

## ***SE RESSAISIR.*** **EDITORIAL GENESIS** **AND RECEPTION**

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Analyzing the process leading to the publication of a work, which thereafter structures its reception, requires considering that beyond the text itself, a work is inscribed in a publishing field. What to make of this banal observation when publication was not aimed for, or when the reception surpasses the author's expectations? Returning to the particularity of *Se Ressaïtir* gives the opportunity to present the various paths to publication and the diverse uses of a text.

### **The ambiguities of a context**

*Essais d'ego-histoire* [Essays of ego-history], edited by Pierre Nora in 1987, Chantal Jacquet's 2014 *Les transclasses ou la non-reproduction* [Transclasses: A Theory of Social Non-Reproduction], and Philippe Lejeune's *Les brouillons de soi* [Drafts of Self] are three waypoints for the rising strength of autobiogra-

phical writing in the social sciences. They were cautiously received, at first, in the field of social sciences, due to an aversion against any hint of subjectivity and possible drift towards the "biographical illusion" (Bourdieu, 1986). However, as two recent introductions demonstrate, the social sciences have become more receptive to self-narratives. Feminist epistemologies have integrated the *standpoint* to knowledge (Harding, 2004) as it is considered to assure greater objectivity in the research process. Moreover, the normalisation of the degree of Habilitation to supervise research (HDR) has encouraged the autobiographical expression of the author, through the writing of a "short dissertation."<sup>1</sup> Self-narratives in the social sciences have become less exotic and less exposed to the stigmatization in an environment that has been resistant to autobiography, although its favorite field remains literature. To cite just two, the books of Annie Ernaux and Édouard Louis have become bestsellers. And despite their authors' intentions, they have contributed to giving their readers a representation of *transfuges de classes* as "miraculous".

It was in this paradoxical context that I received an invitation from the sociologist Claire Ducournau. She wanted to explore "what talking about oneself

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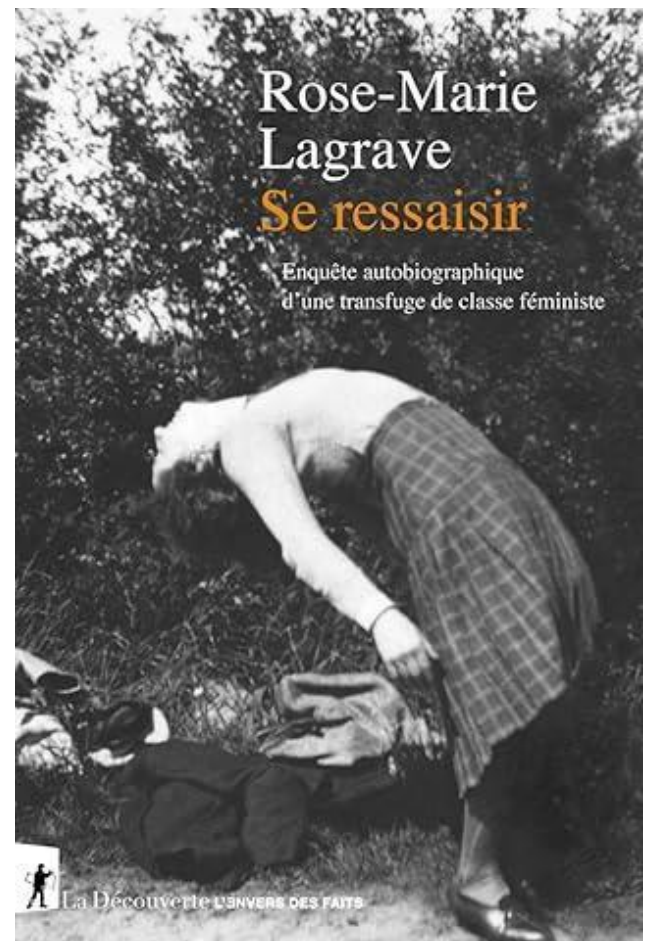
<sup>1</sup> In the French system, the Habilitation to supervise research, introduced in 1984, is the highest academic degree and allows the

supervision of doctoral dissertations. It includes a biographical section.

means,” in an issue of the online journal *Genre, Sexualité, & Société* dedicated to “egologies” (Ducournau, 2010). In responding positively to her request, I nonetheless indicated “*that I would never have consented to this exercise had I not been approached by the editors of the journal, as if breaking the silence could only find its legitimacy outside oneself, within the frame of this academic exercise’s well-known dynamics.*” This digression underlined my difficulty in permitting myself to speak about myself; the mediation of a request was needed. The same phenomenon recurred again. After reading this article, the sociologist Paul Pasquali suggested that I expand upon it for publication with *La Découverte*.<sup>2</sup> After publishing *Passer les frontières sociales* [Passing Social Borders] in 2014, Pasquali had all the dispositions and skills for recognizing and drawing attention from a larger public to the uncertain path of social mobility.

The acceptance of this synopsis by the editorial committee of *La Découverte* fell into a context of intensified publications by *transfuges de classe*, as much in social sciences as in literature. Without our mutual awareness<sup>3</sup>, I thus joined other colleagues simultaneously engaged in writing socioanalyses. This recourse to

autobiography is also explained by a generational effect for those who arrived at retirement and felt the need to take up the threads of a trajectory now in decline, which trajectory must be recorded in order to understand its logic and its meaning. It is encouraged and supported by the intensification of relations between social sciences and literature, of which autobiographies are the paragon, insofar as they tend to borrow a novelistic style and romanticize lives.



<sup>2</sup> *La Découverte*, founded in 1983, is the successor to *Maspero*. The publisher specializes in social science research aimed at a broad audience.

<sup>3</sup> To only mention the main publications: Delsaut (2020), Winock (2020), Delahaye (2021), le Foll (2021), Michel (2021), Alter (2022), Le Bihan (2021) and Moreau (2022).

It's no minor paradox that the explosion of publications by *transfuges de classe* comes just as downward mobility has become one of the most notable phenomena of recent decades (Bourdieu, 1978; Peugny, 2009; Maurin, 2009). There is a generational effect, between the generation of retirees who benefitted from the social advantages of the welfare state and believed in a better future, and the generations of their children and grandchildren, carrying devalued diplomas and being socially and politically disillusioned. The narratives of these *transfuges de classe* (including my own) that highlight upward social mobility do not match the frequent stagnations and regressions of current social trajectories. In this respect, these autobiographies of *transfuges de classe* mark the end of a liberating education system, which engineered potential passages across social boundaries. The publishing field captured well this turning point, publishing some of the last beneficiaries of social salvation through schooling. And this impression of a swan song is reflected in the reception of *Se ressaisir*.

### **An unexpected but sociologically predictable reception**

In an attempt to clarify the different appropriations of the work, I will draw

together different materials concerning its reception, distinguishing between reviews in social science journals, seminar presentations, letters from readers, and readings in libraries or bookstores. With the exception of Didier Éribon's comment at the 2021 symposium "Writing one's life, narrating society. Autobiography at the risk of sociology," held at the National Library of France (BNF), in which he declared my book to be "*horrendous and homophobic*," and that of the anthropologist Bernard Hours who held that the book "*is cold and doesn't express the passion of a life, the affective and emotional dynamics*,"<sup>4</sup> the reception from my sociological colleagues was unexpected. By emphasizing method, they underlined the challenge implied in researching so close to oneself (Bouffartigue, 2022 ; Rabier, 2022) and the pitfalls linked to the exercise of self-reflexivity (Piponnier, 2024). They assessed the work in light of the question posed by Jean-Claude Passeron (1990, p. 3): "*Is there a biographical method capable of offering to sociology the guarantees of proof and reasoning that characterize other data processing methods?*" and they concluded that the essay was promising in this regard. Thereby validating the sociological dimension of the work, these reviews thus count autobiographies

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<sup>4</sup> The author makes a mistake in the subtitle and in the body of the text by writing "an anthropological study" instead of an autobiographical study.

among the legitimate objects of sociology. While discourses on method are the prerogative of sociologists, method is the least of the reader's concerns.

In the case of *Se ressaisir*, the reception includes reports in generalist newspapers, media interviews, meetings with readers during presentations in libraries or bookstores, and the letters and emails I received. The media appearances and newspaper reports emphasized what was considered a performance: the reconstitution of my family history, and, as part of it, my own fragmented trajectory. They particularly highlighted the cleavage between the initial handicaps and my family's collective "success," between the impossible made possible. The questions also touched the term "transfuge," rather than "transclass," and it was necessary to make it clear that transfuge is neither a noun nor a quality, but a process of class migration. I noted a deep consistency between radio programs and generalist newspapers, which share the same cultural space, the same literary references, and know the tricks for promoting a book. As the majority of journalists are inheritors (Lafarge, 2019), curiosity is what guides them when seeking to understand a trajectory that transgresses the logic of social reproduction. They would emphasize the uniqueness of my trajectory, often related back to and summarized by my family of origin. Eleven children, an ascetic and

rigorous catholicism, the social consequences of illness, the daily life in a village of 348 people – in their eyes, these features painted a strange setting. Of all these readings, that of Tiphaine Samoyault in *L'Obs* (2021) is the most comprehensive and the one that aligns best with my intentions, receptive as she is to the details of the work, often ignored elsewhere. For these journalists, it is the distance between them and me that intrigues them, and they seek to pierce its secret.

An opposite logic inspires ordinary readers, as the majority of their letters express a closeness to the author. The recurring question put to me in letters and at conferences is whether my trajectory would still be possible in 2026, given the education system's inability to counteract social inequalities in the schools, as if the French schools of the 1950s were more egalitarian. This question and others suggest a reading of my book through the prism of a lost world – a world I do not, however, describe through rose-colored glasses. Not having the possibility to assess the social characteristics of the readership, the quality of their reception and their competence as I could evaluate it from the length of their letters, their style, and their analytical capacity attest to a high level of education, which is often corroborated by the indication "I am a secondary school teacher." The majority of the letters I received are situated

within this social space for which the education system ensured a certain social ascension, though expectations had been more ambitious. The beginning of the letters is always the same: they indicate that they have not had as “prestigious” a trajectory as mine, and then, through analogy, note a series of points of convergence with my path. Identification is the most frequent way to convey the focus on some of my specific experiences: boarding school, the grip of catholicism, injustices, and class contempt are the most frequently themes evoked and reworked.

The process of appropriation of the work invites readers to revisit their own trajectories in the light of the embodied experience it offers. They feel recognized by a book that allows them to reflect on their own paths, which, in view of this reading, appear in a new light. Reading *Se Ressaisir* is nothing but a pretext to engage in a reading of oneself. The longest letters are true personal narratives, dotted with resentments against an unjust society, and an indictment of the silencing and lack of recognition of ordinary people, who relate to it even more as they cannot write it in the first person. This sort of revelation experienced by readers also plays in reverse, as they point to those elements left out of the book, notably concerning my private life, or the narrative shortfall around my integration into the EHESS (School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences),

thereby accentuating the readers’ active engagement and capacity to co-construct a work.

While the horizon of expectation inscribed in the text calls for a process of recognition among non-inheritors, the extra-textual horizon of expectation, which carries the expectations of the social milieu at any given moment, is harder to ascertain (Jauss, 1978). It is marked by ambiguities, disposed to let the meaning of the work drift towards its opposite. The craze for accounts of *transfuges de classe* hides, in effect, an intent to deny the reproduction of social classes. *Transfuges de classe* are the proof of the efficacy of a social elevator that assures convenient fluidity between classes, perhaps even challenges their existence. Autobiographical narratives, if they do not carefully underline that *transfuges de classe* are the exceptions that make the rule of social reproduction, sometimes rebound in veiled terms against Bourdieu. “The doleful narrative is the counterpart to deterministic theories in sociology: even when individuals escape the mechanisms promised to them and destined to assign them their social category, it can only work through suffering,” writes sociologist Gérald Bronner (2023, p. 113). The narratives of *transfuges* thus become sites of struggle between competing positions in the social sciences. Nevertheless, the majority of the receptions underlined the satisfaction of seeing the question of

social classes return to the spotlight. All emphasize my individual “success,” even if the text indicated that if there was any success, it had to be collective, leading forward towards a classless society.

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