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## *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year* as Louise Erdrich's Self-Portrait

*The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year (BJ)*, Louise Erdrich's first major work of nonfiction, was published in 1995. For some reasons, it did not seem to draw so much readerly attention as her previous fictional works,<sup>1</sup> nor did it incite a substantial body of critical appraisals or commentaries, which may seem surprising given the general interest in Native autobiographies. Labeled parenting/memoir, *The Blue Jay's Dance* was presented as personal reflections of a woman, mother, and writer on pregnancy, birth, and caring for an infant, a statement against the stereotypical portrayal of women in their domestic environment, against the infantilization of women, and against the clichés concerning women and parenthood permeating Western culture. Because of the autobiographical traits and origins of this account, the book was generally construed as a kind of autobiography – even though its time span is limited to one year and the “story” does not really concern the singular events of an individual's life. Most likely, the lack of success and the difficulties readers and critics have faced in their responses to the book result from the failure to identify *The Blue Jay's Dance's* generic matrix. This failure is related to mis-directing critical attention, i.e., focusing on the temporal axis of the work-as-autobiography instead of the spatial axis it is build upon as an auto-portrait.

Discussing the genre of autobiography and the history of literature, Philippe Lejeune declares that literary works are always created and received in a relation to some exemplary work (57). All new texts are, therefore, set against what Hans Robert Jauss terms a horizon of expectations (Lejeune 67-68), which in the case of Native American self-referential writing has been established by N. Scott Momaday's *The Names*. This acclaimed memoir came into being as a culmination, at a given point in his life, of the author's way toward self-understanding, and the narrative identity worked out therein is the end result of temporal movement, although grasped instantaneously by the imaginative act. On the other hand, Erdrich's circumscribing of her identity, while necessarily concerned with time and temporal elements, is constructed primarily on the spatial basis,

<sup>1</sup> By 1995 Erdrich had already published her tetralogy with the highly acclaimed and best-selling *Love Medicine*, for which she received a number of awards, e.g. The National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction in 1984, the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters award for Best First Novel, or the *L.A. Times* award for best novel of the year.

*hic et nunc*. Whereas Momaday offers the means to read his account indicating on the title page that it is a memoir, Erdrich describes hers as “a birth year.” This caption, first of all, emphasizes a relatively short time span her reflections apparently deal with and one definitely too short for an autobiography. Moreover, when viewed against the all-encompassing screen of time – even that of a person’s life – a year is just a point, a dot, a spatial element graspable at a glance. Birth as an event portrayed against the screen of spatially limited time appears to function like perspective in spatial arts; an element providing focus and directing viewer’s gaze. The “birth year” subtitle alone relates Erdrich’s linear and temporal written work to the spatial art of painting and portraying. It echoes Erdrich’s preoccupation with spatiality and picturing that can be identified in her fictional works making up the Little No Horse saga<sup>2</sup> and, more importantly for the present discussion, it lets her inscribe the work, which is apparently devoid of the ethnic sign, into the continuity of American Indian personal narratives.

Self-portrait and autobiography are often confused and sometimes, as in the case of Erdrich’s non-fictional work, are not even differentiated. Philippe Lejeune defines the autobiography as a retrospective prose narrative in which a real-life person presents his or her individual life, emphasizing the history of his/her personality or self. The elements decisive for classifying a work an autobiography are the sameness of the author and the narrator as well as the sameness of the narrator and the main protagonist (22). From the configurational perspective, therefore, the dominant of the autobiography is historical, temporal, and linear. In contrast, as Lejeune himself suggests, the narrative dominant of the auto-portrait is thematic, logical, or analogical – its configuration is spatial.<sup>3</sup> Whereas Lejeune concentrated on the temporally-determined genre of autobiography, whose *locus classicus* is Rousseau’s *Confessions*, the self-portrait, its sister genre dating back to Montaigne’s *Essais*, was studied by Michel Beaujour and described in his article “The Autobiography and Auto-portrait” (1977). The most characteristic thematic element of this genre as defined by Beaujour is epitomized in St. Augustine’s formula, “I am not going to tell you what I have done and achieved but I am going to tell you who I am” (319).

Before attempting to identify who Erdrich says she is, it must be stressed that who one is or thinks to be is not an issue open to an individual. Beaujour states that the author of a self-portrait never knows where he or she is heading and that what auto-portraitists finally come up with depends on categories provided by their culture and tradition. Saying who the author is, self-portraits make use of different culturally valid and specific

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of spatiality, pictorial elements, and impressionistic techniques in the Little No Horse saga see Skwarska.

<sup>3</sup> Lejeune notes that most autobiographical accounts include self-portraying parts as well, and *vice versa* (184).

identity-forming categories and strategies. Needless to say, in Erdrich's case such strategies must necessarily be both Western and Native American; however, the way she answers the question "Who am I?" is to a significant extent rooted in and influenced by her American Indian descent. According to Arnold Krupat, "Native Americans tend to construct themselves not as individuals but as persons" (210). This is clearly Erdrich's goal. In "Dedication and Household Map," an introduction to her book, Erdrich specifies the roles that her reflections concern, namely "what it is to be a parent," "a writer," and "a woman" (*BJ* ix, x). Already in this foreword she hints at another significant feature of Native American and female identity constructions and autobiographies,<sup>4</sup> that is, their relational or synecdochic orientation.<sup>5</sup> Offering "a thumbnail sketch of [her] household set up.... *When this book was written*" (ix, emphasis added),<sup>6</sup> she begins with her immediate family and moves outward to her and her husband's families living elsewhere, including in this picture the place where she lives and the animals.

From the Western point of view Native American accounts of the self are often perceived as fragmented. In her study of American Indian autobiographical forms Wong says that it is so because they are usually event-oriented. What or which events are deemed important and meaningful, moreover, is culture specific (*Sending* 17). The event Erdrich's reflections center on is birth extended to comprise the pregnancy and infant-care. While this "most involuntary work we do" (*BJ* 42) is one of the two experiences common to all living organisms and the one which is primary, conditioning and allowing for the other one, death, Erdrich states that "in our western and westernized culture women's labor is devalorized beginning with Genesis" and that women are "culturally stripped of any moral claim to strength or virtue in labor" (35). Erdrich's question, "why is no woman's labor as famous as the death of Socrates?," seems to refer to Beaujour's argument that the events of an individual's life in the self-portrait are always shadowed by the culture's images and that the figures of Christ and Socrates at the moment of death are the two most often employed in the Western genre of auto-portrait (335-36).

<sup>4</sup> As far as identity formation strategies are concerned, both autobiographies and auto-portraits can be treated *ensemble* since the two genres only differ in this respect in their configurational dominant.

<sup>5</sup> Arnold Krupat declares that "[t]he centrality of the self to Western autobiography has no close parallel in Native American autobiography" and, to differentiate between identity constructions in Western and Native autobiographical narratives, he proposes a distinction based on figures of language, defining the former as metonymic and the latter as synecdochic. The metonymic construction, he explains, follows the part-to-part model and an individual's self is constructed as different and separate from other individuals, whereas the synecdochic one is based on the part-to-whole model and the sense of self is constructed in relation to a collective social unit. "The preference for synecdochic models of the self" in Native American autobiographies, he writes, "has relations to the oral techniques of information transmission typical of Native American cultures" (201, 212, 216).

<sup>6</sup> The phrase emphasizes again the spatial and pictorial focus of Erdrich's work, saying more or less that it is how it "looked" at that particular moment in time.

The historical problem inherent in writing birth narratives – women’s lack of voice or education – coupled with the want of appropriate language and exemplary descriptions of the physicality and drama of labor result in the fact that this basic and most fundamental experience has neither been described or narrativized nor granted due attention. What Erdrich inscribes in her book is thus a new *locus* in Western literature. She turns inside out the tradition with its icons – dying Socrates and dying Christ – and opposes the implied finality, teleology, and closure of the death image. She chooses to focus on the woman, on “guarding and giving life rather than death” (*BJ* 146), the moment of birth of life, the origins, the beginning, the repeatedness and the continuity – features characteristic of Native American outlook,<sup>7</sup> and attempts to work out appropriate language for such a description. “Every birth is profoundly original and yet plotted a billion times” (*BJ* 46), writes Erdrich and tries to describe it from as many angles as possible. She refers to the physical and physiological levels of each labor – hospitals, blood, surgery tools, pain, effort, the body’s tremendous work, the perfect or imperfect division of cells, DNA, chance and order, nature. Then she focuses on mental deliberations connected with creating a new “self,” the need of closeness and intimacy, the desire to remain one with the baby and the necessity to let go, the choices to be made when one has a baby. And, finally, she points to the difficulties inherent in trying to give an account of something that can hardly be described – “bending the bow too great for a woman’s strength (50).

While birth in itself and its unwritten history is what Erdrich focuses on in her work, it is also what provides her with an image or metaphor for defining her self in relation to people, place, and the activity of writing. Birth implies both bondage and release, the cutting of ties. First of all it allows the writer to establish her self and thus herself in relation to other women. “We are all bound... the shining presence behind the net” (*BJ* 141), writes Erdrich referring to the veils behind which women have been forced in our culture. On the one hand, she writes, these veils are like prison bars, symbols of incarceration and obstacles women encounter in life; on the other, however, they may become something of an umbilical cord, “primary cords” (141) between women, providing them with history and relations to all other women: “We are all in need of the ancient nourishment. And if we walk slowly without losing our connection to one another, if we wait, holding firm to the rock while our daughters approach hand over hand, if we can catch our mothers, if we hold our grandmothers, if we remember that the veil can also be the durable love between women” (141). In the part “The Veils” Erdrich emphasizes this

<sup>7</sup> In *Sacred Hoop* Paula Gunn Allen writes that even in pre-contact American Indian cultures women were very highly regarded and celebrated, they cherished the roles of vitalizers, motherhood was considered powerful and valued due to its creative and transformational powers (see esp. Part One). The high status of women is some traditional Native communities is also evident in their matrilinear nature. Erdrich also frequently deals with the issues of motherhood, giving life, and womanhood in her fiction.

fact by describing three photographs, of her grandmother, her mother, and herself, thus expressing the continuity, family values, and matrilinearity that characterize many American Indian cultures.

In her portrait of the woman, Erdrich does not fail to include the domestic rituals traditionally associated with women and devalorized like labor, such as gardening and cooking. Susan Castillo describes Erdrich's relation to these rituals as metonymic (40). There can be no doubt that Erdrich situates herself *vis-à-vis* these rituals. She goes as far as to enrich her account with encyclopedic information on different plants, including many Latin names, descriptions of vegetables, trees, and flowers, as well as recipes for a variety of dishes – often foreign, like Polish pierogies – most of which, let us add, are said to be prepared by her husband. On the other hand, it seems that these same domestic rituals allow Erdrich to relate herself synecdochically to other members of her family as well as to unrelated others. Her interest in gardening the writer apparently inherited from her grandparents – both grandmother and grandfather – and passed on to her little daughter. Gardening also connects her with a long-dead woman who used to live in the house and tend the garden. This “narrative of flowers” (*BJ* 107) has survived the unknown woman, especially in the foxglove:

I don't really know if Mrs. B planted that mournful biennial, missed it in the off years, knew it would come back the following summer. I only know that foxglove, a flower that would look well in a spray laid across a gravestone or pinned to a black church bonnet, best expresses the slate-hearted gaze that meets mine in the old portrait. And so it is the foxglove I am most careful not to disturb, And it is the foxglove – the sandlike seeds sown in flats each spring, its deadly poisonous leaves the source of the cardiac medication digitalis, that I keep for her and multiply with slow perseverance, as if in the presence of the foxglove these ghosts are not so much laid to rest as still able to partake of the rich and rooted fullness of this life. (109-10)

Birth also provides Erdrich with an identity as a mother, a parent. She calls parenthood a job, hinting at the hard work inherent in the task, often belittled and overlooked. It is a job, she writes, “in which it is not unusual to be, at the same instant, widely joyous and profoundly stressed” (*BJ* 116) and she calls up the circumstances – stress, depression, despair, problems with children, lack of time for oneself – traditionally omitted in discussions of parenthood. It is also a task of great dilemmas, which involves celebrations, feats, and holding on to the child, but also loss, the letting go. And again, parenthood appears to be a cultural category which circumscribes a person in a given now, relates him or her to other parents in a given presentness and, finally, inscribes him

or her into the earth-old chain of continuity. A woman remains herself in her individuality and, at the same time, takes on the role of a parent and becomes a parent. We “are slowly made up of one another,” concludes Erdrich, “yet wholly ourselves” (159). This role is passed down from generation to generation, staying dormant, like the newborn dance, until one has a baby:

There is a dance that appears out of nowhere, steps we don’t know we know until using them to calm our baby. This dance is something we learned in our sleep, from our own hearts, from our parents, going back and back through all of our ancestors. Men and women do the same dance, and acquire it without a thought. Graceful, eccentric, this wavelike sway is a skilled graciousness of the entire body. Parents possess and lose it after the first fleeting months, but that’s all right because already it has been passed on – the knowledge lodged deep within the comforted baby. (54)

The way Erdrich answers the question “Who am I?” clearly differs from how Momaday constructs his answer in *The Names*. While Momaday’s narrative identity is constructed along with his narrative, Erdrich’s identity is not so much constructed or created as discovered in and through the categories provided by her culture; actually, to a greater extent, one of the cultures that have played a part in her formation. As such it seems very much in line with the way identity was constructed in traditional societies, where mythology served to define people and their place in the world. A person’s way towards identity and wholeness in those societies took the form of discovering – and then accepting – one’s identity in the storehouse inscribed in the stories which made up the mythology. In other words, the individual had to inscribe him/herself in the world by taking on one of the roles sanctioned by their society – like Abel accepting the role of a dawn runner in Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*. Saying that in traditional societies the individual discovers his/her identity does not mean, however, that the process is passive. Discovering, accepting, and re-enacting one’s role is an active process of consciously choosing one’s destiny. It is a far cry from the doomed destination of the Western tragic hero as described by Bakhtin. It means assuming responsibility and, as Owens argues, choosing another plot and another destiny.<sup>8</sup> Such an attitude is definitely not foreign to

<sup>8</sup> According to Mircea Eliade, for the *homo religiosus* the myth is about ontology, it tells of reality, and the only true reality for that matter. It contains the patterns of dealing with reality presented by gods *in illo tempore*. A religious person is never ready-made and static, it is his or her responsibility to construct and create him- or herself by imitating traditionally sanctioned patterns stored in the myth (78-82). In *Other Destinies* Louis Owens identifies the tendency of Native novelists to make their protagonists the heroes of other plots and destinies as an important feature of the Native American novel. Discussing the Indian’s role in the Western consciousness, he writes that it “was supposed to be romantic, tragic, and epic” and refers to Bakhtin,

Erdrich. Consciously and willingly, she takes on the roles of a woman and a parent which have been overlooked and devalorized in the Western world, re-inscribes them with new values and meanings, and thus creates – for herself and for other women/mothers – another plot and destiny. “A woman needs to tell her version of the story” writes Erdrich, as if in a manifesto, “to tell the bloody version of the fairy tale. A woman has to be her own hero” (BJ 104).

Having said that Erdrich defines herself primarily in the categories significant in the American Indian worldview, it is necessary to point to its two more indispensable elements: landscape and dreams. Castillo defines Erdrich's relation to dreams as metaphorical, pointing out that in Native American cultures dreams and visions have been an important, and sometimes the primary element of a person's way of inscribing into the life of society. It is also in dreams that the boundaries of space and time become blurred and the unbroken continuity comprising all space can be accomplished (41). Erdrich's relation to the landscapes of North Dakota and New Hampshire is defined by Castillo as synecdochic (40). Already in the foreword Erdrich hints at the presence of these landscapes in her “domestic setup.” For the writer, as it seems, the earth or the landscape and humans are related by the event of birth and defined by the mother-child relationship. The primary landscape is the body: “in our own beginnings, we are formed out of the body's interior landscape. For a short while, our mother's bodies are the boundaries and personal geography which are all that we know of the world” (Erdrich, “Where” 49). From a mother's perspective, Erdrich writes that during pregnancy she becomes “less a person than a place, inhabited land” (BJ 9). In this way she combines the mother and the Earth in one image, known not only in Native America. Viewed against the physicality of the tremendous work a body needs to manage to give birth, this image is, however, stripped of its usual romanticism and pastorality. That and the earth's similar relationship to children allow Erdrich to refer to ecology and the need to look after the natural environment: “once we no longer live beneath our mother's heart, it is the earth with which we form the same dependent relationship, relying completely on its cycles and elements, helpless without its protective embrace” (“Where” 50). The practical value of this statement is reflected in the structure of *The Blue Jay's Dance*: its body is divided into four parts – from winter all through spring and summer to fall – matching the four natural cycles and making up a circle, a vehicle of continuity. It is also evident in a

according to whom to perish was in such heroes' nature and they could not become heroes of other plots or destinies. “The noble savage's refusal to perish,” continues Owens, “throws a monkey wrench to the drama.... With few exceptions, American Indian novelists – examples of Indians who have repudiated their assigned plots – are in their fiction rejecting the American gothic with its haunted, guilt-burdened wilderness and doomed Native and emphatically making the Indian the hero of other destinies, other plots” (18).

body's or a person's response to seasons, weather, places. Nature, as Erdrich shows, can offer us consolation in difficult moments, and in nature we can find analogues of real-life situations.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, actual physical landscapes play an important part in a person's life. "We cannot abandon our need for reference, identity, or our pull to landscapes that mirror our most intense feelings," writes Erdrich in her essay ("Where" 49). Born and raised in North Dakota and marked by the ever-present horizon, she has difficulty trying to adjust to life in New Hampshire, which is "a beautiful place but not where [she] belongs" (*BJ* 87). Erdrich must try and define anew her relationship to a new landscape that has entered her life, the "small scale" of the East as opposed to the large scale and openness of the West and the Red River Valley. With the West being part and parcel of the cultural landscape of her people – "horizon sickness" both "romantically German and pragmatically Ojibwa" (92) – the writer must make accommodations to "sink roots" and feel home elsewhere. As she declared in an interview: "I'm so attached to our home... that I really love being there, but I certainly miss North Dakota and this area [Minnesota] a lot... Sometimes I think that the sheer nostalgia sends me back emotionally in a stronger way" (Wong, *Casebook* 109). According to Beaujour, what the self-portrait has in common with utopia is that they are both born out of a missing structure. It may be related to the fact that with old harmonies broken down and topoi lost, the writers need to re-build their connections and redress their balance to ensure themselves in their stability (31). To account for her lost direct connection with the West and its landscape defined by the ever-present horizon, and to find a new harmony in the East which is defined by closure and trees, Erdrich needs to re-think and re-write herself to be balanced again.

Birth also serves Erdrich as a metaphor for writing and an image allowing her to relate to the whole community of writers, and women writers in particular. The relation between Erdrich and the activity of writing is basically metonymic, while that between Erdrich and other writers and women writers is synecdochic. Already in the first paragraph of Part I Winter "Making Babies," she equates having babies with writing: "Growing, bearing, mothering or fathering, supporting, and at last letting go of an infant is a powerful and mundane creative act that rapturously sucks up whole chunks of life" (*BJ* 4). This statement can be read as a description of the time-, energy-, and life-consuming creative process of writing a book-infant that eventually needs to be freed from the motherly/fatherly embrace and that must find its place in the world. And indeed, *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year* says as much about pregnancy and the birth of Erdrich's

<sup>9</sup> When faced with problems with older children Erdrich finds consolation in nature: "to watch a wild creature move is like a visual prayer" (*BJ* 123). She also finds analogies to her own situation, for example, between her moving to her husband's farm and the building of nests by male finches and female finches moving in (87).



daughter<sup>10</sup> as about the process of writing a literary work. Both activities seem to be driven by the same wish: “the need to write and to reproduce are both all absorbing tasks that attempt to partake of the future” (79). Both, in addition, involve a similar danger of self-erasure as a result of love of an infant and the blurring of boundaries between one’s self the new self of the baby (4). The needs of writing and having babies are presented as unconditional, inborn, and to be accepted, like one’s role or functional identity:

I write poems during the late nights up until the week of birth, and fiction by day. I suppose one could say, pulling in the obvious metaphors, that my work is hormone driven, inscribed in mother’s milk, pregnant with itself. I do begin to think that I am in touch with something larger than me, one of the few things. I feel that I am transcribing verbatim from a flow of language running through the room, an ink current into which I dip the pen. It is a dark stream, swift running, a twisting flow that never doubles back. The amazement is that I need only to enter the room at those strange hours to be drawn back into the language. The frustration is that I cannot be there all the time. (25)

The fact that Erdrich considers herself a woman writer ties her to other women writers, both those having babies and those childless. In fact she creates a whole list of women writers and of mothers (144-45), obviously inscribing herself into the continuum.<sup>11</sup>

The above roles are the pieces with which Erdrich builds her self-portrait in *The Blue Jay’s Dance*, and her partial answers to the question “Who am I?” at the present moment. While all of them are true and identity-defining, none can alone serve to describe the writer’s self. And, no doubt, there are more roles that could become parts of this picture, making it even more complete. It has to do with the fact that, as Beaujour elaborates, the unity of the auto-portrait is open – it is never given or complete and more homologous elements can be added to the structure’s paradigmatic order. By contrast, the unity of the autobiography is closed or limited – it is implied by the very choice of *curriculum vitae* and governed by the flow of the syntagmatic order of discourse. The coherence of self-portrait, therefore, is structured like *montage*, an assemblage of parts related by analogy, memory, repetitions, etc. (319). This paradigmatic configuration of self-portrait resembles the whole body of American Indian mythologies which consist of

<sup>10</sup> It does not really tell of a birth of a specific daughter of Erdrich’s; this issue will be dealt with later on in this essay.

<sup>11</sup> She goes even further and pinpoints what gives “savage coherence” to the best of mothers’ visions and work: “the ability to look at social reality with an unflinching mother’s eye, while at the same time guarding a helpless life” (*BJ* 147). At the same time she finds the wholeness that women achieve when nursing babies to be the missing element that drives men writers to create and desire (148).

a growing number of stories, out of which the storyteller chooses those necessary or relevant under given circumstances. The same associative structure can be discerned in Erdrich's other works: *Love Medicine*, the other parts of the Matchimanito saga studied on their own, as well as all these works approached as a whole united by the all-encompassing matrix of the Little No Horse reservation. All of them make up one growing "compost pile."<sup>12</sup> In different parts, stories, or books the writer only chooses to focus on different aspects, events, persons, etc. This is also why *The Beet Queen* and *The Master Butchers Singing Club* can be included in the configuration even though in their thematic focus they depart from Erdrich's other works. Recognizing such connections in Erdrich's fictional works and taking into account *The Blue Jay's Dance* as an autoportrait, finally, allows one to view these works against the autobiographical space thus constructed. One easily finds other links, such as the resemblances between characters and Erdrich's family members: Erdrich's grandmother Mary and Marie; the illness of her grandfather Patric and that of Nector in *Love Medicine*, her other grandmother and Mary Adare in *The Beet Queen*; repetitions of situations: boiling the skunk in *Love Medicine*, sleeping with the skunk in *The Bingo Palace*; and places.

Adapting the written and *par excellence* Western genre of self-portrait to convey ideas or the sense of American Indian – Ojibwa outlook, Erdrich also strengthens herself in the role of storyteller and clearly inscribes herself into the timeless continuum of her people's heritage. In the postmodern-trickster fashion, not only does she appropriate another's discourse and internalizes it to serve her purposes, but she also enriches another's language with new and newly valorized signs enumerated above: the mother, the parent, and the woman writer. Let us now see by what means she achieves this goal.

In his studies of the early forms of novelistic discourse and their spatial and temporal determinants, Bakhtin traces the origins of (auto)biographical accounts to the early Greek novels, the two types of which he identifies as the Platonic and the rhetorical. Both, as he relates, were highly rhetorical and public in nature – in their all-encompassing *agora*-determined chronotope the individual was utterly exteriorized. While the Platonic type was basically the expression of the seeker's path towards knowledge and of metamorphosis – we could say it was organized temporally and syntagmatically, like autobiographies – the rhetorical type, which originated in memorial speeches, was crudely a public account of the individual's achievements (*Dialogic Imagination* 130-146). If one understands "recounting the achievements of" as describing the individual at a finite point in time or saying who he was at the moment of death, the

<sup>12</sup> Using this Rabelaisian metaphor, Erdrich herself describes her writing, indicating that it is a growing whole (Chavkin 41).

paradigmatic and spatial structure of the portrait becomes recognizable. With time, however, and with the evolution of the genres, the rhetorical nature of self-portraying written forms of discourse was lost. Even though the modern genre of self-portrait – epitomized in and evolving from *Essais* – is rooted in the rhetorical matrix, explains Beaujour, its original rhetorical modality of doing something by speaking and speaking for a purpose disappeared. The self-portrait, from Montaigne to Barthes, he says, is just “sinful writing,” which “brutally reveals uselessness and idleness as the basic traits of our culture.” It is also tragic as it has “nothing to convey or hide” and it is “a perfectly redundant statement, simply a book “ (323). This redundancy can find expression in the abundance, verbosity, commonplace, and triviality that enter the self-portrait after the original aphasia accompanying at first the self-portraitist. Nothing, furthermore, can guarantee the statements’ value or soundness, their only guardians are the codes and conventions informing the writer’s prefigurational world (319).

Reading Erdrich’s self-portraying account, one cannot fail to notice the occasional abundance verging on excess, especially with regard to seemingly trivial and irrelevant issues, such as gardening and the encyclopedic specification of plant names, cooking and ready-made recipes for numerous dishes.<sup>13</sup> The book is also fraught with apparently commonplace details, such as different kinds of morning sickness and references to vomiting, mental ups and downs triggered by seemingly banal reasons, the cell division mechanism, etc. Such verbosity and specificity may definitely put the potential reader at a loss as to the purpose of all this writing. However, when one reads Erdrich’s account as an example, her confession – like other self-portraits – becomes useful, and its exemplary status grants the writer an alibi. Erdrich makes sure that she has an alibi early on in her confession: “I finished this book for our daughters because I hope these pages will claim for them and for others, too, what it is to be a parent” (*BJ* ix). Such insistence on giving in the very first sentence of the foreword seems most curious and suggestive, especially when approached in terms of guilt born out of sinful writing and the need to have an alibi to plead innocent when the writer realizes that the discourse is actually turned upon itself (Beaujour 324). “This book,” confesses Erdrich, “is a set of thoughts from one self to the other – the writer to parent, artist to mother” and a “personal search and an extended wondering at life’s complexity” (*BJ* 5). Thus she realizes that her book – or, simply *a* book – especially in the light of the divagations on writing it contains, is really “a self-portrait of a writer for other writers,” which, according to Beaujour, is the only kind of self-portrait that has ever come into being (325). If we accept Beaujour’s

<sup>13</sup> They can go on for many pages, for example, “An all-licorice dinner to saturate the senses” which is basically a licorice-based menu and recipes, takes as many as 9 pages, from 124 to 132.

point of view, this is precisely the reason why *The Blue Jay's Dance* has proved less successful than Erdrich's fictional works. Determined by their genre, self-portraits limit their potential receivers to those who wish to follow the self-portraitist's example and create more discourse. In the case of Erdrich's work, the group – thanks to the birth metaphor underlying the book – can be extended to comprise women and parents as well.

The discourse of self-portrait, according to Beaujour, is directed to itself or to its author and it can be directed towards readers only inasmuch as they stay out of the dialogue, as the third party (324). Erdrich does realize that. She is also aware of the difficulties faced by the eavesdroppers. "In case the reader becomes confused," she turns explicitly to those that are about to follow her conversation with herself, "I offer here a thumbnail sketch of our household setup" (*BJ* ix). Such a move on her part is undoubtedly related to the second of the three fields in which, according to Lejeune, personal narratives function: the field of historical cognition; of acting/performing; and of artistic relations within the work (5). That second field is connected with the rhetoric and the promise on the part of the writer to tell the truth, which in the case of self-portraits needs to be interpreted differently from the way it is decoded by readers in autobiographies.<sup>14</sup> The readers of autobiographical accounts behave in a special way, unlike readers of fiction. They take on the active role of psychologists-interpreters and researchers *vis-à-vis* the actual human being and his/her life-story (Lejeune 15). The end result of this research is what gives them the pleasure of learning something new. Readers of self-portraits, however, are in a different position. Their activity consists in abandoning the role of a passive witness to the author's secluded conversation and accepting the writer's reflections as their own, and thus ultimately identifying with the author (Beaujour 324). Apparently, this identification is made possible by the particular nature of the potential receivers of the portrait, all of whom want to follow the author's steps. Moreover, identification with the author is what brings about the difficulty of giving critical commentaries on self-portraits (324) and what also accounts for the small number of such commentaries on *The Blue Jay's Dance*.

Lejeune identifies one more pact that defines and informs personal narratives – the so-called autobiographical pact. This agreement, which informs the reader and determines

<sup>14</sup> It becomes even more peculiar in the case of Erdrich's portrait. "The baby described is a combination of our three babies whom I nursed and cared for in a series of writing offices" (*BJ* ix) – that proclamation in the introduction on the one hand validates what follows but, on the other hand, it admits a certain freedom of the consolidating mind at work in the configuration. Therefore, to prove the veracity and establish the truth-referent of her work, in the text Erdrich occasionally calls up proper names, e.g. of the mailman, encyclopedic data, and recipes. All of them can be verified by the reader, which seems to give him/her enough evidence as to the book's truth-claim.

the writer, is a kind of contract concerning the writer's identity and signed with his/her proper name (43). The writer, according to the rules imposed by the pact, must be identified as an individual affirming his/her identity, and his/her name must be affirmed in its "author function." Both these aspects are easily identifiable in *The Blue Jay's Dance*. The book is signed with Louise Erdrich's proper name; in the household setup sketch in the foreword she presents the initial autobiographical data, and there are more personal facts throughout the book. By saying who she is, Erdrich affirms her identity as promised by the contract. Last but not least, on the page preceding the title page as well as on that following the account there are lists of other works by Louise Erdrich the writer. In this way her name is affirmed in its author function.

Thus, in its emphasis on the author's proper name underlying the work, Erdrich's account inscribes itself in the body of autobiographical or personal statements that are "shrines of individuals" expressive of the grand Western myth of "I" (Lejeune 18, 91), which is what "self" in the term self-portrait would imply. Were that the case, however, her pronouncement would stand in sharp contrast to the Native American outlook, American Indian constructions of the self, and the body of mythological narratives, all of which have been referred to in the analysis of *The Blue Jay's Dance* as its background. As a matter of fact, it is as early as in the foreword that Erdrich demolishes the shrine of individualism, saying: "I am not a scientist, not a naturalist, not a chef, not an expert, not the best or worst mother, but a writer only, a woman constantly surprised" (BJ x). By identifying herself as "a" or one of, generalizing her experiences as a representative of all these different groups of people,<sup>15</sup> she universalizes her experience and gives potential readers a possibility of accepting it as their own. Also, by presenting her reflections as an example, on the one hand she grants herself the alibi and, on the other, endows her work with a purpose – acting like most, if not all, Native American writers. Due to codified constructions it is rooted in and which it offers and, therefore, generalizations as its structure, the self-portrait – in contrast to the autobiography – ceases to be individual. Its role is always, states Beaujour, to make up for the gap or the lack brought about by the loss of communication and orality of culture and to oppose the *ego*, which is becoming the norm in our modern epoch (329). As such the self-portrait is always discovered – like identities in traditional people's mythologies, it is an old structure in which the writer recognizes and inscribes him- or herself and then passes the possibility to the readers. Erdrich gives expression to this aspect of her work by preceding it with the following epigraph from Marianne von Willemer, adapted by Goethe:

<sup>15</sup> By negating, she also immediately and unfailingly calls up all the referents.

You wakened this book in my mind, you gave  
it to me;  
for the words I spoke in delight and from a full  
heart  
were echoed back from your sweet life.

Like mythology, finally, Erdrich's self-portrait – as well as other self-portraits – is simultaneously modern or contemporary and ahistorical or timeless. Based upon stable topoi, the self-portrait comes into being as a topography, a reaction to, and a process directed at a certain state of affairs. It is always concerned with rhetorical, mythological, and encyclopedic horizons – always updated and modern (Beaujour 331). *The Blue Jay's Dance* does deal with questions of and about time and history but these are always treated personally. In its human dimensions both time and history become universal – time is shown as related both to physicality (the body) and mentality (the mind and history) to people and places, as epitomized in the house.

Summing up, *The Blue Jay's Dance: A Birth Year* comprises both the diachronic and the synchronic axes. Although constructed spatially or associationally, the book extends diachronically *ad infinitum* to comprise the past with the ancestors and the future with the generations to come. While the “self”-referential character of the account might imply emphasis on the individual self, *The Blue Jay's Dance* is both Erdrich's circumscribing of herself in her individuality and her inscribing herself into the continuity of women, mothers, and writers. More than that, it also inscribes itself into the ancient tradition of American Indian personal narratives, understood in a broader sense than it is usually done in the West. If, following Wong, we accept pictographic personal narratives or “picture writing” as personal accounts, we shall notice the missing link. Wong writes:

Plains Indian pictography can be considered a type of literacy if we acknowledge indigenous sign system and do not insist, like some scholars, on the superiority of alphabetic literacy. And pictographic personal narrative can be considered autobiography if we free ourselves from the Eurocentric insistence on such literary conventions as chronology, unity, and closure. Reading these pictographic texts is like reading a diary or examining a photograph album. Each entry-image is discrete, but is related to the others thematically or spatially. Read individually, each captures the immediacy of the moment. Read together, they compose an associational visual narrative. Like Euro-American diaries, journals, and letters, Plains Indian pictographic self-narrations are not “failed versions of something more coherent and unified,” but culturally constructed graphic mode of autobiography. (*Sending* 87)

Erdrich's *The Blue Jay's Dance* is a new and written version of the mode.

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