

## Autobiography and Historical Consciousness

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\*Thesis: It is the intent of this paper to argue the thesis that the autobiographic genre took on its full dimension and richness when Western Man acquired a thoroughly historical understanding of his existence. Autobiography assumes a significant cultural function around a.d. 1800. The growing significance of autobiography is thus a part of that great intellectual revolution marked by **the emergence of the particular modern form of historical mindedness** we call historicism or historicism(821).

\*Autobiography as **a form of expression best suited to reveal the developing self-conceptions of Western Man**(822).

\*The essential subject matter of all autobiographic writing is **concretely experienced reality** and not the realm of brute external fact. External reality is embedded in experience, but it is **viewed from within** the modification of inward life forming our experience; ... Autobiography presupposes **a writer intent upon reflection on this inward realm of experience**(822-23).

\*Real autobiography is **a weave in which self-consciousness is delicately threaded throughout interrelated experience...centered upon an aware self aware of its relation to its experiences**(824).

\*A moment of recognition, a moment of "conversion":...the author subsequently recognizes **the significant role of the crisis** in his life and that he perceives **an order and meaning in that life illuminated by the insights gained at an enlightening moment**(824-25).

\*"heuristic" nature of autobiographic writing: the very act of writing is the attempt to find the new setting of the compass; **the very quest**

for meaning displaces the artistic intent to render the pattern of a life having run its meaningful course(825).

\*Rousseau undertook **his autobiographic effort** with the oft-repeated intention of “reliving” the moments of the past while writing about them, he has a reinforced tendency of re-endowing that moment with its drama and passion...**the Rousseau who relives the moment and the Rousseau who assigns value to that moment condition one another**(826).

\*Montaigne as the very founder of autobiography as a literary genre: he weighs, he tests, he experiments, he assays, and by the very activity signaled by the verb *essayer* he creates a literary genre which he himself filled with such autobiographic content that it left him with the feeling **his book had become consubstantial with himself**(825).

\*Autobiography as retrospective interpretation: he (autobiographer) **imposes on the past the order of the present...** By this superimposition of the completed fact, the fact in the making acquires a meaning it did not possess before. **The meaning of the past is intelligible and meaningful in terms of the present understanding;** it is thus with all historical understanding(826).

\*The dominant autobiographic truth is, therefore, **the vision of the pattern and meaning of life which the autobiographer has at the moment of writing his autobiography**(827).

\*“life” not a snapshot but a process: Inasmuch as autobiography proper is that literary form in which a self retraces its life, the form is, obviously, conditioned by the prevailing conception of “life.” The hallmark of life is that it is process...autobiography, by virtue of its inward experiential marks, may indeed have a special function in helping us to understand life as process(828).

\*“Unfolding” or “Development”: Augustine sought to describe the elements of this upward return of the creature, life as the Christian’s pilgrimage toward the *vita beata*(the good life); he perceived the pattern in his very own life, but thereby also set the pattern for all Christian conceptions of the essential form of life...the process is primarily one of an inner unfolding(830).

\*The Case of Rousseau: He perceived it to be his sad experience that **the social world and the civilization surrounding him not only stood in the way but actually falsified and corrupted the unfolding of the truly natural, good, and uncorrupted man he knew to be his ultimate destiny...**A man could be true to himself and his desired inner development either by absconding from a false world or by changing society. **Only with the complete manipulation of social circumstances** (the problem was seen differently in regard to natural circumstance), **so as to make them correspond fully to the natural processes of growth, might man come to live in harmony with his world**(832).

\*The Case of Goethe: The German poet wanted to present his early formation as a poet, the history of his “education” in the wide sense of the term *Bildungsgeschichte* , and as autobiographer he knew from the outset that this meant showing **the decisive encounter of a self-in-formation with a constantly evolving world...**He and his world were joined; life was to be conceived as a coexistence... **In living with one’s world, one forms a self as the world moves on, and one helps form a world as oneself is being formed**(833).

\*Autobiography inseparably linked to the problem of self-conception: Autobiography will have a limited and uniform function as the carrier of self-conception for all who stress the belief in one uniform human nature. If we place the premium on the view of man as a creature with a fixed potential, as a being always striving for the one universal ideal of being human, then the history of

autobiography is simply the story of the ever-repeated attempt to seek and to attain the one true form of Man. **One form of self results in one form of autobiography**(834).

\*Classical and Medieval Aspects: It is very indicative of the Homeric personality that a Telemachus responds to the inquiry: Who are you? by answering: I am Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, the son of Laertes, the son of Autolycus. **Self-identification is bound to the identification of the dominant bloodline**(835).

\*The Socratic insistence on the inner guidance of reason, on **the unification of the personality in accord with reason**, caused a modification of the Hellenic personality... the ideal of the wise man was kept in a close relation to **the ideal of the public man**...In the intensely aristocratic ancient culture **the two ideals of the statesman or of the philosopher were the dominant models by which to direct the personality**(836).

\*The advent of Christianity: the turn toward and inner-directed personality: the most startling ideal of all...was the ideal expressed in the *Imitatio Christi*...For the very processes of self-formation a man thus has before his eyes the concretely describable, substantive model of being. He will not see this simply as his model; on the contrary, **the model exercises its intensely persuasive and attractive power because it is taken to be of more universal validity**(837).

\*Since the time of the Renaissance: This ideal is characterized by its very rejection of a valid model for the individual...It then appears to be a precious aspect of the human existence that **each and every individual is individually distinctive**, that every person is unique and, therefore, incomparable, unrepeatable, and ultimately indescribable. The individual is ineffable. The general phenomenon Man can only be thought of as a Protean potentiality. Each individual existence is but one of the actualizations of this indefinitely variable human

potential. If you wish to know about humanity, you need to know man in all his variations...**Each life, as a one-time and one-time-only actualization of the potential, is marked by an irreplaceable value.** That man begins to place high value on this ineffable individuality of being is **ultimately the decisive point**(838-39).

\*Autobiography as a self-realization: when a man concludes that his very self represents one unique and unrepeatable form of being human, it becomes the perceived task in life to “fulfill,” to actualize this very specific individuality. By doing so, he can enrich the human cosmos by that one specific form of humanity which only he represents; he will commit a “crime” against the total human cosmos if he neglects to fulfill his individuality or if he falsifies it, for, if he does, he impoverishes humanity in leaving one of its variants forever unexpressed. The power of the model now wanes in the process of self-formation. The guiding star is the vision of an individuality which denies the very validity of a more general model. The individual must be true to himself; the decisions about life must be made in terms of what is appropriate to this self. To guide itself by adhering to a more universalized model will carry with it the danger of falsifying the individuality; only where the model-like traits are in harmony with the individuality do they have a live function. When a man is possessed by such a self-consciousness of his individuality, when he cultivates it as a matter of high value, he has less use for fitting his autobiographic account into a given script, into a prepressed formal literary frame. He has no room for role playing(839).

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The full view of individuality only came with the later part of the eighteenth century and was dependent upon **a more completely developed historical sense**...The Christian autobiographers narrate their lives as dramatic accounts of selves finding their way to God,

but such accounts carry within themselves the same historical limitations that are inherent in the Christian providential view of history...All sorts of factors of secularization, growing ever stronger since the end of the Middle Ages, gradually undermined this historic vision until a point would come at which man was more fascinated with viewing his own diversified doings as ends in themselves than with his concern about a pilgrimage to a Hereafter..Voltaire was not the first to declare that it was time to have done with providential history altogether, but he became a very effective spokesman for the intention to study the human past as the expression of man's need to justify his existence by building civilized life, by thus giving meaning to life which would be meaningless if man did not assign it his own appropriate purpose. The turn to a secular conception of civilization left the providential view of history behind...Individual existence had its own inherent justification and its own *raison d'être*. Every existence was marked by its singular locus in space and its moment in time. It had to be understood in terms of its specified setting and its unrepeatable development. It was an ineffable harmony of diverse givens. It had its very own story(844-47).