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UDC: 821.111(73).09 FejH3 E. U.

■ TEXTBOOK AND FAIRY TALE:  
THE PITFALLS OF DIDACTICISM IN  
*THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE PITTMAN*  
BY ERNEST J. GAINES

## INTRODUCTION

Written in the guise of an ethnological interview, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* presents us with a fictitious life story anchored in historical reality. At the diegetic level, the novel is made up of Miss Jane Pittman's memories, collected and edited by a teacher for his young students. It is presented as a didactic creation to introduce Jane and her people in a history class. Such an endeavor is an ideological statement, an act of rebellion against official programs. For Miss Jane is an illiterate old woman who was born a slave, witnessed the rise of the emancipation movement, and whose experience is largely kept from young Americans.

In a 1974 interview, Gaines thus summarized the main reasons for his choice of subject matter: "Much of our story has not been told [...] we came to this country as slaves [...] Much of this has not been written about sympathetically." (Lowe 1995: 74) The whole body of Gaines's epitext testifies to a total identity of purpose between his and the teacher's enterprise as presented in the introduction. That is why to a great extent "the editor" is to be viewed as Gaines's persona: the author, too, is a pedagogue.

To be effective, didacticism requires a delineated objective in sight, easily identifiable by the student/reader. The entire work is subjected to that ultimate goal, which often entails simplifying—if not oversimplifying—complex situations. In the case of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, the success of the pedagogue's effort largely lies in his ability to arouse the reader's identification with the heroine. Her testimony being so poignant and her psychology so sketchy, however, Miss Jane Pittman is likely to appear as a type, with whom we are led to identify mostly at an emotional level.

*The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* raises key issues in the field of the writing of the self insofar as its narrative strategies blur the boundaries between fiction, biography and autobiography. It thus brings to the fore some of the contradictions inherent to the genre. In the context of the popular and critical success of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*<sup>1</sup> these contradictions have been greatly overlooked;

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this article proposes a reappraisal of a book whose literary form seems driven by an essentially didactic purpose.

Since the novel's didacticism stems from a clearly revisionist trend aimed at challenging canonical American history, it will first be necessary to point out some of the manipulative processes brought into play in an effort to transform the raw data of a life story into an exemplary "autobiography." It will then become apparent that, paradoxically, the narrative strategy giving textual voice and identity to an illiterate ex-slave may well turn out both emancipative and infantilizing for the heroine and the reader alike.

## 1. THE CREATION OF AN EXEMPLARY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

### 1.1. "Miss Jane Pittman" as a didactic tool

The introduction makes it clear that the reason for the editor's undertaking is to rectify the contents of history textbooks: "Miss Jane is not in them" (Gaines 1971: v). The urgency that underlies his initiative arises from the constraints of the school timetable and probably from the inevitable nearing of Miss Jane's death; the initiative also coincides with a political context in tune with such an endeavor. To a great extent, the civil rights protests of the early 1960s were about black Americans striving to get a sense of identity through a coming to terms with the enslavement of their ancestors. As one of those ancestors, Miss Jane is endowed with natural authority; her testimony should be able to shed light on their oppressed past, as well as to provide teachings on how to fight the contemporary social inequality.

Miss Jane's modesty makes her a reluctant witness ("each time I asked her she told me there was no story to tell" [Gaines 1971: v]) and an unwilling teacher. She mostly contents herself with narrating events and hardly ever analyzes her motivations. Since the interviewer chose to conceal his questions, the final text flows as if Miss Jane were talking in structured fashion. In the manner of slave narratives, the end result is chronological, told in a vernacular recognizable as originating from popular southern culture, but sufficiently watered down to be understood by an implied reader not necessarily conversant with a dialect so geographically and historically circumscribed. The obvious structuring and linguistic processing of Miss Jane's original narrative draws the attention to the manipulative role of the teacher, who brings together the functions of interviewer, editor—and, actually, co-author. For his is avowedly not a scrupulous scientific method: he announces in his introduction that he made numerous fundamental choices to compensate for what he thought were shortcomings on Miss Jane's part: "there were times when others carried the story for her ... Much of [what she said] was too repetitious and did not follow a single direction" (Gaines 1971: vi, vii). Such choices are made invisible throughout the text which, despite its polyphonic nature, seems to stem from a single voice.

The diegetic contract thus offered by the introduction is only apparently of a scientific nature. By drawing our attention to the creation of the text it warns us that if what follows is a didactic work, it is also necessarily an esthetic construct aimed at creating the illusion of the truth:

autobiography written as a collaboration [...] reminds us that what is “true” is in itself an artefact and that the “author” is the creation of a contract. The *division of labour* between two “people” (at least) discloses the multiplicity of the parties at work in the process of autobiographical writing, as well as in any kind of writing. Far from imitating the unity of authentic autobiography, it underlines its oblique, calculated character. (Lejeune 1980: 235)<sup>2</sup>

Although Lejeune is here referring to non fictional autobiography, his theory proves all the more relevant in our study of a fictional assisted autobiography in which the interviewer-editor himself discloses some aspects of his manipulative power in his introduction. In essence, these preliminaries did not originate from Miss Jane; they are not even the first demonstration of the editor’s omnipotence: the very title of the narrative asserts the old lady’s ownership of her memories while depriving her of any authorship: “*The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*” cannot really be the autobiography of the ever so modest Miss Jane Pittman, who is nowhere quoted as demanding a third person title for her first person narrative.

This “Miss Jane Pittman,” then, is mostly a didactic tool destined to bypass some of the subjectivity inherent to any individual account, in an attempt at transforming the original private story into a more generalized one, deemed better fit for classroom teaching. To a great extent, thus putting her at a distance while giving the impression that she is speaking in her own voice partakes of a process granting Miss Jane—and, consequently, all the people with an analogous background—exemplary status. In that respect, the editor-teacher introduces new figures in the school curriculum and contributes to broaden the minds of his students. On the other hand, he does so by providing yet another simplistic topos canonizing the black slave as an American icon, alongside the consecrated Founding Fathers.

## 1.2. A conventional textbook?

From the declaration of didactic intent in its introduction down to each event of Miss Jane’s life and the very structuring of those events, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is given the major characteristics of a textbook. Gaines left no identifiable milestone unturned when it came to selecting the major episodes of his heroine’s life, which spans from the end of the Civil War to just before John F. Kennedy’s assassination. Most of these milestones turn out to be very familiar landmarks and figures of American history (slavery, the Ku Klux Klan, scalawags, Frederick Douglass, Lincoln, Huey Long, the two world wars, Martin Luther King and the protest movements of the 1950s and 1960s, etc.). This strategy leaves very little to the reader’s imagination or conjecture and gives a hint of the univocal reading ascribed to *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. “I wanted twelve things that could have happened state-wide that a 110 year old woman might be able to recall” (Lowe 1995: 94-95). Besides the obviousness and predictability of most of those events, their very structuring confirms an author’s iron grip upon what is supposed to be the rambling of an old woman. Although the presence of an introduction is quite common in all types of books, the conspicuous heading “Introduction”

undeniably gives a hint of the conventional approach governing the entire structure. The division of Miss Jane's account into four "Books" of equal length demonstrates the arbitrary carving up of her life story into four periods of equal importance, thus inducing the belief that Miss Jane's life story follows some immanent, logical course and, as such, is the vector of unmistakable teachings. The use of transparent titles for each section ("Book One: The War Years," "Book Two: Reconstruction," "Book Three: The Plantation," "Book Four: The quarters") provides a reassuring entrance into the carefully marked-out map of Miss Jane's life odyssey. Subdivided into short chapters also bearing self-explanatory titles ("Soldiers," "Freedom," "Heading North," etc.), the body of the text is further made reader-friendly. This paratextual device is characteristic of didactic works striving not to scare away the reader with a limited attention span, while making sure they will not miss the point. What is more, this creates a welcome sense of anticipation: the suspenseful "Massacre," for instance, announces the key event in the opening chapter and at the same time is likely to stimulate the failing interest of many a distracted reader.

Despite its obvious advantages, the subdivision pattern is also likely to prove tiresome because of its predictability and may eventually turn counterproductive. Revealingly, the fourth "book" does not follow such a strict framework; visually, Jane's narrative flow goes unhindered, emancipated, as it were, from the tutelary presence of the editor. The latter changes his structural strategy in the last quarter of the book, relinquishing his tight control and leaving the story unfinished, with a "Conclusion" conspicuous by its absence. This structural break coincides with a noticeable change in Miss Jane, who has by now grown much more independent and rebellious. The relative emancipation of her narrative reflects the changes that have occurred among the inhabitants of the quarters. She has gained the status of torchbearer and her life is synonymous with the fight for freedom of her entire people. Since this fight is left in the making, the apparently broken structure of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* turns out to remain meaningful till the very end; there is no conclusion to Miss Jane's "autobiography" because "Miss Jane's story is all of their stories, and their stories are Miss Jane's" (Gaines 1971: viii).

## 2. A FAIRY TALE PATTERN

### 2.1. The infantilizing of Miss Jane

The artificial relationship created by the editor's technique for unearthing and gathering Miss Jane's memories raises the type of ideological and psychological questions alluded to by Lejeune:

*curiosity* urges us to explore an unknown civilization in the midst of our own [...], and which often does not "know" itself.

Any real-life experience is thus collected in an ethnological perspective and becomes an object in the eyes, the ears or the discourse of a subject who handles it according to their own identity or their own interest. The survey apparently allows

the “personal” discourse of the interviewees to become the organizing subject of their own lives, but in reality their discourse becomes a field of study or an object fit for consumption (for delectation) by somebody else, by the one who has the power to read and write. Such intervention is at once a form of rescue or help, and a form of violation or voyeurism, of misuse of power. [...] virtually all investigators and writers strive to [...] limit as much as possible the potentially appalling or condescending aspect of the relationship induced by the survey, to soften the domination that sustains their approach. (Lejeune 1980: 269)<sup>3</sup>

The seeming absence of the editor in the body of the text, induced primarily by the first person narration, leads the reader to believe that Miss Jane controls the direction of her narrative and, consequently, has acquired sufficient insight to assess her life progress. Lejeune has demonstrated that the ethnological type of interview establishes a pattern of ascendancy of the interviewer over the interviewee. In the case of a fictional interview of a very old woman by a—necessarily—much younger person, this situation is akin to a reversal of the adult-child relationship: the teacher takes on the role of the omnipotent grownup by the sheer authority of his ability to write and, at the age of 108 or 109, Miss Jane achieves the paradoxical status of a little girl whose story telling is viewed by adults with a mixture of admiration and benevolent condescension. To crown it all, her barrenness and her unmarried state combine to prevent her full integration in the world of grownups and symbolically make her a perpetual child. This explains why her account has so much in common with a fairy tale, whose diegesis revolves around either a child or a child-like character, but is told by an omniscient narrator belonging to the adult world.

## 2.2. A flat character?

Fairy tales were originally folktales, adapted by aristocrats as literary entertainment; for practical purposes, most of the critical apparatus encompasses the form of the popular tale in the general heading of “fairy tale.” Ironically, fairies are usually absent from such narratives, which probably make up the earliest form of popular literature. The fairy tale is a story of growing up mostly designed for children, but its timeless, universal concerns also encompass adults’ unresolved questionings. It is the didactic genre par excellence, for it presents children with the spectacle of fundamental problems linked to their admission into the adult world, while providing them with adequate ways of dealing with potentially traumatic experiences.

At the diegetic level, Miss Jane’s story is designed to teach young students the hidden side of their collective origin. In its ultimate form as *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, the goal is identical and more general, for it may act as a mind-opener to adults. The paradox is that, in fairy tale fashion, the heroine is brought to life only with a scant description and a relatively superficial personality, as though she did not deserve special interest. She is the ever victimized yet resourceful black woman, who has managed to keep her dignity throughout many adversities: a fairy tale-like stock character we have repeatedly encountered in literature and cinema.

In harmony with the fairy tale pattern, Miss Jane is not a heroine by virtue of the progressive revelation of her psychology. She starts out as a person in the making and acquires her individuality by the way she copes with her successive ordeals. The editor's preface, however, presents Miss Jane as a real life character belonging to contemporary history and her adventures are set within a clearly defined historical background. This realistic framework is fundamentally different from the paradigmatic "Once upon a time" device, conceived to induce an immediate suspension of disbelief. Yet such discrepancies do not rule out *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* as a latter-day fairy tale, for society has been efficient at blotting slavery out of collective memory, and many readers will probably find Miss Jane's 1930s Louisiana alien to their environment, as exotic as fairyland. Incidentally, his admirers called Huey Long "the Kingfish" and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* does present him as a benevolent ruler striving to check the villainy of the merciless southern aristocrats feeding upon their defenseless slaves.

### 2.3. Adherence to and departure from the canon

The fairy tale quality of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is made apparent right from the visual presentation of the Bantam volume, whose title pages of each of the four "books" are adorned with old fashioned illustrations strongly reminiscent of many popular collections. It is enough, for instance, to peruse a recent Wordsworth edition of the classic *English Fairy Tales* to notice striking similarities, not only in the quality of the paper (which is probably incidental), but mostly in Arthur Rackham's renowned illustrations, created at the beginning of the twentieth century.

More importantly, the structure of Miss Jane's account of growing up turns out to be quite close to Vladimir Propp's pattern as theorized in his ground breaking *Morphology of the Folktale* (published in Russian in 1928 and translated at the end of the 1950s). According to Propp, folktales are mostly based on action. They vary only to a certain extent, and invariably involve the same type of characters who always perform the same type of actions, which he calls "functions." Each tale begins with an initial situation, in which members of the family and the hero are introduced; from then on, all the structural elements fall into thirty-one functions, numbered accordingly. The characters may be numerous, but the functions they represent are only a few; this explains the multiformity of the fairy tale as well as its invariability.

The didacticism of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* owes a lot to the textual mechanics brought to light by Propp, and a thorough analysis of Gaines's novel in the light of that theory would prove illuminating. At this point, however, this article may only present the case in a nutshell. The short chapters that make up the first three quarters of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* divide up the text into identifiable units whose main functions the reader can hardly miss. Such functions do coincide with Propp's mechanics: "Soldiers" presents the heroine and her environment, thus providing the initial situation, then "Freedom" introduces Function 2 (Interdiction), in which Miss Jane is warned not to go to Ohio. Her stubbornness makes her violate the interdiction, since she joins the group led by Big Laura in "Heading North" with a view to getting there anyway. This corresponds to Propp's Function 3 (Transgression),

and naturally leads to function 8 in the following chapter, entitled “Massacre.” Propp insists that function 8 is the most important, for it gives a tale its major impulse. The slaughter of the party by patrollers actually combines the two possibilities provided for by Function 8 and its offshoot, Function 8a. Both deal with the notion of lack—either from the outside (as when the villain harms a family member) or from the inside (when the protagonist needs or desires something). In “Massacre” Miss Jane’s companions, her symbolic relatives, get killed and she is now looking for a surrogate family in Ohio with even greater motivation. On her way, she comes across several adults who get her out of embarrassing situations; they fulfill the function of the helper who aids the protagonist at a pivotal moment. Chief among them are the Yankee from the Federal Government who pays the ferry fare in “Shelter for a Night” and takes them to a refuge; the hunter who feeds them before vanishing as if by magic in “The Hunter” and, in “The Old Man,” the old man who also gives them food, who warns Jane of the dangers ahead and tries to show her the way on his map—just before the two children meet Job, yet another helper, who also feeds them and leads them to another shelter. Miss Jane’s repeated encounters with the evils of segregation leave a physical imprint characteristic of the marking resulting from the struggle of the fairy tale protagonist against the villain (Functions 16 and 17); following that battle, the principal character either gets a scarf or a ring, or a physical mark. Miss Jane got the latter and insists such a feature is typical of her entire people:

“I have a scar on my back I got when I was a slave. I’ll carry it to my grave. You got people out there with this scar on their brains, and they carry that scar to their grave. The mark of fear [...] is not easily removed.” (Gaines 1971: 242)

At the end of the novel, Robert Samson stands for all despotic white planters. He is the arch villain of the didactic tale that has been unfolding up to the climactic scene of the very last page, as he finds himself face to face with Miss Jane and the other inhabitants of the quarters, upon whom he can no longer impose his will. Following Propp’s pattern, this defeat corresponds to Function 18, and logically leads to Miss Jane’s ultimate transfiguration (i.e. Function 29) as the leader of the protesters.

The fairy tale analogy is carried even further by a few conspicuous stylistic similarities, as exemplified by the quasi identity between a passage from the Grimms’ famed “Little Snow White” and the end of the first chapter of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*:

“She [the stepmother] called a huntsman, and said, ‘Take the child away into the forest; I will no longer have her in my sight.’”<sup>4</sup>

“‘Take her to the swamps and kill her,’ my mistress said. ‘Get her out of my sight.’” (Gaines 1971: 10)

As the biography of an adult in the making, a fairy tale presents an essentially individual response to the hardships of life; the psychological emancipation it depicts is first and foremost a private affair and social implications are secondary. The completeness of Miss Jane’s transformation at the end of her journey of initiation contrasts with the incompleteness of the new task she finds herself entrusted with. Contrary to what is supposed to occur at the end of a fairy tale, none of her concrete problems are eventually



resolved: her beloved Jimmy is dead, the success of a protest planned in Bayonne is not guaranteed, and Robert Samson and his kind are still very much in command. A fairy tale proclaims the restoration of an Edenic beginning or the advent of a new, ideal and atemporal life; *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* performs cannot hint at any pastoral beginning to the ex-slaves' American past, and merely provides a glimmer of hope for a better future. It uses the pattern of the fairy tale and subverts the latter's purpose. For the true nature of the heroine's problems is not her temporary inadequacy but her oppressive environment, which providence and strength of will are powerless to overthrow. *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* may be an individual's life story, but the moral it is meant to bring home is essentially ideological: younger generations must become acquainted with their collective past so as to engage in political action.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Though Gaines declared that he "didn't have any political thought in mind in terms of using a historical novel as a vehicle to rewrite American history," (Gaines 1998) *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* was written in times of great political protests, with a view to contributing to the reassessment of the Afro American experience. It does so without ever resorting to inflated rhetoric, but not without falling into the pitfalls inherent to any militant discourse, bent on efficacy in convincing the reader—often at the cost of psychological realism and complexity. The systematic lack of access to Miss Jane's thoughts leaves us with a flat character undergoing a series of peripeteia in fairy tale fashion, leading to a conventional final transfiguration scene. Miss Jane is so carefully devised to be a composite of her generation that she is not allowed much individuality, reduced to a few easily identifiable traits: sauciness, stubbornness, independence, resilience, self-sacrifice, etc. Any potentially controversial idiosyncrasy seems to have been blotted out; even her idiolect is hardly distinguishable from the local dialect.<sup>5</sup> Such a strategy befits the didactic purpose of the persona of the teacher/editor, and has indeed proved rewarding in such a context: "his stories are so eminently teachable, so appealing and successful as classroom texts" (Doyle 2002: 23). Evidently, Miss Jane's status as a torchbearer has reached beyond the diegetic level, to win eminence as a politically correct Afro American icon.

- 1 *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* was immediately successful: by mid 1975 850,000 paperback copies and over 26,000 hardback copies had been sold. By 1986 it had been reprinted over 28 times and translated into German, Dutch, Swedish, Japanese, Russian and Spanish. The novel was nominated for both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. In 2007 it was put on the curriculum of the *agrégation*, the high-level competitive examination for English teachers in France.
- 2 L'autobiographie composée en collaboration [...] rappelle que le « vrai » est lui-même un artefact et que l'« auteur » est un effet de contrat. La *division du travail* entre deux « personnes » (au moins) révèle la multiplicité des instances impliquées dans le travail d'écriture autobiographique comme dans toute écriture. Loin de mimer l'unité de l'autobiographie authentique, elle met en évidence son caractère indirect et calculé. (Lejeune 1980: 235, my translation).
- 3 La *curiosité* pousse à explorer une civilisation inconnue au sein même de notre société [...], et qui souvent ne se « connaît » pas elle-même.  
Tout vécu se trouve donc collecté dans une perspective ethnologique, et se trouve constitué comme objet dans le regard, l'écoute ou le discours d'un sujet qui le prend en charge en fonction de sa propre identité,



de son propre intérêt. Le discours « personnel » des enquêtés, auquel l'enquête propose en apparence l'occasion de devenir le sujet organisateur de leur propre vie, devient en fait champ d'étude ou produit de consommation (de délectation) pour un autre, celui qui a le pouvoir d'écrire et de lire. En même temps qu'elle est une forme de sauvetage ou d'aide, l'intervention est un acte de viol ou de voyeurisme, une forme d'abus de pouvoir. [...] presque tous les enquêteurs et écrivains s'emploient [...] à atténuer au maximum ce que pourrait avoir d'odieux ou de condescendant la relation d'enquête, à estomper le rapport de domination qui fonde leur démarche. (My translation).

- 4 Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "Little Snow-White," *Household Tales: Vol. XVII, Part 2*. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909-14 The Harvard Classics. Available at <http://www.bartleby.com/17/2/25.html> [02. 01. 2009].
- 5 Michlin aptly mentions "an apparently involuntary stylistic weakness of this *speakerly* novel: that so many *different* voices turn to the *same* rhetoric" (Michlin 2005: 125). She quickly dismisses such a potential shortcoming, however, by attributing the flattening out of the voices to a deliberate narrative technique: "Since Gaines undoubtedly realized this as he wrote, the only explanation is that all the voices turn into one because we hear them through Miss Jane's ventriloquizing, and that he exhibits this dimension by having Miss Jane modify these other voices as she supposedly echoes them." (Michlin 2005: 125) This argument relativizes Miss Jane's skill as a storyteller, for if she does make up a "one-woman orchestra" (Michlin 2005: 126), this orchestra turns out to be made up of only one instrument.

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## SUMMARY

### "TEXTBOOK AND FAIRY TALE: THE PITFALLS OF DIDACTICISM IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE PITTMAN BY ERNEST J. GAINES"

*The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* has a clear aim in sight. It is to challenge canonical American history by creating an exemplary "autobiography." The interviewer-editor's manipulation of the voice of an illiterate ex-slave is all the more efficacious as it is subtle and paved with good intentions. Such a pedagogical enterprise, however, involves conventional narrative choices which paradoxically end up infantilizing a very old woman and transforming her life story into a latter-day fairy tale.

**KEYWORDS:** Autobiography, biography, slave narrative, fairy tale, folk tale, ideology, didacticism, history, slavery.