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Autobiography in Early Bande Dessinée

Jean-Jacques Rousseau opens book one of his *Confessions* (c. 1712-1765) with the claim that he is the founder of autobiography:

Je forme une entreprise qui n'eut jamais d'exemple, et dont l'exécution n'aura point d'imitateur. Je veux montrer à mes semblables un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature; et cet homme, ce sera moi. (Opening words of *Livre I*)

[I am setting forth on an undertaking for which there is no previous example and whose achievement will have no imitator. I want to show my peers a man in the full truth of nature; and I shall be that man.]

He explains that he sees autobiography as "une chose unique et utile" whilst pointing to its noble function and to the notion that the account of a lofty soul, be it that of a commoner, can raise the subject beyond the status of the highest of kings:

Il est donc sûr que si je remplis bien mes engagements j'aurai fait une chose unique et utile. Et qu'on n'objecte pas que n'étant qu'un homme du peuple, je n'ai rien à dire qui mérite l'attention des lecteurs. Cela peut être vrai des événemens de ma vie: mais j'écris moins l'histoire de ces événemens en eux-mêmes que celle de l'état de mon ame, à mesure qu'ils sont arrivés. Or les ames ne sont plus ou moins illustres que selon qu'elles ont des sentimens plus ou moins grands et nobles, des idées plus ou moins vives et nombreuses. Les faits ne sont ici que des causes occasionnelles. Dans quelque obscurité que j'aye pu vivre, si j'ai pensé plus et mieux que les Rois, l'histoire de mon ame est plus intéressante que celle des leurs. (*Ebauches des Confessions*, page 1150)

[There is no doubt that if I achieve what I set out to do I will have done something unique and useful. And there is no validity to the objection that since I am no more than a common man I have nothing to say that is worthy of the readers' attention. That may be the case as far as the events of my life are concerned: but I am not so much writing the story of those events per se as that of the reactions of my soul to those events. And the extent to which one's soul is illustrious is only dependent on the extent to which it bears great and noble sentiments and plentiful and sharp ideas. The facts, in this case, are no more than secondary causes. No matter how far from fame I might have lived, if I have had more numerous and worthy thoughts than Kings, the story of my soul is more interesting than that of theirs.]

An initial link to the bande dessinée comes with the word "physionomie," the subject of an important treatise by Rodolphe Töpffer, seen by some as the father of the BD: [1](#)

Oui, moi, moi seul, car je ne connois jusqu'ici nul autre homme qui ait osé faire ce que je me propose. Des histoires, des vies, des portraits, des caractères! Qu'est-ce que tout cela? Des romans ingénieux bâtis sur quelques actes extérieurs, sur quelques discours qui s'y rapportent, sur de subtiles conjectures où l'Auteur cherche bien plus à briller lui-même qu'à trouver la vérité. On saisit les traits saillans d'un caractère, on les lie par des traits d'invention, et pourvu que le tout fasse une physionomie, qu'importe qu'elle ressemble? Nul ne peut juger de cela. (*Ebauches des Confessions*, page 1149)

[Yes, I, and I alone, for I know of no other man who up to now has dared do what I am suggesting. Stories, lives, portraits, characters! What is all that? Ingenious novels built on the basis of a few external acts, a few related pronouncements, subtle conjecture whereby the Author aims to make himself stand out rather than find the truth. All you need to do is take a few marking characteristics, bring them together with fictional elements, and as long as the overall effect creates some sort of appearance *une physionomie*, what does it matter what it looks like? No one can come to any conclusions from that.]

Indeed Töpffer, in a letter of 29 December 1840, cites Rousseau as a guiding influence:

Mais parmi les livres de mon père, celui qui a eu sur moi, *comme homme*, la plus grande influence, c'est Rousseau. De seize à vingt ans, je n'ai guère lu autre chose, ni vécu avec quelqu'un d'autre.

[But amongst my father's books, it was Rousseau the greatest influence upon me *as a man*. From the age of sixteen to twenty I hardly read anything else, nor lived with anyone else.]

-Rodolphe Töpffer, Letter to Sainte-Beuve, quoted in Groensteen and Peeters, page xiii.

We should be aware, therefore, of the concept of autobiography as having an uplifting purpose, although this does then take us away from Töpffer, whose 'bande dessinée' adventures of M. Pencil, M. Cryptogram and others are primarily light-hearted quips for the amusement of friends and pupils.

Indeed when I -this is perhaps one article where the use of the first person is entirely admissible- first started exploring the notion of autobiography and early bande dessinée, initial indications were bleak. An inquiry thrown at the knowledgeable staff of Philippe Mellot's Librairie Lutèce drew a blank,² as did a thorough search of Patrick Gaumer and Claude Moliterni's *Dictionnaire mondial de la bande dessinée*.³ Thierry Groensteen's 1996 *9ème Art* article specifically on autobiography starts with the 1980s,⁴ and an earlier 1987 foray into the subject points explicitly to the lack of a history of BD autobiography:⁵

Oscillant, depuis ses origines, entre la satire du réel et le pur divertissement, la bande dessinée n'a guère cultivé la peinture du Moi, au contraire de la littérature.

[Swinging, from its very beginnings, between the satire of real life and pure entertainment, unlike literature the *bande dessinée* has hardly ever cultivated the art of Self-Depiction.]

-Thierry Groensteen, Introduction to "Autobiographies", page 69.

At this stage it was looking as if Autobiography and Early Bande Dessinée might be a contradiction in terms.

Although I did find little or no direct autobiography in early BD-i.e. from the nineteenth century to, say, the 1950s-it is interesting to note that the 'serious bits' that contextualised the BD element in what was a journal-based culture often were autobiographical in tone. The orientation and frenchification of *Le Journal de Mickey* came through the reader participation sections,⁶ and foremost in these was Onc' Léon's contribution. When the point to be made is an essential one, Onc' Léon slips into autobiographical mode, as in the letter from 5 May 1935, reproduced as figure 1. Through the first person anecdote of Onc' Léon's encounter with an old American millionaire and his mathematical calculations as to how many work-hours were lost due to French *formules de politesse*, he presents the very values of *Le Journal de Mickey*: Franco-American friendship, politeness, intelligence, learning as fun and business acumen.



Figure 1

Similar to that of Onc' Léon is the rôle played by Le Fureteur in *Spirou*, as in the example taken from the 5 October 1944 (figure 2), the first number to reappear after the Occupation. Le Fureteur tells of the journal's moral struggle against the enemy and the decision to suspend publication rather than collaborate. There was no choice as,

les hitlériens ont fini par comprendre que Spirou, avec son air candide, était à sa façon un agent de résistance.

[those on Hitler's side ended up understanding that Spirou, despite its innocent appearance, was in its own way working for the resistance.]

But, Le Fureteur continues, all the time that *Spirou* was 'sleeping' its readers were not forgotten. Its authors continued to answer letters, even from fans who had been deported. Le Fureteur concludes,

Ai-je besoin de répéter ce que j'ai écrit alors à mes correspondants? Vous savez bien, n'est-ce pas? que nous avons tremblé pour chacun de



Figure 2

vous. Oui, vous le savez, vous l'avez toujours su, parce que personne ne l'ignore, le *Journal de Spirou*, votre journal, n'est pas simplement un illustré, mais le lien, le trait d'union entre tous les membres d'une famille immense, de la grande famille *Spirou*.

[Need I repeat what I wrote then to my correspondents? You know full well, don't you? That we trembled for each and every one of you. Yes, you know it, you have always known it, because nobody can ignore the fact that the *Journal de Spirou*, your journal, is not just a picture-publication, but the link, the bridge between all the members of an immense family, the great *Spirou* family.]

This is the autobiography not of a single author, but of a collective body, *Spirou*, once again underlining the importance of reader identification and belonging. The words of Jean-Jacques Rousseau-"[d]ans quelque obscurité que j'aye pu vivre, si j'ai pensé plus et mieux que les Rois, l'histoire de mon ame est plus intéressante que celle des leurs"-are particularly apt in these circumstances.

There are also, at this time, examples, albethey limited, of individual artists who show aspects of autobiography in their creations. Vica is a curious case, best known for early Banania adverts and, above all, his work on the *Téméraire*- "Le Petit Nazi illustré" as Pascal Ory has called it-and associated publications. He appears to have been a Russian immigrant whose full-name was Vincent Krasouszky, Vikenty being the Russian version of Vincent and Vica its dimunitive. Vica was born in 1893, served in the Tsar's guard, and, perhaps as a result, was virulently anti-Communist and thus pro-Germany. He is said to have been pious in his orthodox faith, but nonetheless a *fêtard*. We have no trace of him after 1947.⁷



Figure 3



Figure 4

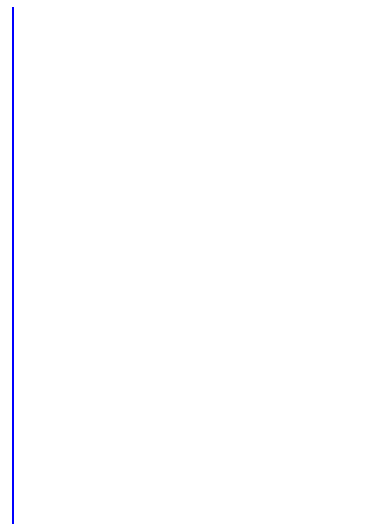


Figure 5

The autobiographical element comes in the fact that Vica's character bears his name and, although he is a sailor living in a world of fantastic animal friends rather than a serious soldier, the character is used to make weighty political points which would seem to be the opinion of the artist. Figures 3-5 show the covers of Vica's principal albums in which he takes on England, the Soviet Union and America: *Vica contre le service secret anglais* (Paris: Editions Dompol [1942?], figure 3), *Vica au paradis de l'U.R.S.S.* (Paris: Editions Dompol, [1942?], figure 4) and *Vica défie l'Oncle Sam* (Paris: Editions Coloniales et Métropolitaines, [1942?], figure 5).

The second individual case is that of Hergé and the question of whether Tintin is autobiographical. This is not the place for a detailed re-examination of this question,⁸ suffice to say that the progress of the Catholic boy-scout has much in common with that of the author, through the influences of Colonialism and Nazism on to a broadening of horizons following a friendship with the Orient. It is an interesting subject, but one that is generally well known.

To return to the notion of the journal as a collective persona, one might equally consider the immediate post-war years when the autobiographical editorial technique continued to flourish. Furthermore, this was the era of the *journal engagé* in widescale circulation, of which the Communist *Vaillant* and the Catholic *Coeurs Vaillants* are the best examples. Both these productions made heavy use of a further technique, the applied ideological use of first-person narrative in individual strips. This is of course not autobiography in the strict sense of a first-person retelling of non-fictional events in an author's life, but the technique used is that of autobiography.

To take a first example, that of "La Force de tenir", that appeared in *Coeurs Vaillants* on 11 April 1954 (pages 4-5), it is when we get to the real point of the story with the hero Marcus opposing his faith to his father's assertion that he is a true Roman—"Non, père, un chrétien simplement"—that we home in on the character, and the first-person dialogue amalgamates the fictional narrator, the voice of the journal, and, ultimately, the reader. The technique is a common one across the spectrum of ideological stances, as a further example, taken from "Mister Bep" of

Vaillant 473 (6 June 1954) indicates (figure 6). When the strip's defining message is to be presented we switch to a close up of the eponymous central character, the kindly working-class everyman turned millionaire, and it is the first-person narrative that extols the virtues of brotherly management:

La haute société d'Old River me salue bien bas, et crie au scandale parce que je traite mes gars en frères, et que je casse la croûte dans les réfectoires des ranchs ou les cantines d'usines. On m'appelle le "financier gadouilleux": certains prennent ça pour une insulte, et moi ça me flatte.

[The high society of Old River looks down its nose at me, and is scandalised by the fact that I treat my men as brothers and eat my nosh in the ranch dining halls or the factory canteens. They call me the "mucky finance man": some take that as an insult, personally I am flattered by it.]



Figure 6

It is around the same time that we find the first steps, in the French tradition at least, towards full autobiography via the self-referential BD that includes the artist in his own strips. In *Vaillant* number 462 of 21 March 1954 Gire's *Pension Radicale* centres upon an insubordinate family goat which finishes by eating the journal we are in the midst of reading. A few issues later (number 465, 11 April 1954) Gire takes the concept a little further as the artist intervenes directly (see figure 7). This would appear to be a direct forerunner of the self-referential play made famous by Marcel Gotlib in the *Rubrique-à-Brac* that was a regular feature of *Pilote* from January 1968 until December 1972.

The move into the 1970s brings us to Moebius's BD auto-interview that appeared in *Schtroumpf* number 25 of 1974 and Nikita Mandryka's *Aventures de Moi* in the first issue of the *Echo des Savanes* (1972).

This latter creation was an almost existential exploration-albeit light-hearted-of the nature and status of the artist. Here, by anybody's definition, we leave the early bande dessinée, but the notion of existentialism serves as a reminder of a final overlap between BD and autobiography, and with it a return to 'traditional' literature, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Mots* of 1964:

Au cours d'une de nos promenades, Anne-Marie s'arrêta comme par hasard devant le kiosque qui se trouve encore à l'angle du boulevard Saint-Michel et de la rue Soufflot: je vis des images merveilleuses, leurs couleurs criardes me fascinèrent, je les réclamai, je les obtins: le tour était joué: je voulus avoir toutes les semaines *Cri-Cri*, *L'Epatant*, *Les Vacances*, *Les Trois Boy-scouts* de Jean de la Hire et *Le Tour du Monde en Aéroplane* d'Arnould Galopin qui paraissaient en fascicules le jeudi. D'un jeudi à l'autre je pensais à l'Aigle des Andes, à Marcel Dunot, le boxeur aux poings de fer, à Christian l'aviateur beaucoup plus qu'à mes amis

Rabelais et Vigny.

[During one of our walks Anne-Marie stopped, as if by chance, in front of the newspaper kiosk that is still to be found at the angle of the Boulevard Saint-Michel and Rue Soufflot: the images I saw were marvellous, their loud colours fascinated me, I wanted to have them and I got them: it was in the bag: every week I wanted to have *Cri-Cri*, *L'Epatant*, *Les Vacances*, *Les Trois Boy-scouts* by Jean de la Hire and *Le Tour du Monde en Aéroplane* by Arnould Galopin, which came out in instalments every Thursday. From one Thursday to the next I spent much more time thinking about The Eagle of the Andes, Marcel Dunot the Boxer with the Iron Fists and Christian the Aviator than about my friends Rabelais and Vigny.]

-(pages 57-58)



Figure 7

Traditional literature, therefore, from Rousseau, to Gide, on to Camus and Sartre uses autobiography for its qualities of ennoblement, a form worthy of serious reflections. When such a form needs a light break, it turns to comics for its subject matter. Bande dessinée, on the other hand, from the nineteenth century onwards in its 'pre-forms,' is principally a form for *divertissement*. It can be associated with lofty ideals, such as Spirou the Resistance hero, and autobiography is then used, but in the affiliated sections. As the form becomes more ideologically engaged autobiographical techniques -- first-person narratives -- are used for making a strip's key points. It is when the form finally becomes self-aware that autobiographical BD comes into its own to lend weight to a form that can finally be taken seriously.

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Vica. *Vica contre le service secret anglais*. Paris: Editions Dompol [1942?].

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---. *Vica au paradis de l'U.R.S.S.* Paris: Editions Dompol, [1942?].


n.b. see also Baron-Carvais, Annie. "Naissance d'un genre: L'Autobiographie en bulles". In *Contre-Champ* 1 (1997). [Article not consulted: Contre-Champ is not available at the BnF and does not feature in the Catalogue Collectif de France]

Illustrations


1. Fig. 1 *La Lettre d'Onc' Léon*. *Le Journal de Mickey* (5 May 1935), page 3.
2. Fig. 2 "Le Fureteur vous dira..." *Spirou* (5 October 1944), page 2.
3. Fig. 3 *Vica contre le service secret anglais*. Paris: Editions Dompol [1942?].
4. Fig. 4 *Vica au paradis de l'U.R.S.S.* Paris: Editions Dompol, [1942?].
5. Fig. 5 *Vica défie l'Oncle Sam*. Paris: Editions Coloniales et Métropolitaines, [1942?].
6. Fig. 6 "Mister Bep." *Vaillant* (6 June 1954), page 13.
7. Fig. 7 "La Pension Radicale." *Vaillant* (11 April 1954), page 8.

Notes


¹  See, for example, Thierry Groensteen and Benoît Peeters, *Töpffer: L'Invention de la bande dessinée* (Paris: Hermann, 1984). The question of whether Töpffer can reasonably be accredited with the title of 'inventor of the bande dessinée' or whether such an accolade is no more than opportunist retrospective historicising is an ongoing debate. It is one that we will leave aside in the context of this article.


2  Situated in the rue d'Arras of Paris's fifth arrondissement, this collectors' bookshop specialises in early bandes dessinées. Philippe Mellor, together with Michel Béra and Michel Denni, also authors the authoritative *Trésors de la bande dessinée* (Paris: Editions de l'Amateur, 2002; first edition 1979). The BDM, as it is known, has no indication of early autobiographic works.


3  (Paris: Larousse, 1994 and 1998).

4  ""Les Petites Cases du Moi: L'Autobiographie en bande dessinée", " *9ème Art* 1 (1996), 58-83.

5  Groensteen, Thierry, ed., "Autobiographies", *Cahiers de la Bande Dessinée* 73 (Jan.-Feb. 1987), 69-96; *Cahiers de la Bande Dessinée* 74 (Mar.-Apr. 1987), 81-87.

6  On this subject see my ""Mickey or Le Journal de Mickey? The Birth of the Modern BD", " *Belphégor* 1 (2001).

7  For these brief elements of biography I am indebted to Claude Guillot's ""Retour sur Vica", " *Le Collectionneur de Bandes Dessinées* 70 (1992), 12-17. See also Pascal Ory, *Le Petit Nazi Illustré: "Le Téméraire"* (1943-1944) (Paris: Albatros, 1979; Paris: Nautilus, 2002).

8  See Michael Farr, *Tintin: Le Rêve et la réalité: L'Histoire de la création des aventures de Tintin* (Brussels: Moulinsart, 2001) for further details and an extensive bibliography. See also Benoît Peeters, *Le Monde d'Hergé* (Tournai: Casterman, 1991) and Pol Vandromme, *Le Monde de Tintin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), this latter being one of the first full-length studies dedicated to bande dessinée.