

Conditions and Limits of Autobiography

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Translated by James Olney

Autobiography is a solidly established literary genre, its history traceable in a series of masterpieces from the *Confessions* of St. Augustine to Gide's *Si le grain ne meurt*, with Rousseau's *Confessions*, Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre tombe*, and Newman's *Apologia* in between. Many great men, and even some not so great—heads of government or generals, ministers of state, explorers, businessmen—have devoted the leisure time of their old age to editing “Memoirs,” which have found an attentive reading public from generation to generation. Autobiography exists, unquestionably and in fine state; it is covered by that reverential rule that protects hallowed things, so that calling it into question might well seem rather foolish. Diogenes demonstrated the reality of movement simply by walking, and thus brought the scoffers over to his side in his dispute with the Eleatic philosopher who claimed, with reason as his authority, that it was impossible for Achilles ever to overtake the tortoise. Likewise, autobiography—fortunately—has not waited for philosophers to grant it the right to exist. However, it is perhaps not too late to ask ourselves some questions about the significance of such an undertaking and about the likelihood of its accomplishment in order to sort out the implicit presuppositions of autobiography.

First of all, it is necessary to point out that the genre of autobiography seems limited in time and in space: it has not always existed

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nor does it exist everywhere. If Augustine's *Confessions* offer us a brilliantly successful landmark right at the beginning, one nevertheless recognizes immediately that this is a late phenomenon in Western culture, coming at that moment when the Christian contribution was grafted onto classical traditions. Moreover, it would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern that has been of good use in his systematic conquest of the universe and that he has communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own. When Gandhi tells his own story, he is using Western means to defend the East. And the moving testimonies collected by Westermann in his *Autobiographies d'Africains* convey the shock of traditional civilizations on coming into contact with Europeans. The old world is in the process of dying in the very interior of that consciousness that questions itself about its destiny, converted willy-nilly to the new life style that whites have brought from beyond the seas.

The concern, which seems so natural to us, to turn back on one's own past, to recollect one's life in order to narrate it, is not at all universal. It asserts itself only in recent centuries and only on a small part of the map of the world. The man who takes delight in thus drawing his own image believes himself worthy of a special interest. Each of us tends to think of himself as the center of a living space: I count, my existence is significant to the world, and my death will leave the world incomplete. In narrating my life, I give witness of myself even from beyond my death and so can preserve this precious capital that ought not disappear. The author of an autobiography gives a sort of relief to his image by reference to the environment with its independent existence; he looks at himself being and delights in being looked at—he calls himself as witness for himself; others he calls as witness for what is irreplaceable in his presence.

This conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life is the late product of a specific civilization. Throughout most of human history, the individual does not oppose himself to all others; he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much *with* others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community. No one is rightful possessor of his life or his death; lives are so thoroughly entangled that each of them has its center everywhere and

its circumference nowhere. The important unit is thus never the isolated being—or, rather, isolation is impossible in such a scheme of total cohesiveness as this. Community life unfolds like a great drama, with its climactic moments originally fixed by the gods being repeated from age to age. Each man thus appears as the possessor of a rôle, already performed by the ancestors and to be performed again by descendants. The number of rôles is limited, and this is expressed by a limited number of names. Newborn children receive the names of the deceased whose rôles, in a sense, they perform again, and so the community maintains a continuous self-identity in spite of the constant renewal of individuals who constitute it.

It is obvious that autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist. But this unconsciousness of personality, characteristic of primitive societies such as ethnologists describe to us, lasts also in more advanced civilizations that subscribe to mythic structures, they too being governed by the principle of repetition. Theories of eternal recurrence, accepted in various guises as dogma by the majority of the great cultures of antiquity, fix attention on that which remains, not on that which passes. "That which is," according to the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, "is that which has been, and there is nothing new under the sun." Likewise, beliefs in the transmigration of souls—beliefs to be found throughout the Indo-European sphere—grant to the nodes of temporal existence only a sort of negative value. The wisdom of India considers personality an evil illusion and seeks salvation in depersonalization.

Autobiography becomes possible only under certain metaphysical preconditions. To begin with, at the cost of a cultural revolution humanity must have emerged from the mythic framework of traditional teachings and must have entered into the perilous domain of history. The man who takes the trouble to tell of himself knows that the present differs from the past and that it will not be repeated in the future; he has become more aware of differences than of similarities; given the constant change, given the uncertainty of events and of men, he believes it a useful and valuable thing to fix his own image so that he can be certain it will not disappear like all things in this world. History then would be the memory of a humanity heading toward unforeseeable goals, struggling against the breakdown of forms and of beings. Each man matters to the world,

each life and each death; the witnessing of each about himself enriches the common cultural heritage.

The curiosity of the individual about himself, the wonder that he feels before the mystery of his own destiny, is thus tied to the Copernican Revolution: at the moment it enters into history, humanity, which previously aligned its development to the great cosmic cycles, finds itself engaged in an autonomous adventure; soon mankind even brings the domain of the sciences into line with its own reckoning, organizing them, by means of technical expertise, according to its own desires. Henceforth, man knows himself a responsible agent: gatherer of men, of lands, of power, maker of kingdoms or of empires, inventor of laws or of wisdom, he alone adds consciousness to nature, leaving there the sign of his presence. The historic personage now appears, and biography, taking its place alongside monuments, inscriptions, statues, is one manifestation of his desire to endure in men's memory. Famous men—heroes and princes—acquire a sort of literary and pedagogical immortality in those exemplary "Lives" written for the edification of future centuries.

But biography, which is thus established as a literary genre, provides only an exterior presentation of great persons, reviewed and corrected by the demands of propaganda and by the general sense of the age. The historian finds himself removed from his model by the passage of time—at least, this is most often true, and it is always true that he is at a great social distance from his model. He is conscious of performing a public and official function similar to that of the artist who sculpts or paints the likeness of a powerful man of the day, posed most flatteringly as determined by current conventions. The appearance of autobiography implies a new spiritual revolution: the artist and the model coincide, the historian tackles himself as object. That is to say, he considers himself a great person, worthy of men's remembrance even though in fact he is only a more or less obscure intellectual. Here a new social area that turns classes about and readjusts values comes into play. Montaigne had a certain prominence, but was descended from a family of merchants; Rousseau, no more than a common citizen of Geneva, was a kind of literary adventurer; yet both of them, in spite of their lowly station on the stage of the world, considered their destiny worthy of being given by way of example. Our interest is turned from public to private history: alongside the great men who act out the offi-

cial history of humanity, there are obscure men who conduct the campaign of their spiritual life within their breast, carrying on silent battles whose ways and means, whose triumphs and reversals also merit being preserved in the universal memory.

This conversion is late in coming insofar as it corresponds to a difficult evolution—or rather to an *involution* of consciousness. The truth is that one is wonderstruck by everything else much sooner than by the self. One wonders at what one sees, but one does not see oneself. If exterior space—the stage of the world—is a light, clear space where everyone’s behavior, movements, and motives are quite plain on first sight, interior space is shadowy in its very essence. The subject who seizes on himself for object inverts the natural direction of attention; it appears that in acting thus he violates certain secret taboos of human nature. Sociology, depth psychology, psychoanalysis have revealed the complex and agonizing sense that the encounter of a man with his image carries. The image is another “myself,” a double of my being but more fragile and vulnerable, invested with a sacred character that makes it at once fascinating and frightening. Narcissus, contemplating his face in the fountain’s depth, is so fascinated with the apparition that he would die bending toward himself. According to most folklore and myth, the apparition of the double is a death sign.

Mythic taboos underline the disconcerting character of the discovery of the self. Nature did not foresee the encounter of man with his reflection, and it is as if she tried to prevent this reflection from appearing. The invention of the mirror would seem to have disrupted human experience, especially from that moment when the mediocre metal plates that were used in antiquity gave way at the end of the Middle Ages to silver-backed mirrors produced by Venetian technique. From that moment, the image in the mirror became a part of the scene of life, and psychoanalysts have brought out the major role that this image plays in the child’s gradual consciousness of his own personality.¹ From the age of six months, the human infant is particularly interested in this reflection of himself, which would leave an animal indifferent. Little by little the infant discovers an essential aspect of his identity: he distinguishes that which is without from his own within, he sees himself as another among others; he is situated in social space, at the heart of which he will become capable of reshaping his own reality.

¹ Cf. in particular the research of Jacques Lacan: “Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je,” *Revue française de psychanalyse* 4 (1949).

The primitive who has not been forewarned is frightened of his reflection in the mirror, just as he is terrified by a photographic or motion-picture image. The child of civilization, on the other hand, has had all the leisure necessary to make himself at home with the changing garments of appearances that he has clothed himself in under the alluring influence of the mirror. And yet even an adult, whether man or woman, if he reflects on it a little, rediscovers beyond this confrontation with himself the turmoil and fascination of Narcissus. The first sound image from the tape recorder, the animated image of the cinema, awaken the same anguish in the depths of our life. The author of an autobiography masters this anxiety by submitting to it; beyond all the images, he follows unceasingly the call of his own being. Thus with Rembrandt, who was fascinated by his Venetian mirror and as a result endlessly multiplied his self-portraits (like Van Gogh later)—witnessings by himself about himself and evidence of the impassioned new disquiet of modern man, fierce to elucidate the mystery of his own personality.

If it is indeed true that autobiography is the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image, one must nevertheless acknowledge that the genre appeared before the technical achievements of German and Italian artisans. At the edge of modern times, the physical and material appeal of the reflection in the mirror bolsters and strengthens the tradition of self-examination of Christian asceticism. Augustine's *Confessions* answer to this new spiritual orientation by contrast to the great philosophic systems of classical antiquity—Epicurean, for example, or Stoic—that contented themselves with a disciplinary notion of individual being and argued that one should seek salvation in adhering to a universal and transcendent law without any regard for the mysteries (which anyway were unsuspected) of interior life. Christianity brings a new anthropology to the fore: every destiny, however humble it be, assumes a kind of supernatural stake. Christian destiny unfolds as a dialogue of the soul with God in which, right up to the end, every action, every initiative of thought or of conduct, can call everything back into question. Each man is accountable for his own existence, and intentions weigh as heavily as acts—whence a new fascination with the secret springs of personal life. The rule requiring confession of sins gives to self-examination a character at once systematic and necessary. Augustine's great book is a consequence of this dogmatic requirement: a soul of genius presents his balance sheet before God in all humility—but also in full rhetorical splendor.

During the Christian centuries of the Western Middle Ages, the penitent, following in the footsteps of Augustine, could scarcely do anything but plead guilty before his Creator. The theological mirror of the Christian soul is a deforming mirror that plays up without pity the slightest faults of the moral personality. The most elementary rule of humility requires the faithful to discover traces of sin everywhere and to suspect beneath the more or less appealing exterior of the individual person the horrid decay of the flesh, the hideous rotting of Ligier Richier's *Skeleton*: every man is uncovered to reveal a potential participant in the *Dance of Death*. Here again, as with primitives, man cannot look on his own image without anguish. It was to require the exploding of the medieval Romania—the breakdown of its dogmatic frame under the combined thrust of the Renaissance and the Reformation—before man could have any interest in seeing himself as he is without any taint of the transcendent. The Venetian mirror provides the restless Rembrandt with an image of himself that is neither twisted nor flattering. Renascent man puts forth on the oceans in search of new continents and men of nature. Montaigne discovers in himself a new world, a man of nature, naked and artless, whose confessions he gives us in his *Essays*, but without penitence.

The *Essays* were to be one of the gospels of the modern spirituality. Freed of all doctrinal allegiance, in a world well on its way to becoming secularized, the autobiographer assumes the task of bringing out the most hidden aspects of individual being. The new age practises the virtue of *individuality* particularly dear to the great men of the Renaissance, champions of free enterprise in art as in morals, in finance and in technical affairs as in philosophy. The *Life* of Cellini, artist and adventurer, testifies to this new freedom of the individual who believes that all things are permitted to him. Beyond the rediscovered disciplines of the classical period, the Romantic era, in its exaltation of genius, reintroduced the taste for autobiography. The virtue of individuality is completed by the virtue of *sincerity*, which Rousseau adopts from Montaigne: the heroism of understanding and telling all, reenforced even more by the teachings of psychoanalysis, takes on, in the eyes of our contemporaries, an increasing value. Complexities, contradictions, and aberrations do not cause hesitation or repugnance but a kind of wonderment. And in a profoundly secular sense, Gide repeats the Psalmist's exclamation: "I praise thee, O my God, for making me a creature so marvellous."

Recourse to history and anthropology allows one to locate autobiography in its cultural moment.² It remains to examine the undertaking itself, to clarify its intentions, and to judge of its chances for success.³ The author of an autobiography gives himself the job of narrating his own history; what he sets out to do is to reassemble the scattered elements of his individual life and to regroup them in a comprehensive sketch. The historian of himself wishes to produce his own portrait, but while the painter captures only a moment of external appearance, the autobiographer strains toward a complete and coherent expression of his entire destiny. The catalogue of Bredius lists sixty-two portraits of Rembrandt accepted as authentic and painted by himself at all ages in his life. The constantly renewed attempt shows clearly that the painter is never satisfied: he acknowledges no single image as his definitive image. The total portrait of Rembrandt is to be found on the horizon of all these different visages of which it would be, in a sense, the common denominator. While a painting is a representation of the present, autobiography claims to retrace a period, a development in time, not by juxtaposing instantaneous images but by composing a kind of film according to a preestablished scenario. The author of a private journal, noting his impressions and mental states from day to day, fixes the portrait of his daily reality without any concern for continuity. Autobiography, on the other hand, requires a man to take a distance with regard to himself in order to reconstitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity across time.

At first sight there is nothing startling in this. If one accepts that each man has a history and that it is possible to narrate this history, it is inevitable that the narrator should eventually take himself as narrative object from the moment that he entertains the notion that his destiny holds a sufficient interest for himself and everyone else. The witness of each person about himself is in addition a privileged one: since he writes of someone who is at a distance or dead, the biographer remains uncertain of his hero's intentions; he must be content to decipher signs, and his work is in certain ways always related to the detective story. On the other hand, no one can know better than I what I have thought, what I have wished; I alone have the privilege of discovering myself from the other side of the mirror—nor can I be cut off by the wall of privacy. Others, no mat-

² For more details one might refer to the work, unfortunately not finished, of Georg Misch: *Geschichte der Autobiographie*, tome 1 (Teubner, 1907).

³ See also André Maurois, *Aspects de la biographie* (Paris, 1928).

ter how well intentioned, are forever going wrong; they describe the external figure, the appearance they see and not the true person, which always escapes them. No one can better do justice to himself than the interested party, and it is precisely in order to do away with misunderstandings, to restore an incomplete or deformed truth, that the autobiographer himself takes up the telling of his story.

A great many autobiographies—no doubt the majority—are based on these elementary motives: as soon as they have the leisure of retirement or exile, the minister of state, the politician, the military leader write in order to celebrate their deeds (always more or less misunderstood), providing a sort of posthumous propaganda for posterity that otherwise is in danger of forgetting them or of failing to esteem them properly. *Memoirs* admirably celebrate the penetrating insight and skill of famous men who, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, were never wrong: Cardinal de Retz, leader of a hapless faction, unflinching wins back after the event all the battles he had lost; Napoleon on Sainte Hélène, through his intermediary las Cases, gets even with the injustice of events, hostile to his genius. One is never better served than by oneself.

The autobiography that is thus devoted exclusively to the defence and glorification of a man, a career, a political cause, or a skillful strategy presents no problems: it is limited almost entirely to the public sector of existence. It provides an interesting and interested testimony that the historian must gather together and criticize along with other testimonies. It is official facts that carry weight here, and intentions are judged by their performance. One should not take the narrator's word for it, but should consider his version of the facts as one contribution to his own biography. Private motives, the obverse of history, balance and complete their opposite, the objective course of events. But for public men it is the exterior aspect that dominates: they tell their stories from the perspective of their time, so that their methodological problems are no different from those of the ordinary writing of history. The historian is well aware that memoirs are always, to a certain degree, a revenge on history. Reading Cardinal de Retz's memoirs one cannot understand at all how it was that he made such a magnificent mess of his career; a clear minded biography would not be overawed by this victim who puffs himself up as a victor but would

reestablish the facts, making use of elementary psychology and necessary cross-checking.

The question changes utterly when the private face of existence assumes more importance. In writing his *Apologia pro vita sua*, Newman attempts to justify in the eyes of contemporary opinion his movement from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism. But with their temporal reference, social and theological occurrences have relatively little significance. The dispute takes place for the most part in the interior domain: here, as in Augustine's *Confessions*, it is the history of a soul that is told to us. External and objective criticism might well pick out an error in detail here and there or a bit of cheating, but it does not reach to the heart of the matter. Rousseau, Goethe, Mill are not content to offer the reader a sort of *curriculum vitae* retracing the steps of an official career that, for importance, was hardly more than mediocre. In this case it is a question of another truth. The act of memory is carried out for itself, and recalling of the past satisfies a more or less anguished disquiet of the mind anxious to recover and redeem lost time in fixing it forever. The title of Jean Paul's autobiographical writing, *Wahrheit aus meinem Leben*, expresses well the fact that the truth in question shows forth from within the private life. Moreover, memories of childhood and youth are very numerous, including among them many masterpieces, for example, Renan's *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse* or Gide's *Si le grain ne meurt*. Now an infant is not yet an historical figure; the significance of his small existence remains strictly private. The writer who recalls his earliest years is thus exploring an enchanted realm that belongs to him alone.

Furthermore, autobiography properly speaking assumes the task of reconstructing the unity of a life across time. This lived unity of attitude and act is not received from the outside; certainly events influence us; they sometimes determine us, and they always limit us. But the essential themes, the structural designs that impose themselves on the complex material of exterior facts are the constituent elements of the personality. Today's comprehensive psychology has taught us that man, far from being subject to ready-made, completed situations given from outside and without him, is the essential agent in bringing about the situations in which he finds himself placed. It is his intervention that structures the terrain where his life is lived and gives it its ultimate shape, so that the landscape is truly, in Amiel's phrase, "a state of the soul."

From this the specific intention of autobiography and its anthropological prerogative as a literary genre is clear: it is one of the means to self knowledge thanks to the fact that it recomposes and interprets a life in its totality. An examination of consciousness limited to the present moment will give me only a fragmentary cutting from my personal being without guarantee that it will continue. In recounting my history I take the longest path, but this path that goes round my life leads me the more surely from me to myself. The recapitulation of ages of existence, of landscapes and encounters, obliges me to situate what I am in the perspective of what I have been. My individual unity, the mysterious essence of my being—this is the law of gathering in and of understanding in all the acts that have been mine, all the faces and all the places where I have recognized signs and witness of my destiny. In other words, autobiography is a second reading of experience, and it is truer than the first because it adds to experience itself consciousness of it. In the immediate moment, the agitation of things ordinarily surrounds me too much for me to be able to see it in its entirety. Memory gives me a certain remove and allows me to take into consideration all the ins and outs of the matter, its context in time and space. As an aerial view sometimes reveals to an archeologist the direction of a road or a fortification or the map of a city invisible to someone on the ground, so the reconstruction in spirit of my destiny bares the major lines that I have failed to notice, the demands of the deepest values I hold that, without my being clearly aware of it, have determined my most decisive choices.

Autobiography is not simple repetition of the past as it was, for recollection brings us not the past itself but only the presence in spirit of a world forever gone. Recapitulation of a life lived claims to be valuable for the one who lived it, and yet it reveals no more than a ghostly image of that life, already far distant, and doubtless incomplete, distorted furthermore by the fact that the man who remembers his past has not been for a long time the same being, the child or adolescent, who lived that past. The passage from immediate experience to consciousness in memory, which effects a sort of repetition of that experience, also serves to modify its significance. A new mode of being appears if it is true, as Hegel claimed, that “consciousness of self is the birthplace of truth.” The past that is recalled has lost its flesh and bone solidity, but it has won a new and more intimate relationship to the individual life that can thus, after being long dispersed and sought again throughout

the course of time, be rediscovered and drawn together again beyond time.

Such is doubtless the most secret purpose in every exercise in Memories, Memoirs, or Confessions. The man who recounts himself is himself searching his self through his history; he is not engaged in an objective and disinterested pursuit but in a work of personal justification. Autobiography appeases the more or less anguished uneasiness of an aging man who wonders if his life has not been lived in vain, frittered away haphazardly, ending now in simple failure. In order to be reassured, he undertakes his own apologia, as Newman expressly says. Perhaps Cardinal de Retz is ridiculous with his claim to political insight and to infallibility, since he lost every game he played; but it may be that every life, even in spite of the most brilliant successes, knows itself inwardly botched. So autobiography is the final chance to win back what has been lost—and we must acknowledge that Retz, as after him Chateaubriand, knew how to play this game masterfully, in such a way that he seemed to the eyes of future generations a conqueror much more than would have been the case had the obscure intrigues he enjoyed pursuing turned out well for his faction. Retz, the writer and memorialist, compensated for the failure of Retz, the conspirator; the task of autobiography is first of all a task of personal salvation. Confession, an attempt at remembering, is at the same time searching for a hidden treasure, for a last delivering word, redeeming in the final appeal a destiny that doubted its own value. For the one who takes up the venture it is a matter of concluding a peace treaty and a new alliance with himself and with the world. The mature man or the man already old who projects his life into narrative would thus provide witness that he has not existed in vain; he chooses not revolution but reconciliation, and he brings it about in the very act of reassembling the scattered elements of a destiny that seems to him to have been worth the trouble of living. The literary work in which he offers himself as example is the means of perfecting this destiny and of bringing it to a successful conclusion.

There is, then, a considerable gap between the avowed plan of autobiography, which is simply to retrace the history of a life, and its deepest intentions, which are directed toward a kind of apologetics or theodicy of the individual being. This gap explains the puzzlement and the ambivalence of the literary genre. The man who sets about writing his memoirs imagines, in all good faith,

that he is writing as an historian and that any difficulties he may discover can be overcome through exercise of critical objectivity and impartiality. The portrait will be exact, and the sequence of events will be brought out precisely as it was. No doubt it will be necessary to struggle against failures of memory and temptations to fudge the truth, but a sufficiently strict moral alertness and a basic good faith will make it possible to reestablish the factual truth as Rousseau claimed in some celebrated pages at the beginning of his *Confessions*. Most authors who recount themselves ask no other questions: the psychological problem of memory, the moral problem of the impartiality of the self to itself—these are not insurmountable difficulties. Autobiography appears as the mirror image of a life, its double more clearly drawn—in a sense the diagram of a destiny.

Now, one is aware of the recent revolution in historical methodology. The idol of an objective and critical history worshipped by the positivists of the nineteenth century has crumbled; hope for an “integral resurrection of the past” nourished by Michelet has come to seem meaningless; the past is the past, it cannot return to dwell in the present except at the cost of complete falsification. The recall of history assumes a very complex relation of past to present, a re-actualization that prevents us from ever discovering the past “in itself,” as it was—the past without us. The historian of himself finds that he is caught up in the same difficulties: returning to visit his own past, he takes the unity and identity of his being for granted, and he imagines himself able to merge what he was with what he has become. The child, the young man, and the mature man of yesterday are gone and cannot protest; only the man of today can speak, which allows him to deny that there is any division or split and to take for granted the very thing that is in question.

It is obvious that the narrative of a life cannot be simply the image-double of that life. Lived existence unfolds from day to day in the present and according to the demands of the moment, which the individual copes with the best he can using all the resources at his disposal. Life is a dubious battle in which conscious schemes and projects mingle with unconscious drives and with the desire to give up and to strive no more. Every destiny opens its way through the undetermined variables of men, circumstances, and itself. This constant tension, this charge of the unknown, which corresponds to the very arrow of lived time, cannot exist in a narrative of memories composed after the event by someone who knows the

end of the story. In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy has shown the immense difference there is between a real battle lived from minute to minute by the agonized participants largely unaware of what is happening even if they enjoy the security of being staff officers and the narrative of the same battle put in fine logical and rational order by the historian who knows all the turning points and the outcome of the conflict. The same time gap exists between a life and its biography: "I don't know," Valéry wrote, "if anyone has ever tried to write a biography and attempted at each instant of it to know as little of the following moment as the hero of the work knew himself at the corresponding instant of his career. This would be to restore chance in each instant, rather than putting together a series that admits of a neat summary and a causality that can be described in a formula."⁴

Thus the original sin of autobiography is first one of logical coherence and rationalization. The narrative is conscious, and since the narrator's consciousness directs the narrative, it seems to him incontestable that it has also directed his life. In other words, the act of reflecting that is essential to conscious awareness is transferred, by a kind of unavoidable optical illusion, back to the stage of the event itself. At the beginning of a recollection of his childhood, the novelist François Mauriac protests against the notion "that an author retouches his memories with the deliberate intention of deceiving us. In truth, he is yielding to necessity: he must render stationary and fixed this past life which was moving. . . . It is against his own will that he carves out of his teeming past these figures that are as arbitrary as the constellations with which we have peopled the night."⁵ In short, a kind of Bergsonian critique of autobiography is necessary: Bergson criticizes classical theories of volition and free will for reconstructing a mode of conduct after the fact and then imagining that at the decisive moments there existed a clear choice among various possibilities, whereas in fact actual freedom proceeds on its own impetus and there is ordinarily no choice at all. Likewise, autobiography is condemned to substitute endlessly the completely formed for that which is in the process of being formed. With its burden of insecurity, the lived present finds itself caught in that necessary movement that, along the thread of the narrative, binds the past to the future.

⁴ Paul Valéry, *Tel Quel II* (Paris, 1943), p. 349. Cf. this remark of the same author: "The person who confesses is lying and fleeing the real truth, which is nothing, or unformed, and in general blurred."

⁵ François Mauriac, *Commencements d'une vie* (Paris, 1932), Introduction, p. xi.

The difficulty is insurmountable: no trick of presentation even when assisted by genius can prevent the narrator from always knowing the outcome of the story he tells—he commences, in a manner of speaking, with the problem already solved. Moreover, the illusion begins from the moment that the narrative *confers a meaning* on the event which, when it actually occurred, no doubt had several meanings or perhaps none. This postulating of a meaning dictates the choice of the facts to be retained and of the details to bring out or to dismiss according to the demands of the preconceived intelligibility. It is here that the failures, the gaps, and the deformations of memory find their origin; they are not due to purely physical cause nor to chance, but on the contrary they are the result of an option of the writer who remembers and wants to gain acceptance for this or that revised and corrected version of his past, his private reality. Renan expressed it very well: “Goethe,” he remarks, “chooses, as title of his Memoirs, *Truth and Poetry*, thereby showing that one cannot compose his own biography in the same way one would do a biography of others. What one says of oneself is always poetry. . . . One writes of such things in order to transmit to others the world view that one carries in oneself.”⁶

One must choose a side and give up the pretence of objectivity, abandoning a sort of false scientific attitude that would judge a work by the precision of its detail. There are painters of historical scenes whose entire ambition in painting a battlefield is to represent in the most minute detail the uniforms and the weapons or to render an exact topographical map. The result is as false as it could well be, while Velásquez’s *Rendición de Breda* or Goya’s *Dos de Mayo*, even though they swarm with inaccuracies, remain wonderful masterpieces nonetheless. An autobiography cannot be a pure and simple record of existence, an account book or a logbook: on such and such a day at such and such an hour, I went to such and such a place . . . A record of this kind, no matter how minutely exact, would be no more than a caricature of real life; in such a case, rigorous precision would add up to the same thing as the subtlest deception.

One of Lamartine’s finest autobiographical poems, *La vigne et la maison*, evokes the house in Milly in which the poet was born, the facade of which is decorated with a garland of woodbine. An historian has discovered that there was no vine growing against the

⁶ Ernest Renan, *Souvenirs d’enfance et de jeunesse* (Paris, n.d.), Preface, pp. ii-iii.

house in Milly during the poet's childhood; only much later, after the poem was written and in order to reconcile poetry and truth, did Madame de Lamartine have a climbing vine planted. The anecdote is symbolic: in autobiography the truth of facts is subordinate to the truth of the man, for it is first of all the man who is in question. The narrative offers us the testimony of a man about himself, the contest of a being in dialogue with itself, seeking its innermost fidelity.

Any autobiography is a moment of the life that it recounts; it struggles to draw the meaning from that life, but it is itself a meaning in the life. One part of the whole claims to reflect the whole, but it adds something to this whole of which it constitutes a moment. Some Flemish or Dutch painters of interior scenes depict a little mirror on the wall in which the painting is repeated a second time; the image in the mirror does not only duplicate the scene but adds to it as a new dimension a distancing perspective. Likewise, autobiography is not a simple recapitulation of the past; it is also the attempt and the drama of a man struggling to reassemble himself in his own likeness at a certain moment of his history. This delivering up of earlier being brings a new stake into the game.

The significance of autobiography should therefore be sought beyond truth and falsity, as those are conceived by simple common sense. It is unquestionably a document about a life, and the historian has a perfect right to check out its testimony and verify its accuracy. But it is also a work of art, and the literary devotee, for his part, will be aware of its stylistic harmony and the beauty of its images. It is therefore of little consequence that the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* should be full of errors, omissions, and lies, and of little consequence also that Chateaubriand made up most of his *Voyage en Amérique*: the recollection of landscapes that he never saw and the description of the traveller's moods nevertheless remain excellent. We may call it fiction or fraud, but its artistic value is real: there is a truth affirmed beyond the fraudulent itinerary and chronology, a truth of the man, images of himself and of the world, reveries of a man of genius, who, for his own enchantment and that of his readers, realizes himself in the unreal.

The literary, artistic function is thus of greater importance than the historic and objective function in spite of the claims made by positivist criticism both previously and today. But the literary function itself, if one would really understand the essence of autobiography, appears yet secondary in comparison with the anthro-

polological significance. Every work of art is a projection from the interior realm into exterior space where in becoming incarnated it achieves consciousness of itself. Consequently, there is need of a second critique that instead of verifying the literal accuracy of the narrative or demonstrating its artistic value would attempt to draw out its innermost, private significance by viewing it as the symbol, as it were, or the parable of a consciousness in quest of its own truth.

The man who in recalling his life sets out to discover himself does not surrender to a passive contemplation of his private being. The truth is not a hidden treasure, already there, that one can bring out by simply reproducing it as it is. Confession of the past realizes itself as a work in the present: it effects a true creation of self by the self. Under guise of presenting myself as I was, I exercise a sort of right to recover possession of my existence now and later. "To create and in creating to be created," the fine formula of Lequier, ought to be the motto of autobiography. It cannot recall the past in the past and for the past—a vain and fruitless endeavor—for no one can revive the dead; it calls up the past for the present and in the present, and it brings back from earlier times that which preserves a meaning and value today; it asserts a kind of tradition between myself and me that establishes an ancient and new fidelity, for the past drawn up into the present is also a pledge and a prophecy of the future. Temporal perspectives thus seem to be telescoped together and to interpenetrate one another; they commune in that self-knowledge that regroups personal being above and beyond its own time limits. Confession takes on the character of an avowal of values and a recognition of self by the self—a choice carried out at the level of essential being—not a revelation of a reality given in advance but a corollary of an active intelligence.

The creative and illuminating nature thus discerned in autobiography suggests a new and more profound sense of truth as an expression of inmost being, a likeness no longer of things but of the person. Now this truth, which is too often neglected, nevertheless constitutes one of the necessary references for understanding the human realm. We understand everything outside of us as well as ourselves with reference to what we are and according to our spiritual capacities. This is what Dilthey, one of the founders of modern historiography, meant when he said that universal history is an extrapolation from autobiography. The objective space of his-

tory is always a projection of the mental space of the historian. The poet Novalis had a presentiment of this well before Dilthey: "The historian," he says, "constructs historic beings. The facts of history provide the matter which the historian molds in giving it life. Thus history too yields to the general principles of creation and organization, and apart from these principles there is no true historical construction—nothing but scattered traces of chance creations in which an aimless genius has been at work."⁷ And Nietzsche, for his part, affirmed the necessity of feeling "as his *own* history the history of all humanity" (*The Gay Science*, section 337).

We must, therefore, introduce a kind of reversal of perspective and give up thinking about autobiography in the same way as we do an objective biography, regulated only by the requirements of the genre of history. Every autobiography is a work of art and at the same time a work of enlightenment; it does not show us the individual seen from outside in his visible actions but the person in his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been. What is in question is a sort of revaluation of individual destiny; the author, who is at the same time the hero of the tale, wants to elucidate his past in order to draw out the structure of his being in time. And this secret structure is for him the implicit condition of all possible knowledge in every order whatsoever—hence the central place of autobiography, especially in the literary sphere.

Experience is the prime matter of all creation, which is an elaboration of elements borrowed from lived reality. One can exercise imagination only by starting from what one is, from what one has tried either in fact or in wish. Autobiography displays this privileged content with a minimum of alterations; more precisely, it ordinarily fancies that it is restoring this content as it was, but in giving his own narrative, the man is forever adding himself to himself. So creation of a literary world begins with the author's confession: the narrative that he makes of his life is already a first work of art, the first deciphering of an affirmation that, at a further stage of stripping down and recomposing, will open out in novels, in tragedies, or in poems. The novelist François Mauriac is doing no more than repeating an intuition well-known to many writers

⁷ *Blütenstaub*, section 92. In *Novalis Werke*, ed. Gerhard Schulz (München, 1969), p. 345.

when he says: "I think that every great work of fiction is simply an interior life in novel form."⁸ Every novel is an autobiography by intermediary—a truth that Nietzsche extended even beyond the limits of what would properly be called literature: "Little by little it has become clear to me that every great philosophy has been the confession of its maker, as it were his involuntary and unconscious autobiography."⁹

We might say then that there are two guises or two versions of autobiography: on the one hand, that which is properly called confession; on the other hand, the artist's entire work, which takes up the same material in complete freedom and under the protection of a hidden identity. After Sophie's death, Novalis kept a private diary for some time in which he recorded his moods from day to day and in a bald style; and at the same period there was coming to birth within him the *Hymnes à la nuit*, one of the masterpieces of Romantic poetry. Neither the poet nor his fiancée is named in the *Hymnes*; nevertheless it is certain that the *Hymnes* have the same autobiographical content as the *Journal*—they represent a chronicle of the experience of Sophie's death. Likewise, Goethe took the trouble to write his memoirs; but his work throughout, from *Werther* right up to *Faust* Part II and the *Marienbad Elegies*, unfolds as one massive confession. "There is not, in the *Affinities*," he confided to Eckermann, "a single episode that was not lived, although no episode is presented just as it occurred."

But it is pointless to multiply examples. Critics have decided to range writers' works in chronological order and to search in each of them for an expression of a real situation, thus acknowledging the autobiographical character of all literary creation. To understand *A la recherche du temps perdu*, it is necessary to recognize Proust's autobiography in it; *Green Henry* is Gottfried Keller's autobiography, just as *Jean-Christophe* is Romain Rolland's. The autobiographical key allows for a correlation of the life with the work. This correlation is not, however, as simple as that, for example, between a text and its translation. Here our earlier observations again assume their full importance.

⁸ Mauriac, *Journal II* (Paris, 1937), p. 138. Cf. Maurois, *Tourguéniev* (Paris, 1931), p. 196: "Artistic creation is not a creation *ex nihilo*. It is a regrouping of the elements of reality. One could easily show that the strangest narratives, those which seem furthest from real observation, such as *Gulliver's Travels*, the *Tales* of Edgar A. Poe, Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, are made from memories."

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, section 6.

With the literary artist it is not really possible to detect in the life itself a kind of truth that exists before the work and comes to be reflected in it—directly in autobiography, more or less indirectly in novel or poem. The two simply are not independent: “The great events of my life are my works,” Balzac said. Autobiography is also a work or an event of the life, and yet it turns back on the life and affects it by a kind of boomerang. Psychoanalysis and other depth psychologies have made us familiar with the idea already implicitly contained in the practice of the sacrament of confession that in becoming conscious of the past one alters the present. As Sainte-Beuve remarked in the case of the writer, “Writing is liberation.” After self-examination a man is no longer the man he was before. Autobiography is therefore never the finished image or the fixing forever of an individual life: the human being is always a making, a doing; memoirs look to an essence beyond existence, and in manifesting it they serve to create it. In the dialogue with himself, the writer does not seek to say a final word that would complete his life; he strives only to embrace more closely the always secret but never refused sense of his own destiny.

Here again, every work is autobiographical insofar as being registered in the life it alters the life to come. Better still, it is the peculiar nature of the literary calling that the work, even before it has been realized, can have an effect on being. The autobiography is lived, played, before being written; it fixes a kind of retrospective mark on the event even as it occurs. One critic has observed that reading the correspondence of Mérimée gives the impression that his way of living the episodes he describes is already affected by the account that he will give of them to his friends. Likewise, Thibaudet defends Chateaubriand against those who accuse him of having falsified his Memoirs: “His way of arranging his life after the event is consubstantial with his art. It is not deformation but formation from within. We cannot separate his falsehoods from his style.” We can only “see his personality and his life as a function of his work and also its consequence—as, at one and the same time, the cause and the effect of his style.”¹⁰

Style should be understood here not only as a principle of writing but as a line of life, a “life style.” The truth of the life is not different in kind from the truth of the work: the great artist, the great writer lives, in a sense, for his autobiography. This could easily be dem-

¹⁰ Albert Thibaudet, *Réflexions sur la critique* (Paris, 1939), pp. 27, 29.

onstrated in the case of Goethe or of Baudelaire, of Gauguin, of Beethoven, of Byron, of Shelley, and of many others among the greatest artists. There is a romantic life style as there is a classical, a baroque, an existentialist, or a decadent life style. The life, the work, the autobiography appear thus like three aspects of a single affirmation, united by a system of constant intercourse. A single acquiescence justifies the venture of action or the venture of writing, so that it would be possible to discern a symbolic correlation between them and to bring out the gravitational centers, the inflectional points of a destiny. In this correlation, theoreticians of *Formgeschichte* [Form History]¹¹ have found the starting point for a method of literary and artistic interpretation that is specially concerned to lay bare those essential themes that will render the man and the work intelligible. Chronological order, which is altogether external, thus seems illusory; literary history makes room for what Bertram, in Nietzsche's case, calls a personal "mythology" organized around leitmotifs of the total, integral experience: the knight, Death and the Devil, Socrates, Portofino, Eleusis—those overwhelming ideas that Bertram finds leaving their deep impress on Nietzsche's work as on his life.

In the final analysis, then, the prerogative of autobiography consists in this: that it shows us not the objective stages of a career—to discern these is the task of the historian—but that it reveals instead the effort of a creator to give the meaning of his own mythic tale. Every man is the first witness of himself; yet the testimony that he thus produces constitutes no ultimate, conclusive authority—not only because objective scrutiny will always discover inaccuracies but much more because there is never an end to this dialogue of a life with itself in search of its own absolute. Here every man is for himself the existential stakes in a gamble that cannot be entirely lost nor entirely won. Artistic creation is a struggle with the angel, in which the creator is the more certain of being vanquished since the opponent is still himself. He wrestles with his shadow, certain only of never laying hold of it.

¹¹ Cf. Paul Böckmann, *Formgeschichte der Deutschen Dichtung* (1949) for the literary application of *Formgeschichte* (trans. note).