arises between the «truth of life» and the «truth of literature» makes it possible to determine the extent to which the word constitutes a personal utterance – to what degree it belongs to the author and where the guarantee of its authenticity lies.

Framing the question in this way shifts the focus from genre to the problem of the «self» writing about itself – that is, to the author's pursuit of self-knowledge, in which literature played a defining role during the Romantic period.

This leads to the question of how the «I,» as it unfolds through language, becomes a text shaped by the laws of literary discourse.

The very formulation of the problem of personal writing brings to the forefront a range of important questions: the narrative strategy used to portray the self; the principles of plot construction in relation to the «I»; the word (in its broadest sense, including literary discourse) as a vehicle for conveying individual experience; the relationship between author, narrator, and protagonist; and writing as the act of recording events as structured by the writer's temporal experience.

In this context, it becomes crucial to define the author's presence in the text – a presence revealed through the intentionality of the writing, the genre and stylistic principles guiding the development of the text, and its figurative and semantic dominants.

Typically, when addressing the degree of personal content in the personal novel, scholars turn either to the issue of fiction versus truth — leaning toward a biographical approach — or to the concept of autofiction, focusing exclusively on formal markers as tools of the writer's game with the reader. However, these approaches, it seems, should be avoided. The use and theoretical grounding of the concept of personal writing should instead allow us to uncover the author's intention as a self-testifying subject – one who writes the self, that is, who creates the self through language, revealing their true identity. In studying personal

writing, critical attention should shift toward the subject: the «I» of the text must be understood as a subject writing itself.

Personal writing offers a way to trace the development of literature through the writer's personal quest for the self. It unfolds as the intentional act of the «I,» which constructs its own meanings and, in doing so, adapts the genre-specific and stylistic (linguistic) practices of literature to its needs.

Personal writing resists everything dogmatic, rigid, and fixed – any structure lacking flexibility. It is marked by the fluidity of form, which is subordinated to its primary imperative: self-expression through language.

When using the term personal writing, we refer specifically to the autobiographical texts of Romanticism, beginning with Rousseau (the justification for this position will be addressed separately in the study). The problem of the authorial «I» and historical time is treated in this work as follows: the «I,» as the bearer of language, is also the bearer of cultural consciousness and, through language, belongs to its historical epoch, expressing the semantic potential of its time.

It should be noted that some scholars divide the body of texts that constitute personal writing in the work of a single author into two categories: texts written for oneself and texts intended for publication. This approach is represented, for example, in A. Oliver's book *Benjamin Constant: Writing and the Conquest of the Self*. In the present study, such a division will not be maintained, although the distinction between the intimate and the public – as well as the author's intention regarding the reader's reception of the written text – will be taken into account.

This study focuses on how the text captures personal consciousness, which necessarily requires that the category of time be anchored in the act of writing – the time of the writing process, the time of the writer's life, and the time recorded within the narrative. Thus, personal writing must be considered in its processual nature – as something in the making.

From this perspective, the author's intention becomes crucial, as it is largely shaped by how 19th-century Romantic culture conceived of the self. It is important to avoid the risk of reducing literature to a mere game in which the writer's individuality is lost.

Instead, we must firmly establish the domain of writing as the space in which the very essence of personal self-awareness is defined – placing an equal sign between the writing self and the act of writing itself.

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The analysis conducted has shown that French prose of

the first half of the 19th century is marked by an active interplay between fictional literary forms and personal, autobiographical modes of writing – such as memoirs, diaries, letters, and autobiographies. These forms reveal a clear tendency toward novelization: elements of fiction increasingly permeate texts that were traditionally perceived as documentary. As a result, the boundaries between the fictional and the non-fictional become blurred.

One of the key conclusions is that personal writing in the Romantic era should not be viewed as a simple opposition between fiction and truth. On the contrary, the fictional nature of personal writing should be seen not as distortion but as a distinctive mode of self-expression that conveys the inner truth of the author. Romantic culture shaped the understanding of the self as a text – mutable, sensitive, and inherently contradictory. In this context, the written «I» becomes not merely a reflection of identity but its active construction.

Thus, personal writing in the 19th century is less an act of documentary testimony and more a form of literary self-reflection. It plays a significant role in the evolution of French prose genres, encouraging a shift from classical autobiography toward new forms of narrative rooted in individual perception of the world.

To analyze personal writing in 19th-century literature effectively, an interdisciplinary approach is required – one that combines philological, cultural, and philosophical-anthropological methods. Only such a perspective can adequately account for the complex nature of texts in which the literary and the personal merge into a unified expressive whole.

## CONCLUSION

This article examines how the author's concept of the self is realized in language, how aesthetic intentions correspond to spiritual experience, and how the word becomes that very experience – in other words, how the «I» develops within the word, which itself is a word of literature.

It should be emphasized that the core issue of this study is not so much the delimitation of personal writing forms by genre, but rather their convergence. Only such an approach – one that takes into account both the distinctive features of autobiographical genres and their mutual influence and fusion in the 19th century – allows for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of personal writing and the processes that led to the birth of a new artistic expression.

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