
Gudrun Piller

Historical research expects from self-narratives a particularly direct access to history. Self-narratives, as sources that supposedly depict actual experience, become authentic and direct. This is especially the case for investigations into the history of the body. For example, in his essay on plague experiences based on self-narratives, Otto Ulbricht explains that one “must first and foremost draw on primary sources that actually retain such experiences.”² Consequently, he assesses medical treatises and manuals as well as literary texts as “methodologically unacceptable” for investigating experience.³ For Ulbricht, the value of self-narratives over other sources is their greater actuality in describing subjective experience. In a similar way, Jens Lachmund and Gunnar Stollberg appeal in their research to the greater authenticity of self-narratives in describing experiences with illness.⁴ The same assumption underlies Patrick Barbier’s claim that nothing is known of the sexual lives of castrati because “none of them left behind autobiographical writings.”⁵ And Philipp Sarasin sees the “junctions between the symbolic and the real,” the rifts in which the real becomes tangible, foremost in ego-documents, thus also in self-narratives.⁶

This assessment – met by Sarasin rather cautiously – conceals several methodological dangers. It can lead to interpretations that overestimate the referential content and the text’s verisimilitude, and it tends to ignore the character of their construction. Regarding the history of the body, Kathleen

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¹ This article was translated by Hannah Elmer. It summarizes some of the results of my dissertation: Gudrun Piller, Private Körper. Spuren des Leibes in Selbstzeugnissen des 18. Jahrhunderts (Selbstzeugnisse der Neuzeit, vol. 17), (Cologne, Weimar and Vienna: 2007).
³ Ibid., 11.
Canning has concluded that discourse history treats the body as an abstraction, while works on bodily experience demonstrate the opposite problem: "they are often overly concrete, undertheorised or cast too simply."  

The following article is concerned with the various uses self-narratives can have for the history of the body and how these can be applied in a methodologically sensible way. It thus focuses primarily on methodological and theoretical problems. As can be clearly seen in the introductory sentences and quotations, works of body history that are based on self-narratives lead directly into the debate over the term 'experience'. Therefore, the following text also attempts to see where a self-narrative-based history of the body could be positioned in the discussion about experience versus discourse history. The starting point of my thesis was the lapidary question of how authors of self-narratives in the eighteenth century regarded the body. The main body of sources was formed by approximately fifty hand-written and unedited eighteenth-century self-narratives – eight of which were composed by women – and which, until recently, lay unnoticed in the archives of German-speaking Switzerland.

Formally, the texts I addressed were autobiographies, longer curricula vitae, house books, family books, diaries, annual notes, notebooks in yearly calendars or self-narratives concentrating on, for example, raising children or a failing marriage in which the forms might intertwine. Self-narratives vary so much in form, range, content and function that the genre of 'self-narrative' is often defined through a listing of its subgroups. Definitions that can encompass all texts are hard to find unless they are based on very general statements. For instance, Benigna von Krusenstjern claims that a constitutive criterion of self-narratives is that they contain a certain degree of "self-thematizing by an explicit self." The advantage of such an open definition is that mixed forms, fragmentary, incoherent and atypical texts are not excluded, which is normally the result of more stringent definitions, such as a restrictive concept of 'autobiography'. Even in more recent investigations of German self-writing,

8 The texts were inventoried in the context of the project "Deutschschweizerische Selbstzeugnisse (1500–1800) als Quellen der Mentalitätsgeschichte" funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. The project was lead by Kaspar von Greyerz. Regarding the project, cf. Sebastian Leutert and Gudrun Piller, "Deutschschweizerische Selbstzeugnisse (1500–1800) als Quellen der Mentalitätsgeschichte. Ein Forschungsbericht," *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 49 (1999), 197–221.