

Autosociobiographies as a Way of Writing Social Life

Lagasnerie's 3 between Literature and Sociology

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Drawing on a distinction proposed by Roland Barthes and Pierre Bourdieu, the present article discusses the place of writing about the social between sociology and literature with a special focus on the role of *writers* and *authors*. After some initial deliberations on this conceptual differentiation and how it relates to the genre of autosociobiography, I will turn my attention to 3. *Une aspiration au dehors* [3. A Longing for the Outside] (2023) by the French philosopher and sociologist Geoffroy de Lagasnerie. I will be guided throughout by Elisabeth Lenk's observation that society can be researched and recorded in the act of writing.

At a conference in 1989, Lenk, a former student of Theodor W. Adorno's, reminisced about her teacher and the nature of his work. Most notably, she attempted to counter Adorno's posthumous perception by portraying the latter not as a figure of the German public sphere to be reified or turned into another chapter in the history of philosophy and sociology, but first and foremost as a researcher who had developed his findings and ideas as he committed them to paper. In so doing, Lenk argued, Adorno had captured social processes such as the disappearance or submergence of certain modes of feeling, thinking, and behaviour, thereby dialectically safeguarding them for posterity (*Aufhebung*):

By writing, he sought to preserve that what was threatened to disappear from reality. Pressed by a double opposition: against German fascism, but also against the mentality of the future victors, those who gave him refuge, he pointed out defiantly those elements that did not conform to

the scheme of a terrible standardisation and simplification. (Lenk 1990: 12)¹

My chief interest here is not with Adorno himself, but rather with the practice of writing and reading sociological texts. Accordingly, I embrace Lenk's way of reading, that is, I engage with the textual structure of thinking about society as opposed to discounting it. This in turn makes it necessary to take sociological writings seriously *as texts written by authors*, not only with regard to their content, but also their structural form, their stylistic and linguistic characteristics, their metaphors and imagery, and their narrative voice(s): after all, addressing the social through the aesthetic procedure of writing means to predetermine (or at the very least influence) the reader's approach to the resulting text.

Writers and Authors

In investigating the situatedness of the genre of autosociobiography at the nexus of sociology and literature, it is helpful to consider Roland Barthes's and Pierre Bourdieu's distinction between those who discursively produce something new (*authors/auteurs*) and those who operate within existing discourses (*writers/scripteurs*).

According to Barthes and Bourdieu, *authors* invoke their own authority and the associated charisma (Bourdieu 2015: 104) – or that of a patron or divine sign (Barthes 2002: 54) – in order to formulate genuinely innovative ideas. Like prophets who freely create content and form as the spirit takes them, they are not compelled to refer to other pieces of writing – the requisite authority is generated by their own texts (Bourdieu 2015: 106). This form of discursive innovation is interrelated with the differentiation of textual production characteristic of modernity, especially the dichotomy between scientific and artistic writing (Lepenies 1988: II), and the emergence of the social figure of the artistic genius whose innovative potential is fuelled from within (Müller-Jentsch

1 “Schreibend hat er dasjenige zu bewahren gesucht, was im Begriff stand, aus der Wirklichkeit zu verschwinden. Unter dem Druck einer doppelten Opposition: gegen den deutschen Faschismus, aber auch gegen eine bestimmte Mentalität der zukünftigen Sieger, derer, die ihm Zuflucht gewährten, arbeitete er trotzig diejenigen Elemente heraus, die sich dem Schema einer furchtbaren Vereinheitlichung und Vereinfachung nicht fügten.” Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own, supported by DeepL.

2005). Despite all the criticism directed against this notion (Bourdieu 1980), it has had a profound impact on the relationship between literature and discourse: literary writing is under no obligation to explicitly position itself vis-à-vis the surrounding discourses.

It is against this background that Barthes distinguishes between *writers* and *authors*. The latter fulfil a *function*, namely to compose texts that are linked to them as authentic subjects embodying their existence through the specificity of their writing (Barthes 1972: 144). The former, on the other hand, perform an *activity*. In this, they resemble a bookkeeper or a civil servant, since their writing is not itself the object of what they are doing, but merely a mediation; writing is the writer's means of transporting his or her purpose. No coincidence, then, that the purposes listed by Barthes, such as explaining or teaching, are reminiscent of the activities of the scientist: according to him, *writers* concentrate exclusively on content, which they communicate in a verbal form that ultimately amounts to nothing (Barthes 1984: 14).² The language of *authors*, meanwhile, is more than just mediation: it is the very object of writing.

Barthes admitted that this distinction rarely existed in such pure form, and was increasingly shifting in his own time (Barthes 1972: 149–50). In members of the *intelligentsia*, in particular, he noted a hybrid manifestation that combined aspects of both modes of writing: the *author-writer* can and may write with the freedom ascribed to the field of literature (*author*), but he or she is nonetheless subject to the rules of writing established and enforced by a scholarly community (*writer*).

To summarise the relationship between writing and discourse as conceptualised by Barthes and Bourdieu: all *writers* are inscribed into discourse, but there is a key difference between *authors*, who are free not to reveal their points of reference, and those who are subject to rules of citation – as an activity, the latter's writing is the product of a community and its canon of conventions. For Barthes, this dividing line is especially conspicuous between science and literature. Wolf Lepenies (1988), however, has highlighted the special role of sociology, a discipline which finds itself in a continuous struggle over whether

2 “Pour la science, le langage n'est qu'un instrument, que l'on a intérêt à rendre aussi transparent, aussi neutre que possible, assujetti à la matière scientifique (opérations, hypothèses, résultats) qui, dit-on, existe en dehors de lui et le précède: il y a d'un côté et d'abord les contenus du message scientifique, qui sont tout, d'un autre côté et ensuite la forme verbale chargée d'exprimer ces contenus, qui n'est rien.”

its output should be classified as (hard) science or literature. At the heart of this struggle lies a fundamental question: does the strength of sociology lie in translating its findings into absolute facts, or in recognising the limits of facticity? The latter option entails the recognition that sociality cannot be captured in its entirety with mere evidence: it is always bound in writing, a form that is not only mediation, but shapes the content and is itself conditioned by it.

In this context, it is instructive to pay particular attention to auctorial practice. Barthes conceives of writing as performed by *authors* in terms of an intransitive verb (Barthes 2018: 18): in his eyes, they do not identify with a particular text or book, but rather with the activity itself (Barthes 2018: 18). As Carolin Amlinger's study *Schreiben. Eine Soziologie literarischer Arbeit* shows, *authors* hardly ever separate their vocation from their profession, and relate that profession not so much to products but to the production process, which is writing (2021: 480). In fact, writing as a process appears to be the lynchpin of why people enter the profession of literary writing in the first place, a field full of risks and uncertainties: they desire and demand literary writing. Amlinger describes this desire as a "passionate devotion, the limitless urge to write" (2021: 7).³ Difficult for those outside the profession to understand, it is articulated across national and temporal boundaries – be it by George Orwell ("From a very early age, perhaps the age of five or six, I knew that when I grew up I should be a writer"; Orwell 1984: 1), Truman Capote ("I realised that I wanted to be a writer"; Capote 2006: 19), or Georg Stefan Troller, when he gives voice to the child's need to put the world into poetic form (Troller/Ortmann 2022).

As Lepenies has shown in his above-mentioned study, the situation is different for sociologists: more than any other discipline in the humanities, sociology is characterised by a historically evolved combination of the ways and means of science on the one hand, and literature on the other. The hybrid academic identity of sociologists is evident from the interview series "Über Schreiben sprechen" [Talking about writing], in which members of the discipline in Germany, France, and Britain discuss the forms, rituals, and problems associated with their writing processes. In the entire series of contributions by the online forum *Soziopolis*, for instance, there is not a single reference to writing as a necessity of life (as opposed to a necessity of the profession). The German sociologist Ulrich Bröckling (Bröckling/Liebhart 2020), meanwhile, distinguishes between his roles as a university lecturer, scholar, and author. As far as his primary role as an academic teacher is concerned, his writing is

3 "leidenschaftliche Hingabe, der grenzenlose Drang zum Schreiben".

located between that of a *scientist* and that of an *author*, and bound to the forms required in the respective function:

Being a scholar also means writing down the results of one's thinking and research and making them public. Much of what is and must be written in everyday academic life has little to do, from my perspective, with authorship in the emphatic sense. (Bröckling/Liebhart 2020)⁴

Bröckling divides his writing into formats such as expert opinions, emails, and proposals (*scientist*) and manuscripts, essays, and books (*writer*), the latter of which he finds more problematic. Similar statements can be found throughout the series, and even in the case of a writing enthusiast like Gisèle Sapiro – “Writing is at the heart of my life, and I have to admit that I don't feel quite like myself at times when I'm not writing” (Sapiro/Ortmann 2022)⁵ – writing is portrayed as an activity that is important, even beloved, but not entirely inevitable.

Hence, sociology can hardly be understood as a fundamentally intransitive activity, even if it could be argued that sociologists simply sociologise when they are pursuing their profession. In the interviews in question, that profession cannot be delineated by writing alone, nor can a vocation to being a sociologist be established, as in literary writing. However, there are sociologists who adopt and use forms of literary writing in order to thematise experiences that they would not be able to invoke and express in academic writing. In so doing, they leverage the enormous advantage of literary over academic writing, which consists in the fact that it can be used to map out and address society in its entirety (Bourdieu 2016: 53), tracing complex social processes and dynamics by means of a single narrative thread. The result – the emerging genre of autosociobiography, which once again emphasises the unique role of sociology between science and literature, as mentioned above – will be the topic of the following section.

4 “Wissenschaftler zu sein, bedeutet auch, die Ergebnisse des eigenen Nachdenkens und Forschens zu verschriftlichen und öffentlich zu machen. Vieles von dem, was im akademischen Alltag geschrieben wird und werden muss, hat für mich allerdings wenig mit Autorschaft im emphatischen Sinne zu tun.”

5 “Schreiben ist das Herzstück meines Lebens, und ich muss zugeben, dass ich mich in Zeiten, in denen ich nicht schreibe, nicht ganz wie ich selbst fühle.”

Autosociobiography

What is autosociobiography? Can writings be unified under this genre description, and if so, into which category do they fall – literature or sociology, both, or neither of the two? Are autosociobiographies an extension of sociology, or do they have nothing to do with it? On the sociological side, at least, the answer to these questions is controversial.

At first glance, it seems relatively easy to define the term: it goes back to a statement by Annie Ernaux, whose writings, such as *La Place* (1983; *A Man's Place* 2012) and *Les Années* (2008; *The Years* 2017), are also at the centre of the battle over the interpretation of texts perceived as autosociobiographical. In an interview with Frédéric-Yves Jeannet, Ernaux spoke about the differences between autobiographies and her own work, referring to a part of her own writings as “auto-socio-biographies” (Ernaux 2011: 23). According to her, her texts are not about subjective, personal experiences, but about collective ones that are represented through “the impersonal mode of personal passions” (Ernaux 2011: 23).⁶ This can be seen in *Les Années*, for example, where Ernaux embraces the perspective of an indeterminate ‘we’ (*nous*) or ‘one’ (*on*) (Hamm 2018) in order to capture moments of a collective history that will never be repeated, combining her impersonal writing with excerpts of song lyrics, newspaper clippings, television adverts, and passages from philosophical and sociological treatises – fragments of a past to which she can relate through her personal experiences, but which do not apply exclusively to her.

Ernaux’s is a story of unfulfilled advancement: having escaped her class of origin, she never fully arrives in her new milieu. In portraying this experience of being an outcast in a twofold sense, she draws heavily on Bourdieu’s concept of the cleft habitus (Ernaux/Lagrave 2023: 78; Hechler 2022: 17). In a 2023 conversation with Rose-Marie Lagrave, she stated that it was only through sociology, especially Bourdieu’s, that she had been able to understand what had happened to her in her life as a social climber:

Sociology holds the key to understanding ourselves, and I would like to give you another personal example with the Bourdieuan notion of the *habitus*

6 “le mode impersonnel de passions personnelles”.

clivé, which seems to account for my entire life since adolescence. (Ernaux/Lagrave 2023: 80.)⁷

However, the “label autosociobiography” (Blome et al. 2022: 2), which has experienced a “boom” (Blome et al. 2022: 1) in recent years, especially due to the German-language success of Didier Eribon’s *Retour à Reims* (2009), is increasingly being separated from its originator. Authors in various countries have published texts that qualify as autosociobiographical, a categorisation for which Carlos Spoerhase (2022) cites three criteria: first, an autobiographical dimension, second, a description of the experience of transitioning from one social class to another, and third, a formulated “claim to a critical reconstruction of a social situation” (68).⁸ Crucially, in autosociobiographical works, the blurring of the boundary between sociology and literature is not only produced by referencing sociological theories – the way sociologists engage with these texts also plays a decisive role. Amlinger notes that sociologists ascribe to them “a sociological knowledge potential” because they can be used to explain social realities (Amlinger 2022: 44).⁹ One reason for this is that autobiographies use forms of factual narration (Amlinger 2022: 44) that are associated with a commitment to truth. That said, the fact that the truthfulness of the narrative stands or falls with the identity of the narrator/protagonist with the *author* makes it difficult to equate this form of literature with sociology.

Eribon’s *Retour à Reims* has served as a prominent example of autosociobiographical forms of writing in the sociological discourse of recent years, especially in German-language sociology. Published in translation in 2016 after a seven-year odyssey, it conquered by storm the German book market, the feature pages, and the specialist discourse. In both *Retour à Reims* and *La société comme verdict* (2013), a literarisation of sociological writing can be observed, as the boundaries between different fields, and above all between sociology and literature, are subverted. Eribon himself sees the two books in question less as biographical works than as theoretical analyses. Using the method of sociological introspection, he combines the writings of Bourdieu and Ernaux with everyday observations, personal memories, and family histories. Eribon’s works

7 “Que la sociologie apporte des clés pour se comprendre, j’en vois encore un exemple personnel avec la notion bourdieusienne d’‘habitus clivé’ qui me semble rendre compte de toute ma vie depuis l’adolescence.”

8 “Anspruch einer kritischen Rekonstruktion einer gesellschaftlichen Lage”.

9 “ein soziologisches Erkenntnispotenzial”.

are characterised by a fruitful combination of literary and theoretical texts that deal with similar problems, allowing him to create a resonance between the exponents of various genres that he compiles and employs for his sociological work.

This approach to autosociobiographical writing is comparatively rare in the wave of publications in the genre, but it is executed and reflected upon as a method in David Prinz's "Ein Unfall" [An accident] (2022), a short story that revolves around the author's class origins and the sense of distance from them he has since acquired. Elsewhere, Prinz examines the epistemological procedures of autosociobiographies. Having drafted a praxeology of autosociobiography, he comes to the conclusion that what autosociobiographies, autofictions, and autotheories all have in common is that they destabilise historically evolved structures of domination and inequality (Prinz 2024: 62). Due to the constant possibility of failure that accompanies autosociobiographical self-experiments, Prinz concludes, such writing practices produce "textual bodies that are by no means *self-contained* and coherent" (2024: 62).¹⁰

Autosociobiographical (self-)experiments of the kind performed and theorised by Prinz stand in contrast to texts that represent the truth claim discussed by Amlinger, but do not fulfil it in a scientific manner, as is the case with Christian Baron's *Ein Mann seiner Klasse* [A man of his class] (2020). Thus, autosociobiography ultimately remains elusive: as it oscillates between sociology and literature, it merges the knowledge, methods, and modes of representation of the two fields, producing hybrid figures of the kind envisaged decades ago by Barthes, *author-writers* who both freely express themselves by discursive means and use their life stories or those of other people to examine broader social dynamics. As Jochen Hörisch (2007: 10) has pointed out, the truth-referentiality of literature differs fundamentally from that of science: it is immune to negation. However, these *author-writers* combine scientific arguments, sociological theories, and empirical studies with references to film, music, and literature, everyday observations, and personal memories, transforming singular experience into collective social narrative in the process. As the following section will show, a similar approach is adopted in Geoffroy de Lagasnerie's 3: here, too, the social totality is inferred through the observation of the individual.

10 "keineswegs *abgeschlossene* und in sich kohärente Textkörper".

3 – An Autosociobiographical Text?

The holder of a professorship at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Arts in Cergy (ENSAPC), Lagasnerie has published extensively, particularly on topics of a political-sociological or socio-philosophical nature, and frequents a range of different media to address current political issues. As he told me in an interview in 2022, his attitude towards the production of texts is anything but enthusiastic; while he thoroughly depends on writing as a means of expression and as an analytical tool, he does not love it – indeed, his passion is not for writing, but for revising:

I distrust the narcissism of writers who stage their difficulties in writing and their rituals. I would say that in my case it is pretty easy: I hate to write, but I love to rewrite. So, for me, it is always about creating a first version and a rough plan as soon as possible, on the basis of which I can revise everything. (Lagasnerie/Ortmann 2022)¹¹

Accordingly, Lagasnerie seeks to work as quickly as possible, dictating tentative ideas into his iPhone to produce notes that he later transcribes.

Most of his books deal with power relations, be it in the form of repression by the law and the police, the possibilities and impossibilities of modern art, or the workings of contemporary academia. Hence, he frequently writes *against* something and conceives of writing as a political act:

Writing means engaging, participating in the world, and therefore writing is never neutral. It must never become a kind of routine, an end in itself, where the writer or researcher no longer asks himself or herself why and for whom he or she is writing. Otherwise, one runs the risk that one's own intellectual activity is ultimately only an instrument for the reproduction of cultural or academic institutions that accomplishes nothing. (Lagasnerie/Ortmann 2022)¹²

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- 11 "Ich misstrauere dem Narzissmus von Schriftstellern, die ihre Schwierigkeiten beim Schreiben und ihre Rituale in Szene setzen. Ich würde sagen, dass es in meinem Fall ziemlich einfach ist: Ich hasse es zu schreiben, aber ich liebe es, umzuschreiben. Bei mir geht es also immer darum, so schnell wie möglich eine erste Version und einen groben Plan zu erstellen, auf deren Grundlage ich alles noch einmal überarbeiten kann."
- 12 "Schreiben bedeutet, sich zu engagieren, an der Welt teilzunehmen, und daher ist Schreiben nie neutral. Es darf niemals zu einer Art Routine werden, zu einem

Lagasnerie's writing is very much engaged, directed towards an effect – it is meant to shape society, to denounce injustice, to formulate criticism. Hence the need for his books to be concise: in order for his ideas to circulate widely, they must be accessible to as many people as possible. Lagasnerie is not primarily concerned with the act of writing itself, but with its goal, the desired change or outcome, and thus with efficiency. Therefore, in my opinion, his academic works do not exhibit the writing of *authors* as conceptualised by Barthes and Bourdieu, but are imbued with a much more pragmatic and transitive understanding of the activity according to which “[t]he most important thing is to find an effective form without renouncing the theoretical sophistication” (Lagasnerie/Ortmann 2022).¹³

3, his latest book, differs significantly from all his previous publications, as Édouard Louis's astonished post about it makes clear:

When Geoffroy told Didier and me that he wanted to write a book about our friendship, the friendship that has been at the centre of our lives for over ten years now, I was obviously surprised. I guess I had the idea that it would be up to me, so obsessed and fascinated by the autobiographical form, to write this story one day. To try to do so anyway. Or maybe Didier, but not Geoffroy (Louis 2023).¹⁴

This difference has also been thematised by Lagasnerie himself. In contrast to his other projects, which always arose from a feeling of unease, the new book was not written in opposition to, but for and about something: based on the relationship between Eribon, Louis, and himself, it negotiates friendship as a template for life. Interestingly, 3 was Lagasnerie's second attempt at engaging

Selbstzweck, bei dem sich der Schriftsteller oder die Forscherin nicht mehr fragt, warum und für wen er oder sie schreibt. Andernfalls läuft man Gefahr, dass die eigene intellektuelle Tätigkeit letztlich nur ein Instrument zur Reproduktion kultureller oder akademischer Institutionen ist, das nichts hervorbringt.”

13 “Das Wichtigste ist, eine wirksame Form zu finden, ohne auf den theoretischen Anspruch zu verzichten.”

14 “Quand Geoffroy a annoncé à Didier et moi qu'il voulait écrire un livre sur notre amitié, sur cette amitié qui constitue le centre de nos vies depuis plus de dix ans maintenant, j'ai évidemment été surpris. J'avais sans doute l'idée que ce serait à moi, si obsédé et fasciné par la forme autobiographique, d'écrire un jour cette histoire. D'essayer de le faire en tout cas. Ou peut-être Didier, mais pas Geoffroy.”

with this topic. Intended as a very different kind of book from the ones he usually writes, i.e., a decidedly *literary* one, the first iteration was a work he could not finish:

I thought it would be enough to tell our story in order to document it. So, I wrote a first version of the book, which was narrative, biographical, with many anecdotes and without explicit theoretical discourse or prior theorising. However, when I read it through again, I realised that with this approach I had produced a naïve narrative that was free of problems and, in a sense, even fact-free. I was confusing appearance with reality. I was talking about nothing. (Lagasnerie/Ortmann 2022)¹⁵

After Lagasnerie had realised, to his dissatisfaction, that he could not write about the topic in the vein of Louis or Eribon, he discarded the first version of the book and immersed himself for a year in sociological, philosophical, and literary texts on friendship. Only then did he begin to compose a second version – a book that does contain an autobiographical part, but that also generalises the singularity of the relationship between the three friends, comprehensively discussing the unique role that friendship can play in life and the unconventional forms it may take; and as indicated by its subtitle (*Une aspiration au dehors* – A longing for the outside), Lagasnerie's notion of friendship is very much about escape, about breaking away from bourgeois expectations to enable a different way of living that does not revolve around the traditional core of a family and/or partnership.

What brings 3 close to the realm of autosociobiography is not only the overarching theme of Lagasnerie's friendship with Eribon and Louis, two of the most eminent authors of this genre, and their numerous and reciprocal cross-references to each other's texts – it is also the specific form chosen by Lagasnerie for the second, published version of the book, its combination of analytical reflection, theoretical discourse, and literary narrative. In a sense, 3 is a

15 "Ich dachte, es würde genügen, unsere Geschichte zu erzählen, um sie zu dokumentieren. Ich schrieb also eine erste Version des Buches, die narrativ, biografisch, mit vielen Anekdoten und ohne expliziten theoretischen Diskurs oder vorheriges Theoretisieren war. Als ich sie jedoch noch einmal durchlas, wurde mir klar, dass ich mit diesem Ansatz eine naive Erzählung produziert hatte, die frei von Problemen und in gewissem Sinne sogar faktenfrei war. Ich verwechselte den Schein mit dem Sein. Ich sprach von nichts."

mixture of the project's first iteration, in which Lagasnerie attempted a novel-like narrative, and a theoretical treatise on models of life and friendship:

Here, too, I'd like to explore the forms of life – what we are and what we could be, the gap between what we become and the multiple versions of ourselves we could have developed into – based on the capture and description of a singularity. But this singularity has the specificity of being, for me, lived and anchored in my biography: it's the friendship that links Didier Eribon, Édouard Louis, and myself. (Lagasnerie 2023)¹⁶

3 discusses the issue of friendship on three distinct yet interconnected levels, the first being the 'I' (*je*) as which Lagasnerie speaks *qua* author and subject. The first-person perspective is employed when the text describes Lagasnerie's personal experiences and the relationship between the three friends, but also when it investigates how individual subjects perceive and process the social world. This approach allows Lagasnerie to theorise the 'I' sociologically as a singular identity that is collectively imparted and that constitutes the product of the social position one occupies:

The 'I' that I am is merely the way in which positions in different spaces of the social world at different times in the life cycle are linked together. The behaviours I hold as mine are often only the effect of the position I occupy at a given moment in these spaces and this cycle. After my death, others will in turn perform the same actions and feel the same affects as I do, holding them just as illusorily to their singular identity. (Lagasnerie 2023)¹⁷

16 "J'aimerais ici élaborer une interrogation sur les formes de la vie – sur ce que nous sommes et ce que nous pourrions être, sur l'écart entre ce que nous devenons et les multiples versions de nous-mêmes que nous aurions pu développer – en m'appuyant là aussi sur la saisie et la description d'une singularité. Mais cette singularité présente la spécificité d'être pour moi vécue et ancrée dans ma biographie: il s'agit de la relation d'amitié qui nous lie, Didier Eribon, Édouard Louis et moi-même."

17 "Le 'je' que je suis n'est que la manière dont sont reliées entre elles des positions situées dans les différents espaces du monde social à différents moments du cycle de la vie. Et les comportements que je tiens pour miens ne sont souvent que l'effet de la position que j'occupe à un moment donné dans ces espaces et ce cycle. Après ma disparition biologique, d'autres viendront à leur tour accomplir les mêmes actions et ressentir les mêmes affects que moi, les tenant eux aussi et de façon tout aussi illusoire pour leur identité singulière."

The second level is that of a generalising ‘we’, which Lagasnerie employs to point out issues that affect, if not all, then at least many social actors, be it ageing (Lagasnerie 2023: 8), coming to terms with one’s own existence (7), or, following Adorno, the closely intertwined questions of “what we are” and “what society has made of us” (11).¹⁸ However, the text also contains another ‘we’ that embodies and linguistically constitutes the singular constellation at the heart of Lagasnerie’s book: the triangle of friendship between Eribon, Louis, and himself. This different ‘we’ appears time and again when the everyday lives and shared history of the three friends are described (Lagasnerie 2023: 27, 37, etc.), but also when their relationship as writing subjects is discussed:

First of all, Didier made it possible for Édouard and me to think of ourselves as authors and to concede to ourselves the right to write. When I met Didier, ten years before we met Édouard, I was still a student, but becoming an author slowly became a matter of course: spending time with Didier and the friends he had at the time, seeing him live, write, and publish, dining in his apartment flooded with books and magazines strewn everywhere and in every direction, made me naturally part of the world of books. (Lagasnerie 2023: 144)¹⁹

As stated above, these three levels are inextricably linked, allowing Lagasnerie to interweave personal stories with generalising observations and theoretical arguments pertaining to friendship as a guiding principle of life. This approach is reminiscent of (and conducive to) Adorno’s “moment of thought”, which the latter describes as circling around an object to be investigated (Adorno 1973: 166): Lagasnerie, too, circles around the concept of friendship, observing it from different angles and in different constellations.

The circular movement in question is especially prominent in a passage containing sociological-philosophical reflections on the treatment of friend-

18 “Nous ne devons jamais, comme dit Adorno, confondre ce que nous sommes et ce que la société a fait de nous.”

19 “Didier a d’abord rendu possible, pour Édouard et moi, le fait de nous penser comme auteur et de nous donner le droit d’écrire. Dès que j’ai rencontré Didier, dix ans avant que nous ne rencontrions Édouard, j’étais encore étudiant, mais devenir un auteur s’est petit à petit imposé comme une évidence: fréquenter Didier, ses amis de l’époque, le voir vivre, écrire et publier, dîner dans son appartement inondé d’ouvrages ou de revues posés partout et dans tous les sens, m’a inscrit dans l’évidence du monde des livres.”

ship by authors such as Bourdieu, Adorno, and Walter Benjamin. In the latter's *Das Leben der Studenten* (1991 [1915]; *The Life of Students*), for instance, friendship is understood as a "model of life, as a culture and mode of producing subjectivity" (Lagasnerie 2023: 13),²⁰ a notion that chimes with Lagasnerie's own concept of friendship as a space of possibility that can open up between people, allowing them to be free and creative (19). At the end of his book, Lagasnerie draws on the view of love and friendship embraced by Bourdieu, according to whom such relationships entail a suspension of symbolic power and the concomitant fight for dominance:

Love and friendship, at least in their pure form, are based on a suspension of the struggle for symbolic power. In Bourdieu's understanding, love is an exchange of justifications for existing, and the couple thus turns out to represent a mini-city of powerful symbolic autarky, and thus capable of 'competing victoriously with all the consecrations ordinarily demanded of the institutions and rites of <Society>, that secular substitute for God'. (Lagasnerie 2023: 202)²¹

When Lagasnerie refers to (autosociobiographical) literary texts, such as Ernaux's *Une femme* (1987; *A Woman's Story* 2003) and Louis's *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (2014; *The End of Eddy* 2017), he does so in a way that recalls Eribon's method of sociological introspection, mixing sociological-philosophical thinking with literary narratives which in turn do not merely serve as allegories, but as scientific sources; that is, the literary-autosociobiographical material is incorporated into the sociological argumentation through a literary effect (Lagasnerie 2023: 141). Moreover, Lagasnerie's descriptions of life with Eribon and Louis never go into great detail, focusing instead on general phases or forms of relationships:

20 "L'amitié est devenue un mode de vie, c'est-à-dire à la fois une culture et un mode de production de la subjectivité."

21 "La vie amoureuse et la vie amicale se fondent ainsi, du moins dans leur version pure, sur une mise en suspens de la lutte pour le pouvoir symbolique. L'amour est interprété par Bourdieu comme un échange de justifications d'exister, et le couple s'avère ainsi représenter une mini-cité d'une puissante autarcie symbolique, et par là même capable de 'rivaliser victorieusement avec toutes les consécrationes que l'on demande d'ordinaire aux institutions et aux rites de la 'Société', ce substitut mondain de Dieu."

After sport, Édouard and I would meet Didier downstairs at his house and spend some time with him at the café. He would talk to us about *La Société comme verdict*, which he was trying to finalise. Sometimes he'd appear with eyes reddened by the hours spent in front of his screen, looking haggard, and say: 'I think I'll throw this manuscript out of the window.' Then, we would each go home until evening to work and rest, and we only met up again later for dinner. On days without sport, we would meet in the evening at Édouard's, my house, or at the restaurant – or go to the cinema, the theatre, or see other friends. (Lagasnerie 2023: 37)²²

With scenes like these, Lagasnerie illustrates how a particular kind of relationship combines private and public aspects, work and leisure – a friendship that is unlike the relationship between family members or an amorous couple. Embodying a sense of liberation from traditional norms, this unique friendship becomes a proposal for a general pattern of living understood by Lagasnerie as an escape, a transformation, a new beginning. This sets 3 apart from *conventional* autosociobiographical texts: here, escape does not take the form of a transition from one social class to another, but of a much broader emancipation from social expectations; here, the narrative of provenance is not focused on past social mobility, but on a future-oriented movement towards a different way of life with friendship as its centre.

To conclude: 3 combines art and scholarship, literature and sociology. Not only does Lagasnerie draw on literary and academic texts, but he also writes in both an autobiographical and a scientific manner. Narrating the unique relationship between Édouard Louis, Didier Eribon, and himself, he combines this account with sociological-philosophical reflections on human existence in late modernity and the role of friendship as a way of life. Therefore, Lagasnerie's approach to textual production can be interpreted as a way of connecting the two modes of writing conceptualised by Bourdieu (see above). In Bourdieu's understanding, the focus of literary writing on the concrete can be generalised

22 "Après le sport, nous retrouvions Didier en bas de chez lui et nous passions un moment avec lui, au café. Il nous parlait de *La Société comme verdict* qu'il tentait de mettre au point. Il apparaissait parfois les yeux rougis par les heures passées devant son écran, l'air hagard, et disait: 'Je crois que je vais balancer ce manuscrit par la fenêtre.' Chacun de nous rentrait ensuite chez lui, jusqu'au soir, pour travailler et se reposer, puis nous nous retrouvions pour dîner. Les jours où nous n'allions pas au sport, nous nous retrouvions directement le soir, chez Édouard, chez moi, ou au restaurant – ou bien pour aller au cinéma, au théâtre, ou voir d'autres amis."

on a more abstract level, which then lends itself to scientific theorisation. Going even further, Lagasnerie subverts the boundaries between literature and sociology, allowing the two fields to merge: similar to Ernaux, Eribon, or Louis, he pursues an investigation of reality that commingles philosophy, sociology, speculation, and fantasy (Lagasnerie/Ortmann 2022).

The autosociobiographical traits exhibited by 3 place Lagasnerie in close proximity to the role of the *author-writer* envisaged by Barthes: as a *writer*, he explicitly inscribes himself into theoretical and literary discourses; as an *author*, he narrates the special relationship that exists between Eribon, Louis, and himself from a decidedly literary perspective. It is by embracing this two-pronged approach that Lagasnerie is able to preserve (in Adorno's sense) the relationship that connects Eribon, Louis, and himself, while simultaneously presenting friendship as an alternative paradigm of human existence. This brings us back to the beginning of this article, where Lenk's interpretation of Adorno's work was discussed: in Lagasnerie's 3, the compulsion to standardise social life in all its aspects, to adopt a simplistic view of human interactions, is counteracted with the search for an alternative model of life capable of resolving social contradictions.

The answer to the question of whether 3 belongs to a (more or less clearly delineated) corpus of autosociobiographical texts depends on the generic parameters applied and is ultimately open to debate. That said, a certain proximity seems evident – not only because of the specific relationship between (autosociobiographical) authors negotiated within the text, but also due to important similarities such as the portrayed attempt to transition from a 'predetermined' life model to a self-chosen one. All told, Lagasnerie's 3 is an example of how much sociological work stands to gain from literary practices, or in other words: from a different kind of writing in which both the general and the particular of the social come into view.

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