

“Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” translated by James Olney

***Autobiography becomes possible only under certain metaphysical preconditions:**

1. 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(30-31).

2. **Humanity**, which previously aligned its development to the great cosmic cycles, **finds itself engaged in an autonomous adventure...Henceforth, man knows himself a responsible agent...he along adds consciousness to nature, leaving there the sign of his presence**(31).

3. Autobiographer considering 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 official 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**(31-32).

***Christianity bringing a new anthropology:**

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...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(34)...
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(34)**.

***Autobiographer vs Painter:** 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...Autobiography... 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(35)**.

***Autobiography assuming the task of reconstructing the unity of a life across time:**

...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... “a state of the soul.”(37)

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. ...autobiography is a second reading of experience, and it is truer than the first because it adds to experience itself

consciousness of it(38).

*Autobiography for a personal justification:

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...**a kind of apologetics or theodicy of the individual being**(39).

*The original sin of autobiography is first one of logical coherence and rationalization:

...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(41).

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...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**...**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...in autobiography **the truth of facts is subordinate to the**

truth of man(42-43).

*Autobiography is itself a meaning a the life:

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.

*Autobiography as a work of art:

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 *Memoires d'outretornbe* should be full of errors, omissions, and lies, and of little consequence also that Chateaubriand made up most of his Voyage en Amerique: 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**(43).

*Autobiography is not simply recovering a hidden treasure already there...“To create and in creating to be created”:

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(44).**

*Autobiography as 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...**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(45).**

*The artist’s entire work as his Autobiography;

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...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**(47).

*The prerogative of autobiography;

...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(48).