

O DIÁRIO DE ANNE FRANK: A ARTE DA VIDA PARA A POSTERIDADE

ANNE FRANK'S DIARY: THE ART OF LIFE FOR POSTERITY

EL DIARIO DE ANNE FRANK: EL ARTE DE LA VIDA PARA LA POSTERIDAD

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RESUMO: uma valiosa fonte de experiência humana, independentemente de tempo, lugar e perspectiva, o diário de Anne Frank revela a aurora de uma vida promissora que, apesar de não sobreviver à Solução Final nazista, consegue mostrar que a chamada 'luz no fim do túnel' pode se apresentar de muitas formas diferentes. O objetivo deste ensaio é apontar algumas das razões pelas quais o relato de Anne é relevante e transgressivo tanto em termos literários como socioculturais. Para tanto, as particularidades de sua escrita feminina subversiva são analisadas em comparação aos principais preceitos da autobiografia tradicional. Essa é decerto uma das maneiras de trazer à tona o potencial do texto de promover mudanças positivas e incentivar novas pesquisas que levem em conta a desconstrução de outras grandes narrativas.

Palavras-chave: autobiografia, diário, escrita feminina.

ABSTRACT: a valuable source of human experience, regardless of time, place and perspective, Anne Frank's diary reveals the dawn of a promising life that, despite not surviving the Nazi Final Solution, manages to show that the so-called 'light at the end of the tunnel' may present itself in many different ways. The purpose of this essay is to point out some of the reasons why Anne's account is relevant and transgressive both in literary and sociocultural terms. In order to do so, the particularities of its subversive female writing are analysed in comparison to traditional autobiography's main precepts. That certainly is one of the manners to bring to the fore this text's potential to promote cultural change for the better as well as foster new investigations taking into account the deconstruction of other master narratives.

Keywords: autobiography, diary, female writing.

RESUMEN: una valiosa fuente de experiencia humana, independientemente de tiempo, lugar y perspectiva, el diario de Anne Frank revela el alba de una vida promisoría que, a pesar de no sobrevivir a la Solución Final nazi, logra enseñar que la llamada 'luz al final del túnel' se puede presentar de muchas formas diferentes. El propósito de este ensayo es señalar algunas de las razones por las cuales el relato de Anne es relevante y transgresivo tanto en términos literarios como socioculturales. Para ello, las particularidades de su escritura femenina subversiva son analizadas en comparación con los principales preceptos de la autobiografía tradicional. Es cierto que esta es una de las maneras de dar proyección al potencial del texto de promover cambios positivos y encorajar nuevas investigaciones que tengan en cuenta la desconstrucción de otras narrativas maestras.

Palabras clave: autobiografía, diário, escritura femenina.

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*I don't want to moan about myself, on the contrary, I want to be brave*ⁱ
Anne Frank

*I pray for all Jews and all those in need*ⁱⁱ
Anne Frank

*People can tell you to keep your mouth shut,
but it doesn't stop you having your own opinion.
Even if people are still very young,
they shouldn't be prevented from saying what they think*ⁱⁱⁱ
Anne Frank

It is no doubt that *a lot* has already been written or produced about *The Diary of Anne Frank*: essays, books, films, documentaries... The list will certainly never end. However, it is also true that there will always be contributions to be made if the analysis of her memories of the hiding place dubbed the 'Secret Annexe' stems from, among other things, a different perspective, place and time. Needless to say, it is exactly by taking this precept into account that this essay proposes to offer a new and alternative reading of one of the most read life narratives in the 20th century.

From the very beginning, Anne's diary hurls the reader into quite an unfathomable world for those who have never had to endure the restrictions that overwhelming fears of the outside impose: "I wander from one room to another, downstairs and up again, feeling like a song-bird whose wings have been brutally clipped and who is beating itself in utter darkness against the bars of its cage" (FRANK, 1999, p. 96). However, what impresses yet more is how young Anne is when she starts writing this textual combination of memories, recent events and anxiety about the outcome of every single incident with(in/out) her secret address, all the time oscillating between faith and hopelessness: only thirteen years old! Actually, that is the way she finds to depict the hardships her family and the others in hiding have to go through in their last desperate attempt to escape the horrors of the Holocaust, as well as to portray the beautiful process of turning into a brave young woman forever in love with life: "I think what is happening to me is so wonderful, and not only what can be seen on my body, but all that is taking place inside" (FRANK, 1999, p. 111).

Curiously enough, this strong urge to write Anne feels at an early age is not new in the History of women's personal narratives: "I know that I can write, a couple of my stories are good, my descriptions of the 'Secret Annexe' are humorous, there's a lot in my diary that speaks" (FRANK, 1999, p. 165). Indeed, Margaret Cavendish (Duchess of Newcastle, 1623-73) herself, author of the *True Relation of My Birth, Breeding and Life*, the earliest secular autobiography written by a woman, admits to "being addicted from my childhood [...] to write with the pen [rather] than to work with a needle" (CAVENDISH, 2000, p. 57).

What makes Anne's diary stand out as an important landmark in female life writing is this indescribable atmosphere of doom and gloom she has to face after the German invasion of the

Netherlands in May, 1940, and the Nazi restless efforts to dehumanise and exterminate the Jews as part of the Final Solution policy: “[s]ome time this terrible war will be over. Surely the time will come when *we are people again*, and not just Jews” (FRANK, 1999, p. 174, *my italics*). In addition, Anne’s text is unquestionably transgressive when it comes to conforming to dominant cultural models of autobiography. After all, as Virginia Woolf states: “[...] the truth is that when we write of a woman, everything is out of place – culminations and perorations; the accent never falls where it does with a man” (WOOLF, 2005, p. 549). In terms of female writing, it is no accident in that one of its main features is precisely its potential to subvert the patriarchal order so as to foster transformations and provide women with a new sense of themselves.

As a matter of fact, Anne’s diary is a precursor in many ways in its use of self-referential writing to promote sociocultural change. Pondering over the strategic use of autobiography by those who live on the margins today, Julia Swindells states:

[a]utobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness – women, black people, working-class people – have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a ‘personal’ voice, which speaks beyond itself. [...] In this context, autobiography can appear the most direct and accessible way of countering silence and misrepresentation (SWINDELLS, 1995, p. 7).

It goes without saying that it is exactly what Anne already does back then. As a marginalized subject she is aware of the potential her text has not only to testify to the oppression her people, her family and herself suffer, but also to pave the way for political intervention in their favour: “Bolkestein, a Minister, [...] said that they ought to make a collection of diaries and letters after the war. Of course, they all made a rush at my diary immediately. Just imagine how interesting it would be if I were to publish a romance of the ‘Secret Annexe’” (FRANK, 1999, p. 161). However, Anne’s diary goes beyond empowering the Jewish people by means of their cultural inscription and recognition. In fact, Anne’s self-referential writing wreaks cultural havoc as it contributes to (de-/re-)construct in terms of form and content a genre patriarchal to the core: traditional autobiography.

To begin with, a genre whose aim is to artistically intertwine a person’s life itself with the act of writing, Western canonical autobiography is a nonfictional mode of life narrative that purports to present a relevant and trustworthy account of one’s own life whose emphasis is *only* on the individual himself. Moreover, this genre has Saint Augustine’s and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ‘confessional’ texts as role models. In other words, as Laura Marcus makes clear, the advocates of this genre believe that the authors of this sort of textual narrative should *only* be people of ‘lofty reputation’ and ‘historical importance’ (MARCUS, 1994, p. 31-32). Of course, even though Anne’s precocious talent and time would end up proving otherwise, she does not fit into either categories as

far as the Nazis and the proponents of conventional autobiography are concerned. In addition, as William Howarth sees it, “no one writes such a book [an autobiography] until he has lived out the requisite years” (HOWARTH, 1980, p. 86). However, Anne’s diary gives more than enough proof that this assertion simply cannot be taken as a rule of thumb. Actually, despite her short lifetime and the fact that the focus of her text lies mostly on the years spent in the Secret Annexe, Anne unquestionably has *a lot* of valuable life experience to share.

At any rate, Anne’s real subversion becomes patent the moment her ‘unnatural’ use of the phallic pen totally disregards what Jacques Derrida calls the ‘law of genre’:

[a]s soon as the word *genre* is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. ‘Do’, ‘Do not’, says ‘genre’, the word *genre*, the figure, the voice, or the law of genre. [...] Thus, as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity (DERRIDA, 1992, p. 224-25, *author’s italics*).

Effectively, Anne’s life story helps problematize and destabilise the definition of ‘autobiography’ precisely for the disruption of the reader’s conventionalised understanding of these regulations. And it does not take much to perceive that gender plays a major role in the process. As Mary G. Mason puts it:

[n]owhere in women’s autobiographies do we find the patterns established by the two prototypical male autobiographers, Augustine and Rousseau; and conversely male writers never take up the archetypal models of Julian, Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish, and Anne Bradstreet (MASON, 1998, p. 321).

These structuring and content differences are patent in Anne’s diary from the outset. First, as Philippe Lejeune describes in the essay “The Autobiographical Contract”, one of the main characteristics of the genre is its celebration of the autonomous individual and the universalising life story: “[a] retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (LEJEUNE, 1982, p. 193).

Although at times Anne describes herself as an uncomprehended adolescent island surrounded by a rough sea of complaining adults, her particular practice of life writing has certainly nothing to do with the master narrative of the ‘sovereign self’. As opposed to the traditional accent on ‘me’, the interaction between ‘I’ and ‘we’ is recurrent in her narrative: “seriously, it would seem quite funny ten years after the war if *we* Jews were to tell how *we* lived and what *we* ate and talked about here. Although *I* tell you a lot, still, even so, you only know very little of *our* lives” (FRANK, 1999, p. 161, *my italics*). Therefore, Anne’s text gives prominence not to the solitary self, but rather to the collective experience of all those fleeing death like her. By doing so, Anne writes at once

both herself and the Jewish people into History. With regard to this particular aspect noticeable in Anne's account, James Olney recognises "[t]hat women's autobiographies display quite a different orientation toward the self and others from the typical orientation to be found in autobiographies by men" (OLNEY, 1980, p. 17).

As a matter of fact, this idiosyncrasy of Anne's writing emanates from the so-called female 'relational autobiography'. According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, it is a term whose purpose is to typify the sort of selfhood that pervades women's life narratives as different from the radical individuality and the discourse of selfishness and egotism invariably present in men's autobiographical practices. That is, a prevailing sense of 'me' "as interdependent and identified with a community" (SMITH; WATSON, 2001, p. 201). Thus, since it belongs to someone who sees herself as only one more victim of Hitler's anti-Jewish laws, Anne's diary brings to light both the personal and the collective. All through the text, it is evident that the Jewish misfortune is an inherent part of Anne's account for she is aware that it is very much *hers* as well:

[t]hat is when the sufferings of *us* Jews really began. Anti-Jewish decrees followed each other in quick succession. Jews must wear a yellow star, Jews must hand in their bicycles, Jews are banned from trams and are forbidden to drive. Jews are only allowed to do their shopping between three and five o'clock and then only in shops which bear the placard 'Jewish shop'. Jews must be indoors by eight o'clock and cannot even sit in their own gardens after that hour. Jews are forbidden to visit theatres, cinemas, and other places of entertainment. Jews may not take part in public sports. Swimming baths, tennis courts, hockey fields, and other sports grounds are all prohibited to them. Jews may not visit Christians. Jews must go to Jewish schools, and many more restrictions of a similar kind (FRANK, 1999, p. 4-5, *my italics*).

By favouring collective solidarity, this constant empathetic interplay between 'me' and 'us', over the exclusionary practices of the solitary self, Anne may not have managed to escape death in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, but at least she was able to evade the inevitable alienation and feeling of 'isolated being' that ensues the adoption of the concept of individualism traditional autobiography endorses. In fact, it is precisely in this relational self that Anne finds a real source of strength and transformation. Eventually, it is anything but a dispirited girl that speaks: "I know that I'm a woman, a woman with inward strength and plenty of courage" (FRANK, 1999, p. 175). With respect to this concept of isolate selfhood inapplicable to women, it is also worth mentioning Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic point of view:

growing girls come to define themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate (CHODOROW, 1999, p. 169).

Obviously, if as a woman Anne has a more relational self, it should come as no surprise that her narrative likewise has a different shape in comparison to the masculinist and misogynist

traditional one. In effect, it is precisely this more fluid sense of self that makes Anne subversively interpolate fragments of others' biographies into her life story – the reason why it is indisputably dialogic: “[h]ave I ever really told you anything about our family? I don’t think I have, so I will begin now” (FRANK, 1999, p. 191).

Futhermore, what also determines significantly this transgressive form Anne’s text has is the manner her identity formation takes place. As Linda Anderson shows, besides “tak[ing] on a unifying and conservative function”, the limits of conventional autobiography also work as, according to the guardians of the genre, the only means “of alleviating the dangers and anxieties of fragmentation” (ANDERSON, 2004, p. 5). However, far from having a unitary, permanent and essentialist nature, Anne’s identity is an interminable process, always in (re)construction. It is fluid, mobile, plural, made up of changeable and sometimes even conflictual identities.

Even though every now and then the diary mentions, among others, “the ordinary Anne”, “a second Anne”, “Anne number two” and “[t]he Anne who is gentle” (FRANK, 1999, p. 182-83), perhaps the best of examples is the impression Anne gives at first that she is sexually attracted to girls: “I remember that once when I slept with a girl I had a strong desire to kiss her, and that I did so. [...] I go into ecstasies every time I see the naked figure of a woman” (FRANK, 1999, p. 111), just to contradict herself two months later: “I’m glad after all that the Van Daans have a son and not a daughter, my conquest could never have been so difficult, so beautiful, so good, if I had not happened to hit on someone of the opposite sex” (FRANK, 1999, p. 141).

Interestingly enough, this ever-shifting self of Anne’s life writing is very much in tune with Sidonie Smith’s and Julia Watson’s concept that the narrating ‘I’ of the autobiographical narrative is “neither unified nor stable. It is split, fragmented, provisional, multiple, a subject always in the process of coming together and of dispersing [...]. We can read [...] this fragmentation in the multiple voices through which the narrator speaks in the text” (SMITH; WATSON, 2001, p. 60). Hence, there is no doubt that Anne’s identification process is a key element in the fragmentation of her narrative, and she is hardly unaware of it: “[e]verything here is so mixed up, nothing’s connected any more” (FRANK, 1999, p. 176). It is worth observing that this temporarily-being-endlessly-becoming sort of identity also helps undermine hegemonic formulations of identity conventional autobiography supports as well as contributes to change dominant knowledges regarding the human subject. More importantly, despite all the Nazi efforts to make the Jews see and experience themselves as mere abject things, it is precisely the fact that identity is forever incomplete, multifaceted and context-specific that allows Anne’s narrative not only to turn into a real site of enabling self-reconstruction and self-determination, but also to inscribe all the Jews as fully human right in the midst of a system whose main goal was to dehumanise and reify them.

As soon as one realises all this, it immediately comes to the fore how empowering a form the diary is to Anne. Indeed, as Linda Anderson makes it clear:

[s]ome recent critics believe that diaries have had a particular importance for women, allowing them to become authors in private, and thus circumvent a historical prohibition. For others the 'female form' of the diary created a space where the traditional ordering of narrative and meaning could begin to be undone. [...] The unchronological and unprogressive form of the diary could be viewed, therefore, as a reflection of women's different experience, or as a deliberate strategy, an escape into a potential or protean form of subjectivity (ANDERSON, 2004, p. 34).

Nevertheless, the cultural alternatives Anne's life story offers are not over yet: as her narrative is retrospective at times and describes the 'reality' of bygone days, "I will start by sketching in brief the story of my life", and at others talks about the moment its production takes place, "here I come to the present day", not to mention the envisaging of future possibilities, "I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out" (FRANK, 1999, p. 4, 5, 220), it is certainly the case that it once more disrespects the 'law of genre' by blurring the boundaries between the subversive diary and traditional autobiography. Actually, this confusion of boundaries also takes place every time Anne inserts textual pieces of others' lives into her narrative, which makes it rather (auto)biographical for the divide between the two genres becomes more permeable and mobile: "[j]ust for a change, as we haven't talked about them for so long, I want to tell you a little discussion that went on between Mr and Mrs Van Daan yesterday" (FRANK, 1999, p. 196). Beyond the shadow of a doubt, what is crystal clear here is that whatever political power may result from these blurry borders, it undoubtedly mirrors the sort of strength women find in their more fluid sense of self, which does not amount to homogeneity at all.

Nevertheless, if Anne's account is autobiographical to some extent, it is because there still remain elements which attest to its nature in spite of all the damage she does. In fact, the introduction to the first one begins right on the cover of the book. The very title *The Diary of Anne Frank* announces from the start that there will be a convergence of identities among authorial signature, narrator and protagonist. Indeed, one of the requirements Lejeune's contract imposes (LEJEUNE, 1982, p. 193) if a piece of text is to be autobiographical.

Another important aspect has to do with intersubjective interactions which occur within the writer/reader pact as a result of the recognition of another consciousness as condition to the disclosure of the self. According to Cosslett and coauthors, intersubjectivity

implies that the narration of a life or a self can never be confined to a single, isolated subjecthood. Others are an integral part of consciousness, events and the production of a narrative. Or, put more abstractly, the narration of a self cannot be understood in isolation from an other it acknowledges, implicitly or explicitly, and with which it is in a constitutive relationship. Moreover, this other may be either a concrete individual or a generalised subject (COSSLETT *et al.* 2000, p. 4).

No wonder then that, in order to establish these processes of communicative exchange and understanding, the identification of this 'other' takes place in the very first pages of the narrative: "I want this diary itself to be my friend, and I shall call my friend Kitty" (FRANK, 1999, p. 4). Actually, as Jean Starobinski explains, the existence of this 'someone else' is fundamental to endow the narrating 'I' with legitimacy: "the 'I' is confirmed in the function of permanent subject by the presence of its correlative 'you', giving clear motivation to the discourse" (STAROBINSKI, 1980, p. 77). However, Anne is no fool, she knows very well that this interplay would end up having much more than just a fictional interlocutor: "[w]ill the reader take into consideration that when this story was written, the writer had not cooled down from her fury!" (FRANK, 1999, p. 81). And this is anything but an insignificant detail: once Anne acknowledges that she minds the opinion of a future reading public, she clearly emphasises the role of the reader in the fabrication of the anti-monologic text. After all, as Barrett Mandel puts it, "[b]ut is it not true that 'completeness' rests not in the work of literature but in the reader?" (MANDEL, 1980, p. 54).

In conclusion, what without question impels Anne to write is a mixture of her need to recover the past, apprehend better the present and at least be able to project future possibilities for her and all the Jews. By doing so, not only does she show the vulnerabilities of those hiding in the Secret Annexe, but also makes patent their strengths, resourcefulness and resilience. Indeed, the moment Anne describes in details her existence portraying herself as an object of investigation, she ends up playing the role of an observing subject and writes about something far bigger than herself, to wit life itself. That is why besides being a form of witnessing or testimony, the experience Anne's work of art and *life* depicts is not hers only anymore, but *everyone's*.

Furthermore, by living and writing against the grain, Anne contributes considerably to the transformation of a genre which historically has mocked and undervalued the female experience. In effect, erstwhile an exclusive male domain, canonical autobiography finds in mid-20th century one more landmark opposition to the standards it has always tried to enforce.

Finally, Anne's capture might have been the end of the matter for the life narrator, but that is truly not the case to her narrative. As James Olney states with reference to autobiographical texts: "the narrative is never finished, nor ever can be, within the covers of a book" (OLNEY, 1980, p. 25). Therefore, Anne's book can be thought of as an open-ended narrative to be finished both by the historians, who have done research on what 'really' happened to her after the arrest of all the hiders, and each one of her readers who, in a certain way, go on (re)constructing her narrative up to the present day.

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ⁱ Frank: 1999, p. 149.

ⁱⁱ Frank: 1999, p. 113.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frank: 1999, p. 137.