

1. What is Autobiography?

from Linda Anderson's "Introduction" of her book *Autobiography* (The New Critical Idiom series)

'Autobiography is indeed everywhere one cares to find it', Candace Lang wrote in 1982, thus acknowledging a major problem for anyone who studies this topic: if the writer is always, in the broadest sense, implicated in the work, **any writing may be judged to be autobiographical, depending on how one reads it** (Lang 1982: 6). However, autobiography has also been recognized since the late eighteenth century as a distinct literary genre and, as such, an important testing ground for critical controversies about a range of ideas including authorship, selfhood, representation and the division between fact and fiction. Philippe Lejeune considered the problems, and in 1982 produced the following judicious and widely quoted definition:

A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality.

(Lejeune 1982: 193)

However, Lejeune himself remained dissatisfied with this since it did not seem to provide a sufficient boundary between autobiography and the adjacent genres of biography and fiction. A certain 'latitude' in classifying particular cases might be admitted but one condition for autobiography was absolute: **there must be 'identity between the author, the narrator, and the protagonist'** (Lejeune 1982: 193). ...Intention, however, is further defined as a particular kind of 'honest' intention which then guarantees the 'truth' of the writing. Trust the author, this rather circular argument goes, if s/he seems to be trustworthy. Hence for Roy Pascal, an early critic of the genre, autobiography depends on **'the seriousness of the author, the seriousness of his personality and his intention in writing'** (Pascal 1960: 60). ... For these critics, autobiographies are seen as providing proof of the validity and importance of **a certain conception of authorship: authors who have authority over their own texts and whose writings can be read as forms of direct access to themselves** (Olney 1972: 332). Even Philippe Lejeune, with whom we started, and for whom the concept of the author is more difficult to define, requiring him to resort to 'authoritative' legal terminology, proposes an 'autobiographical pact' or 'contract' based on 'an intention to honour the signature'. According to Lejeune, the author of an autobiography implicitly declares that **he is the person he says he is and that the author and the protagonist are the same** (Lejeune 1982: 202);

2. Three monumental Autobiographies of historical significance

1) St. Augustine's *The Confession*

-The episode showing his conversion in his *Confessions*

8.12.29 So was I speaking and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when, lo! I heard from a neighbouring house a voice, as of boy or girl, I know not, chanting, and oft repeating, "Take up and read; Take up and read." Instantly, my countenance altered, I began to think most intently whether children were wont in any kind of play to sing such words: nor could I remember ever to have heard the like. So checking the torrent of my tears, I arose; interpreting it to be no other than a command from God to open the book, and read the first chapter I should find. For I had heard of Antony, that coming in during the reading of the Gospel, he received the admonition, as if what was being read was spoken to him: Go, sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come and follow me:(Matt. 19:21) and by such oracle he was forthwith converted unto Thee. Eagerly then I returned to the place where Alypius was sitting; for there had I laid the volume of the Apostle when I arose thence. I seized, opened, and in silence read that section on which my eyes first fell: Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, in concupiscence(Romans 13:13-14). No further would I read; nor needed I: for instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away.

8.12.30 Then putting my finger between, or some other mark, I shut the volume, and with a calmed countenance made it known to Alypius. And what was wrought in him, which I knew not, he thus showed me. He asked to see what I had read: I showed him; and he looked even further than I had read, and I knew not what followed. This followed, him that is weak in the faith, receive; which he applied to himself, and disclosed to me. And by this admonition was he strengthened; and by a good resolution and purpose, and most corresponding to his character, wherein he did always very far differ from me, for the better, without any turbulent delay he joined me. Thence we go in to my mother; we tell her; she rejoiceth: we relate in order how it took place: she leaps for joy, and triumpheth, and blesseth Thee, Who are able to do above that which we ask or think; for she perceived that Thou hadst given her more for me, than she was wont to beg by her pitiful and most sorrowful groanings. For thou convertedst me unto Thyself, so that I sought neither wife, nor any hope of this world, standing in that rule of faith, where Thou hadst showed me unto her in a vision, so many years before. And Thou

didst convert her mourning into joy, much more plentiful than she had desired, and in a much more precious and purer way than she erst required, by having grandchildren of my body.

-from Spengemann's chapter on Augustine

Spengeman's summary of the formal structure of St. Augustine *The Confessions* of St. Augustine in his book "The Forms of Autobiography"

The structure of Augustine's *Confessions* is tripartite. In Books I through IX, the Augustine who has already received the gift of faith stands upon the fixed point of an immutable truth and looks back, or rather down, upon the sinful life he led between his birth and his conversion. To dramatize the importance of conversion, Augustine draws a sharp distinction between his old, unregenerate self, who could see his life only from an ever-shifting perspective within it, and his new converted self, who sees that life as an eternally complete moral design with all its parts existing) simultaneously in timeless space. The religious significance of the conversion, the accuracy of the meanings he assigns to his past life, the whole lesson of the narrative, in fact, depend upon the narrator's ability to persuade himself and the reader that he has attained this timeless wisdom, and can now see the true, eternal pattern of his false, temporal life.

Once the narrative arrives at the moment of conversion, however, and the old Augustine gives way to the new, the narrator ceases to recount his past life and begins a meditative inquiry into three topics: memory, time, and the Creation. In this second part of *The Confessions*, Books X through XII, the narrator no longer surveys his temporal life from a point outside it; he moves through the temporal process of meditation in search of some timeless wisdom beyond. No longer do we have two Augustines, one trapped in time and the other standing outside it. Now, the Augustine who lives the life and the one who recounts it are the same person, and that person finds himself once again in an uncertain, temporal condition, between past conversion and the ultimate redemption he seeks. If the import of part one depended upon the narrator's standing still in the presence of an unchanging truth already known, the success of part two depends on his ability to move rapidly through his changing thoughts toward a truth which is yet unknown.

The Confessions then conclude with Book XIII, which continues the meditation upon the Creation, but in quite a different spirit. Here again, the Augustine who acts and the one who reflects and explains are the same person, a faithful but still time-bound mortal in search of truth. Instead of pursuing his quest for complete understanding along the temporal path of inquiry, however, the narrator now confesses directly to God his conviction that faith itself is wisdom. Although time, change, and ignorance are the inescapable conditions of our mortality, when

redeemed by faith, time can symbolize eternity, inquiry can adumbrate knowledge, corruption can mirror grace, the created can glimpse its creator, and the conditional can find, in the fleeting instant, its absolute ground.

b) from Montaigne's *Essays*

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To the reader

This, reader, is an honest book. It warns you at the outset that my sole purpose in writing it has been a private and domestic one. I have had no thought of serving you or of my own fame; such a plan would be beyond my power. I have intended it solely for the pleasure of my relatives and friends so that, when they have lost me - which they soon must - they may recover some features of my character and disposition, and thus keep the memory they have of me more completely and vividly alive.

Had it been my purpose to seek the world's favour, I should have put on finer clothes, and have presented myself in a studied attitude. But I want to appear in my simple, natural, and everyday dress, without strain or artifice; for it is myself that I portray. My imperfections may be read to the life, and my natural form will be here in so far as respect for the public allows. Had my lot been cast among those peoples who are said still to live under the kindly liberty of nature's primal laws, I should, I assure you, most gladly have painted myself completely and in all my nakedness.

So, reader, I am myself the substance of my book, and there is no reason why you should waste your leisure on so frivolous and unrewarding a subject.

Farewell then, from Montaigne,

this first day of March, 1580.

Book One: Chapter 21

On the power of the imagination

I am one of those who are very much affected by the imagination. Everyone feels its impact, but some are knocked over by it. On me it makes an intense impression, and my practice is rather to avoid it than to resist it. I wish I could consort only with healthy and the cheerful, for the sight of another's anguish gives me real pain, and my body has often taken over the sensations of some

person I am with. A perpetual cough irritates my lungs and my throat; and I am more reluctant to visit a sick man to whom I am bound by duty and interest than one who has a smaller claim on my attention and consideration. As I observe a disease, so I catch it give it lodging in myself. It is no surprise to me that the imagination should bring fevers and death to those who allow it free play and encourage it. Simon Thomas was a great physician in his day, and I remember meeting him once at the house of a rich old man who suffered with his lungs. When the patient asked him how he could be cured, Master Thomas answered that one way would be for him to infect me with a liking for his company. Then if he were to fix his gaze on the freshness of my complexion, and his thoughts on the youthful gaiety and vigour with which I overflowed, and if he were to feast his sense on my flourishing state of health, his own condition might well improve. What he forgot to say was that mine might at the same time deteriorate.

-From translator's introduction

MONTAIGNE'S Essays are, in effect, an extended autobiography, the only one ever to be written in this way. Other autobiographers begin with the writer's birth, and carry on, with more or less digressions, to that moment when he picks up the pen to sketch out his first chapter. Montaigne, however, does not proceed along the line of time; he does not tell us what event succeeded what other. His aim is to present **a portrait of himself in a frame of timelessness**; to build up from a number of partial sketches **the essential man**; not as an unchanging being, but as **one who retained a core of identity** more important as a subject than the events that befell him.

Montaigne, as he says several times, is following a new method. In order to leave this portrait of himself as a memorial for his friends and relations, he makes a number of trials - for such is the meaning of the word *essai*, which he invented, as a literary term - in order to test **his response to different subjects and situations**. He writes on education and friendship, on the uncertainty of our judgement and the strength of the imagination, or develops what appears to be an entirely wayward reflection on the subject of cannibals or coaches. But all the time he is making a trial of himself and his opinions, in an endeavour to see which of them are permanent and which temporary; which of them arise from the passing circumstances of his life and the particular climate of his times, with its pedantic scholarship, its religious dissensions, and its cruel civil wars, and which belong to the man himself, Michel de Montaigne.

c) Rousseau's *The Confessions* (1782)

THE CONFESSIONS OF JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

by Jean-Jacques Rousseau

translated by W. Conyngham Mallory

BOOK I

[1712-1728]

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I HAVE begun on a work which is without precedent, whose accomplishment will have no imitator. I propose to set before my fellow-mortals a man in all the truth of nature; and this man shall be myself.

I have studied mankind and know my heart; I am not made like any one I have been acquainted with, perhaps like no one in existence; if not better, I at least claim originality, and whether Nature has acted rightly or wrongly in destroying the mold in which she cast me, can only be decided after I have been read.

I will present myself, whenever the last trumpet shall sound, before the Sovereign Judge with this book in my hand, and loudly proclaim, "Thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I. With equal freedom and veracity have I related what was laudable or wicked, I have concealed no crimes, added no virtues; and if I have sometimes introduced superfluous ornament, it was merely to occupy a void occasioned by defect of memory: I may have supposed that certain, which I only knew to be probable, but have never asserted as truth, a conscious falsehood. Such as I was, I have declared myself; sometimes vile and despicable, at others, virtuous, generous, and sublime; even as Thou hast read my inmost soul: Power Eternal! assemble round Thy throne an innumerable throng of my fellow-mortals, let them listen to my confessions, let them blush at my depravity, let them tremble at my sufferings; let each in his turn expose with equal sincerity the failings, the wanderings of his heart, and if he dare, aver, I was better than that man."

from Book IV (1731-1732)

The appearance of Aurora seemed so delightful one morning that, putting on my clothes, I hastened into the country, to see the rising of the sun. I enjoyed that pleasure in its utmost extent; it was one week after midsummer; the earth was covered with verdure and flowers, the nightingales, whose soft warblings were almost concluded, seemed to vie with each other, and in concert with birds of various kinds to bid adieu to spring, and hail the approach of a beautiful summer's day: one of those lovely days that are no longer to be enjoyed at my age, and which have never been seen on the melancholy soil I now inhabit.

I had rambled insensibly, to a considerable distance the town- the heat

augmented- I was walking in the shade along a valley, by the side of a brook, I heard behind me the step of horses, and the voice of some females who, though they seemed embarrassed, did not laugh the less heartily on that account. I turn round, hear myself called by name, and approaching, find two young people of my acquaintance, excellent horsewomen, could not make their horses cross the rivulet. having been sent from that country for some youthful folly, had imitated Madam de Warrens, at whose house I had sometimes seen her; but not having, like her, a pension, she had been fortunate in this attachment to Mademoiselle Galley, who had prevailed on her mother to engage her young friend as a companion, till she could be otherwise provided for. Mademoiselle Galley was one year younger than her friend, handsomer, more delicate, more ingenious, and, to complete all, extremely well made. They loved each other tenderly, and the good disposition of both could not fail to render their union durable, if some lover did not derange it. They informed me they were going to Toune, an old castle belonging to Madam Galley, and implored my assistance to make their horses cross the stream, not being able to compass it themselves. I would have given each a cut or two with the whip, but they feared I might be kicked, and themselves thrown; I therefore had recourse to another expedient, I took hold of Mademoiselle Galley's horse and led him through the brook, the water reaching half-way up my legs. The other followed without any difficulty. This done, I would have paid my compliments to the ladies, and walked off like a great booby as I was, but after whispering escape thus: you have got wet in our service, and we ought in conscience to take care and dry you. If you please you must go with us, you are now our prisoner." My heart began to beat- I looked at Mademoiselle Galley- "Yes, yes," added she, laughing at my fearful look, "our prisoner of war; come, get up behind her, we shall give a good account of you." "But, mademoiselle," continued I, "I have not the honor to be acquainted with your mother; what will she say on my Toune, we are alone, we shall return at night, and you shall come back with us."

The stroke of electricity has not a more instantaneous effect than trembled with joy, and when it became necessary to clasp her in order to hold myself on, my heart beat so violently that she perceived it, and told me hers beat also from a fear of falling. In my present posture, I might naturally have considered this an invitation to satisfy myself of the truth of her assertion, yet I did not dare, and during the whole way my arms served as a girdle (a very close one. I must confess), without being a moment displaced. Some women that may read this would be for giving me a box on the ear, and, truly, I deserved it.

The gayety of the journey, and the chat of these girls, so enlivened me, that during the whole time we passed together we never ceased talking a moment. They had set me so thoroughly at ease, that my tongue spoke as fast as my eyes, though not exactly the same things. Some minutes, indeed, when I was left alone with either, the conversation became a little embarrassed, but neither of them was

absent long enough to allow time for explaining the cause.

Arrived at Toune, and myself well dried, we breakfasted together; after which it was necessary to settle the important business of preparing dinner. The young ladies cooked, kissing from time to time the farmer's children, while the poor scullion looked on grumbling. Provisions had been sent for from town, and there was everything necessary for a good dinner, but unhappily they had forgotten wine; this forgetfulness was by no means astonishing in girls who seldom drank any, but I was sorry for the omission, as I had reckoned on its help, thinking it might add to my confidence. They were sorry likewise, and perhaps from the same motive; though I had no reason to say this, for their lively and charming gayety was innocence itself; besides, there were two of them, what could they expect from me? They went everywhere about the neighborhood to seek for wine, but none could be procured, so pure and sober are the peasants in those parts. As they were expressing their concern, I begged them not to give themselves any uneasiness on my account, for while with them I had no occasion for wine to intoxicate me. This was the only gallantry I ventured at during the whole of the day, and I believe the sly rogues saw well enough that I said nothing but the truth.

We dined in the kitchen: the two friends were seated on the benches, one on each side the long table, and their guest at the end, between them, on a three-legged stool. What a dinner! how charming the remembrance! While we can enjoy, at so small an expense, such pure, such true delights, why should we be solicitous for others? Never did those petite soupers, so celebrated in Paris, equal this: I do not only say for real pleasure and gayety, but even for sensuality. After dinner, we were economical; instead of drinking the coffee we had reserved at breakfast, we kept it for an afternoon collation, with cream, and some cakes they had brought with them. To keep our appetites in play, we went into the orchard, meaning to finish our dessert with cherries. I got into a tree, throwing them down bunches, from which they returned the stones through the branches. One time, Mademoiselle Galley, holding out her apron, and drawing back her head, stood so fair, and I took such good aim, that I dropped a bunch into her bosom. On her laughing, I said to myself, "Why are not my lips cherries? how gladly would I throw them there likewise!"

Thus the day passed with the greatest freedom, yet with the utmost decency; not a single equivocal word, not one attempt at double-meaning pleasantry; yet this delicacy was not affected, we only performed the parts our hearts dictated; in short, my modesty, some will say my folly, was such that the greatest familiarity that escaped me was once kissing the hand of Mademoiselle Galley; it is true, the attending circumstances helped to stamp a value on this trifling favor; we were alone, I was embarrassed, her eyes were fixed on the ground, and my lips, instead of uttering words, were pressed on her hand, which she drew gently back after the

salute, without any appearance of displeasure. I know not what I should have said to her, but her friend entered, and at that moment I thought her ugly. At length, they bethought themselves, that they must return to town before night; even now we had but just time to reach it by daylight; and we hastened our departure in the same order we came. Had I pleased myself, I should certainly have reversed this order, for the glance of Mademoiselle Galley had reached my heart, but I dared not mention it, and the proposal could not reasonably come from her. On the way, we expressed our sorrow that the day was over, but far from complaining of the shortness of its duration, we were conscious of having prolonged it by every possible amusement.

I quitted them in nearly the same spot where I had taken them up. With what regret did we part! With what pleasure did we form projects to renew our meeting! Delightful hours, which we passed innocently together, ye were worth ages of familiarity! The sweet remembrance of this day cost those amiable girls nothing; the tender union which reigned among us equaled more lively pleasure, with which it could not have existed. We loved each other without shame or mystery, and wished to continue our reciprocal affection. There is a species of enjoyment connected with innocence of manners which is superior to any other, because it has no interval; for myself, the remembrance of such a day touches me nearer, delights me more, and returns with greater rapture to my heart, than any other pleasures I ever tasted. I hardly knew what I wished with those charming girls. I do not say, that had the arrangement been in my power, I should have divided my heart between them; I certainly felt some degree of preference: though I should have been happy to have had Mademoiselle better as a confidante; be that as it may, I felt on leaving them as though I could not live without either. Who would have thought that I should never see them more; and that here our ephemeral amours must end?

Those who read this will not fail to laugh at my gallantries, and remark, that after very promising preliminaries, my most forward adventures concluded by a kiss of the hand: yet be not mistaken, reader, in your estimate of my enjoyments: I have, perhaps, tasted more real pleasure in my amours, which concluded by a kiss of the hand, than you will ever have in yours, which, at least, begin there.

-Spengeman's summary of the formal structure of Rousseau *The Confessions* of Rousseau in his book *The Forms of Autobiography*

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Motivated initially by the conviction of his own complete individuality, Rousseau sets out to write a historical autobiography, to explain how he came to be the man he is by reviewing, in the light of his present situation, the train of events which

led him to that situation. Rousseau's method here closely resembles Franklin's secularization of the historical form, interpreting the life solely in relation to its temporal outcome rather than in relation to some timeless, over-arching form of truth. Unlike Franklin, however, whose acknowledged success justified retroactively the actions, good and bad, that led up to it, Rousseau is a social pariah and a political exile. Consequently, although a review of his past life may explain how he came to be such a miserable scapegrace, it will not automatically reconcile him with the society upon whose good opinion his fame, his immortality depends. To justify himself in his reader's eyes, he must argue that his present troubles are due to circumstances beyond his own control and that his reputation does not accurately reflect his true character.

Rousseau therefore proposes to reveal the true self that lies hidden behind his often disgraceful behavior and thus to correct the misapprehensions of those who know him only from the outside—by reputation or through the slanderous reports of his enemies. In one sense, this intention differs markedly from Franklin's. Equating his reputation with the truth about himself, Franklin sought to align himself with society by portraying his life as an example of publicly acknowledged values. Rousseau, on the other hand, means to correct his reputation by persuading society to abandon its characteristic hard-heartedness and sympathize with him. In an equally important sense, of course, Rousseau's desire to remake society in his own image does not differ fundamentally from Franklin's hope of persuading society to imitate his own rise to success and Reason. It simply makes explicit the radical individualism that Franklin's acceptance by his public had enabled him to disguise as a lesson in social conformity. The point remains, however, that whereas Franklin could portray his experiences as having generated the true self which is also the basis for his good reputation, Rousseau must describe the experiences that produced his bad reputation as having somehow obscured his true, essentially worthy, self.

To prosecute this combined *apologia* and social indictment, Rousseau adopts the argument that the complete, true, and innocent soul he received from Nature at birth has been repeatedly violated and gradually dissipated by his confrontations with unnatural, unfeeling society. In effect, this interpretation of the life turns the historical form upside down. Instead of reviewing the process by which he came into possession of true being, Rousseau reviews the process through which his originally true being has been scattered among the times and places of his progressively unhappy life. His experiences, in other words, have taught him that experience is the enemy of truth and happiness. While this disparaging view of experience links Rousseau more closely to Augustine, who also distinguished sharply between the truth and the lessons of experience, than to Dante, Bunyan, and Franklin, who saw no necessary conflict between the truth and the experiences that revealed it to them, Rousseau stands apart from all his

predecessors, including Augustine, in drawing a clear line between the truth and his narrator's acquired knowledge. In all those earlier works, the narrator stands simultaneously in true being and in a knowledge of it, whether that knowledge has come from revelation entirely, from experience alone, or from some combination of the two. In Rousseau's *Confessions*, the narrator's knowledge comes entirely from the experiences that have perverted, destroyed, or at least obscured his true being. Consequently, his review of the experiences that taught him what he knows recapitulates the loss of his happiness, making the customarily happy task of historical recollection an occasion for mingled rancor and self pity.

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Rousseau's *Confessions* portray a consciousness trapped in time and dependent upon temporal action for its fleeting apprehensions of the absolute. Lacking an achieved self upon which to stand and see all past times laid out before it in a timeless design, the mind must move unceasingly among its memories of conditioned experience in search of their absolute ground. In this situation, biographical review, the method of historical autobiography, no longer serves its purpose of displaying the pattern which is described by past events and which assigns to each event its place and consequent meaning. With every movement of the self-seeking consciousness, the overall pattern, and hence the relative value of each event, changes. The value that historical autobiographers assigned to events on the basis of their place in the overall pattern of the life, Rousseau measures primarily by how much feeling a remembered event can elicit. And once feeling constitutes the primary standard of value, the truest autobiographical statements are those which bear the heaviest emotional freight, rather than those which conform to some generally accepted notion of historical accuracy, doctrinal orthodoxy, or public morality.

At this point, the distinction between fact and fiction, between autobiographical recollection and autobiographical invention, begins to blur. Not even lies or self-contradictions are untrue as long as they generate those ecstatic feelings which are the ground of true being and of sympathetic consanguinity. By the same token, a perfectly accurate recollection or an unexceptionable reflection which evokes no feeling, no conviction of self, can only exacerbate the autobiographer's estrangement from the truth and erect another barrier of individual peculiarity between him and his potentially sympathetic reader. Rousseau says that he became self-conscious upon learning to read, that his character was formed by what he read, and that his nature has found its proper theatre of action in writing and imagining fictions. Conversely, among the experiences in which his original being has deposited portions of itself over the years, the most important are his fictions, which, being still available in their original form, do not require the mediation of

unstable memory but rather provide immediate access to the lost self that went into them. In very much the same sense that these fictions are autobiographical, *The Confessions* are fictional, resting their truthfulness less upon the accuracies of its depicted events or the acceptability of its judgments than upon the feelings it calls forth and expresses—the self that is realized through them, is preserved for posterity in them, and cannot be abstracted from them. Rousseau's autobiography does not so much refer to the life he lived elsewhere as record the life he lived in the act of composing it—the only life he could count on to overcome time and achieve the immortality he sought.

Having begun his autobiography with the idea of telling the truth about himself, Rousseau came to regard the book as a way of finding out that truth and then as a way of living truthfully, imaginatively, in the flickering light of that ineffable bliss which he had always considered his true destiny but from which time and experience had exiled him. Although *The Confessions* retain the biographical content of historical autobiography, and although Rousseau attempts sporadically to maintain a stable perspective on the moving past, his belief that his past experiences have divorced him from true being and his conviction that passionate, imaginative action is truer than calm, rational judgment deny the fundamental premises of the historical form and foreshadow the eventual abandonment of both biographical data and a comprehending narrator by autobiographers in the poetic mode. Rousseau's shift, in mid-passage, from historical explanation to philosophical inquiry is itself foreshadowed, far back, in the movement from part one to part two of Augustine's *Confessions*. And like that movement, Rousseau's points far ahead, to those modern writers who turned from life to find themselves in autobiography.