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Autobiography and Historical Consciousness

Karl J. Weintraub

An autobiographic instinct may be as old as Man Writing; but only since 1800 has Western Man placed a premium on autobiography. A bibliography of all autobiographic writing prior to that time would be a small fascicule; a bibliography since 1800 a thick tome. The ground behind this simpleminded assertion of a quantitative measure cannot be explained away by easy reference to the mass literacy of the modern world or the greater ease of publishing. It is as much a fact of cultural conditions as is the significant relation of rhetoric to the intense public mindedness of classical men, the relative insignificance of tragedy in a thoroughly Christianized world view, the disappearance of epic from a nonaristocratic world, or the powerful assertion of the novel in an age of burghers. The usage of the term "autobiography" itself is suggestive, although this mode of historical explanation is always defective in the sense that such older terms as "hypomnemata," "commentarii," "vita," "confessions," or "memoirs" may well have covered the functions subsequently encapsulated in a newly fashionable term. In German the term makes its appearance shortly before 1800; the *Oxford English Dictionary* attributes first English usage to Southey in an article on Portuguese literature from the year 1809.

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 historicalism.

As the more systematical and rigorous bent of mind of the literary

scholar and critic will soon discern: these are but the reflections of a simpleminded historian. They rest in the work of some years on the history of autobiography as a form of expression best suited to reveal the developing self-conceptions of Western men. At best, such reflections are meant to stimulate discussion about a genre deserving of clarification.¹

I. *Problems of the Genre*

Since the word "autobiography," by its derivation, means no more than that the life recorded is the life lived by the writer, the reach of the term is very wide. Lyric poetry rarely can be free of strong autobiographic elements; yet it makes no sense to let this great poetic genre be swallowed up in the imperialistic overreach of a loosely defined term. The autobiographic factor in such poetry very rarely is "a life," more frequently it is but a moment of a life, and only sometimes indeed is it a significant moment summing up the quintessential meaning of a life. The individual can sum up his life on a tombstone, but here the rendition of the life becomes awesomely brief; when it is longer, it rather tends to become a record of state than a private document. Even if no such criterion can be hard and fast, it seems sensible, at least, to demand that autobiography have scope. It is expected to have recaptured a significant segment of life, a formidable portion of an experience.

Memoir

In *res gestae*, memoirs, and reminiscences we always have the identity of writer and reported experience so typical of autobiography. More often than not such writing is being listed as autobiography. But some important considerations should give us pause. 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

1. The ultimate ground for this interest lies in my reading of Burckhardt, Dilthey, Cassirer, Meinecke, Auerbach, and Lovejoy. For a study of the autobiographic genre, I found most helpful: Georg Misch, *Geschichte der Autobiographie*, 4 vols. (Leipzig and Frankfurt, 1907-69); Ray Pascal, *Design & Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1960); and Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie," in *Formen der Selbstdarstellung*, ed. Günther Reichenkron (Berlin, 1956).

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experience, but it is viewed from within the modification of inward life forming our experience; external fact attains a degree of symptomatic value derived from inward absorption and reflection. In *biography* this process is reversed: an outsider to a life tries to discern an inner structure of a life from an assembled mass of data on actualized external behavior and conduct or from the externalized statements of inward life. Autobiography presupposes a writer intent upon reflection on this inward realm of experience, someone for whom this inner world of experience is important. In memoir external fact is, indeed, translated into conscious experience, but the eye of the writer is focused less on the inner experience than on the external realm of fact. The interest of the memoirist is on the world of events, he records the memories of significant happenings; ideally he aspires to God's all-seeing eye. It is indicative that the historian loves him the more he can trust the urge to be the "objective" witness, the object-oriented recorder. In the autobiographic records of historical actors the focus is similarly on the *res gestae*, the deeds done; the message about the person lies in the value of the deeds done and less in the conscious reflection on the inner meaning of these acts for the personality. In the *Res gestae*, the Emperor Augustus presents the world historical deeds he performed; he tells us next to nothing about his inner experience. This important historical inscription forms almost an "ideal type" polar extremity on that spectrum of writings which would have at the other extremity an "ideal type" autobiography in which such a writer as Augustine dwells almost exclusively on the inner reflection of a life in which external fact only had an inner meaning.

The language being used here clearly suggests that the differentiation of memoir from autobiography cannot be a tight and definitive one. Ideal types, in Max Weber's sense, are as heuristic devices, as merely conceptual tools, always purer than the complex reality they are meant to explore. If they prove helpful in sorting out the complexities of the real world, fine! continue to use them; if you reify them, you commit an intellectual sin of the first order. It is thus not surprising that in the middle region of the spectrum we can find many works which are hybrids of memoir and autobiography. In such a work as Cardinal de Retz's *Memoires* autobiography and memoir interlace, with memoir seeming to dominate; in Chateaubriand's *Memoires d'outre-tombe*, the weight of the mixture pulls the work toward the autobiographic pole. The admittedly never-very-precise classifying judgment can be helped by an assessment of the author's intent and perspective. Is the book an attempt, preferably a conscious one, to present a life and a personality through its public acts; in other words, is this the life record of a man who fulfilled his existence in public activity, the autobiography of a *homo politicus*? Or is the work an attempt to present deeds and events for the sake of deeds and events, is it then memoir or *res gestae*? Is the focus on the inner

coherence of experience, or is it on the moment and the momentousness of events and of noteworthy achievements? The objective of autobiography is a life, not simply a record of the things which have “touched upon” an existence. If life is an interplay of an “I-and-its circumstances,” then its record should be more than an account of the circumstances. It would thus seem that autobiography adheres more closely to the true potential of the genre the more its real subject matter is character, personality, self-conception—all those difficult-to-define matters which ultimately determine the inner coherence and the meaning of a life. Real autobiography is a weave in which self-consciousness is delicately threaded throughout interrelated experience. It may have such varied functions as self-explication, self-discovery, self-clarification, self-formation, self-presentation, self-justification. All these functions interpenetrate easily, but all are centered upon an aware self aware of its relation to its experiences.

The Necessary Point of View

The genuine autobiographic effort is guided by a desire to discern and to assign meaning to a life. This effort is usually dominated by the writer’s “point of view,” in the most literal sense of the coordinate point in space and time at which the autobiographer stands to view his life. The essential issue is that such a point in time is located on the lifeline of the writer somewhere beyond a moment of crisis or beyond an experience, or a cumulative set of experiences which can play the same function as a crisis. This aspect comes forcefully to the fore in that type of autobiography which is built around a “conversion” experience: Augustine’s *Confessions* and the garden scene of August 386; Descartes’ *Discours de la methode* (a work that deserves to be read as autobiography) and the night from November 10 to 11, 1619 “dans une poêle”; Rousseau’s *Confessions* and the moment on an October afternoon in 1749 on the road to Vincennes; or Gibbon’s *Autobiography* and the scene on the steps of the Capitoline Hill on October 15, 1764. At such crisis points lives undergo a wrenching; personal matter in diffused suspension is catalyzed to take on clarified form; the personality gels like the crystal on its lattices. It is as if scales fall off the eyes which now begin to see purposes only seen confusedly before. The course of life is seen to have connecting lines previously hidden, converging now to a direction where uncoordinated drift and wandering prevailed before. The crisis may have its effects gradually only; eleven years of eventful change lay for Augustine between the scene in the garden and the composition of the *Confessions*, and Gibbon let several years pass before he truly applied himself to the *Decline and Fall*. The important matter is that 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. An Augustine was so filled with the wonder of this illumination that he turned his entire account of life into a hymn of praise to a divine power guiding a life when it seemed so unguided, directing the erring wanderer secretly back to a road which might eventually narrow into the path for a fully directed *peregrinatio*. In other lives the radical turning point is lacking, but their owners may discern the pattern and meaning through the effect of more slowly settling experiences. When the sixty-year-old Goethe began to compose *Dichtung und Wahrheit* he saw no one single experience illuminating his life, but many repeated experiences (some of which—such as the Italian journey of 1786–88—even lay outside the scope covered by the ultimate autobiographic account) signaled a pattern of experience from which the personality emerged with lucid contours. Somewhere in time the essential harmony had become visible in the complexity of the person and in the vicissitudes of an eventful life; only after this point could he present his life with the supreme detachment “of irony in the highest sense.” Vico, having compressed the entire meaning of his existence into the authorship of the *New Science*, writes the account of his life as the unfolding of the logical sequentiality of his grandiose thought experiment, which had turning points but no conversion crisis.

When the autobiographic effort lacks the prior illumination securing the author’s retrospective view on a patterned experience, the autobiographic function tends to become self-orientation, and the autobiographic form is either crippled or underdeveloped. When Petrarch returned to the Vacluse from the coronation as poet laureate in 1341, he found himself troubled by intensely conflicting cares about himself and by the direction of his life’s course. The dramatic potential of the dialogue form is exploited in the *Secretum* for the autobiographic search for the meaning, the purpose, the direction of life. 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. The old Cardano, driven by an intense hope to discover that the vast aggregate of his life’s details was held together by a nexus of significant causes, leaves the reader with the analytically separated facts and the near-impossible task of finding within this sorted detail the evanescent personality and the coherent lifeline. And the aging Montaigne picks up any one of a myriad of concrete experiences, and by holding it up against the light of his marvelous lively mind he discerns the ever-changing reflections of his many-fold self in the experience and in the act of understanding it. 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. Thus the essay form itself suggests that the writer is only on the way of finding the vantage point from

which the fully coordinated view of a life could render the essential structure of that life. Where the autobiographic act of self-discovery and self-orientation predominates, it impedes the autobiographic art of presenting the essential wholeness of life.

Retrospective Interpretation

When the autobiographer has gained that firm vantage point from which the full retrospective view on life can be had, he imposes on the past the order of the present. The fact once in the making can now be seen together with the fact in its result. 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. Facts are thus placed into relationships retroactively in which they did not stand when they were first experienced. For some readers this shift evokes the problem: what then is truth in the account? When Rousseau recounts in the *Confessions* (Book 1) how the youthful apprentice, returning late from a walk outside the walls of Geneva, found the gate being closed and the drawbridge (with its threatening horns) being pulled high, he sees in this event a turning point for his entire life. He could assign such meaning to the event only years later when the haunting feeling had taken hold of his awareness that he was destined to be the man who had lost home and had never been permitted to find one. Whether he was right in that assignation of meaning is a different story again: he himself complicates the reader's understanding when he makes the same set of judgments upon leaving Madame de Warens and Les Charmettes, for this also was a turning point (and he lists others). Since 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 reendowing that moment with its drama and passion; when he evaluates the significance of the event, he, in a way characteristic for his quarrel with fate, overemphasizes the dramatic impact of each event. The Rousseau who relives the moment and the Rousseau who assigns value to that moment condition one another; but it is clearly the latter who guides the entire process of the writing. For it is he clearly who makes the decision to select the incident with the drawbridge. He selects it because he perceives it as a meaningful incident, meaningful in relation to a whole pattern of reality in his life. Elements of past experience are wrenched loose a little bit from the context in which they originally stood; they are singled out because they are *now* seen to have a symptomatic meaning they may not have had before. The lines whereby they are connected to earlier or later elements of experience become more important than the lines connecting them with the temporal context of elements in which they occurred.

Past life is being rearranged because it is being interpreted in terms of the meaning (or meanings) that life now is seen to possess. 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. Autobiography cannot be read in a truthful manner if the reader cannot, or will not, recapture the standpoint, the point of view of the autobiographer as autobiographer.

Diary

This fundamental process of guiding the narration of life by the present meaning of life differentiates autobiography proper from the autobiographic genre of the diary. The diurnal entries of the diarist are governed by the very fact that a day has its end. Even if in the maturing diarist a sense of selection begins to be guided by the growing awareness of what this person values and does not value, the journal entry is the completed precipitate of each day. It has its very value in being the reflection of but a brief moment; it attributes prime significance to the segments of life. A long diary will indeed reveal the development of the person of the writer but will do so in a totally different manner from an autobiography. Just as it is a sin against the spirit and nature of chronicle to alter it in the light of subsequent insight, it is a sin against a diary to impose the order of the next day on the record of the previous day. Just as little as you obtain "history" by scissor-and-pasting chronicle to chronicle do you obtain autobiography by stringing up the diurnal record leaves. History and autobiography derive their value from rendering significant portions of the past as interpreted past; for both the incoherent realia of life have been sorted out and those selected have been assigned their fitting place in a fuller pattern of meaning. The diary, the letter, the chronicle, the annal have their value because they are but momentary interpretations of life; the premium for them lies in the function of faithful recording and not in the function of assigning long-range meaning. In a sense, they are aids for bringing the past into the present, when taken under a retrospective view, while history and autobiography subsume the past in the stance of the present. Autobiography and diary do not mix well; as a composite form they are less happily wedded even than the epistle inserted in history, that favored form of "Life and Letters" of the nineteenth century. Inserting diary entries in autobiographic accounts usually has a jarring effect; one of the more fortunate blendings can be found in Gibbon's *Autobiography* when he briefly uses diary entries for making the point that there was indeed a time when he sought a suitable historical subject for his talents in which the topic of the *Decline and Fall* did not yet figure at all. Thus both forms of writing have distinctively different purposes, placing different weights on different formal elements. Where a highly autobiographic

writer, like André Gide, has given us both journals and a formal autobiography (to say nothing yet of the strongly autobiographic novels as well), it is clear that we cannot substitute the one form for the other. From reading Goethe's journals and annals we could not by any process of recomposing arrive at the wonder of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*.

The Literary Self-Portrait

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, and that, as Georg Simmel said, life wants more life. If life is process, it should be understood as process; autobiography, by virtue of its inward experiential marks, may indeed have a special function in helping us to understand life as process.

It again becomes necessary to differentiate genuine autobiographic writing from yet another autobiographically colored genre: the literary self-portrait. The mere urge toward self-discovery and self-assessment can result in a static portrait of the moment. Writings in which the author is intensely preoccupied with exploring his present state of self, or in which he halts to assess his condition so that he may set his compass for the life to be led—as is the case so largely with Petrarch's *Secretum*, also his letter on the *Ascent of Mount Ventoux* or the letter *On His Own Ignorance*—tend to have the quality of the literary self-portrait. *Autobibliography*, a form which had great significance for the development of autobiography, has a similar tendency: the author (often in the form of a preface) wishes to set his present work in the context of his other *oeuvre* and can do so without giving this account a developmental dimension, concentrating instead on the general character of his work, therein revealing the character of the writer himself. This tendency weakens the more we come to the eighteenth century; a Vico describing the author of the *New Science*, a Gibbon depicting the creator of the *Decline and Fall*, render their accounts as a "development."

When the urge predominates to uncover the nature, the very structure of the personality, the author is easily driven toward a form of self-portraiture rather than autobiography. This is a noteworthy aspect of Cardano's self-study: under the rubric of what he considers to be telling categories he takes the personality apart in topical dissection, even leaving the reader with the impression that the author is less certain of the total configuration of the self than he is of the minutiae from which the portrait still must be composed. Montaigne's *Essais* are from one point of view a grandiose manifestation of the author's ceaseless quest to understand and to capture the very nature of the self; he also comes to understand that he is a fluctuating, a changing being. He sees the self "in passage," he is eager to register all its fluctuations, but—and

it is an important but—he is much less concerned with tracing how such a being came to be than with obtaining a hold of the self so that he may live and die by being truthful to his self. The manner in which he inserts his later reflections in the essays already written (and printed)—the so-called *B* and *C* insertions of the Bordeaux manuscript—suggests as much. The great seventeenth-century divine, Richard Baxter, wrote his life as a straightforward narrative, but felt the need of describing his character in a static self-portrait-like inset, the long section on “Self-Analysis,” almost as if to say: I can see how and in what way I have changed, but neither know how or why I should have to trace the emergence of this character. The massive autobiographic attempt of Rousseau began in the self-portraiture of *Mon portrait* (a text difficult to date), the four letters to Malesherbes, the *Ébauches des confessions*, and continued, after the *Confessions*, in the three dialogues *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jaques*, and even *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*. It is one way to read the *Confessions* even as a most intricate effort to portray the unaltered original nature and moral sensibility as the lasting good underlying the wildly fluctuating adventures of his life. In all such writings the deep-seated concern with self-analysis and self-depiction easily lets the author slip into self-portraiture. The habit is reenforced by the dilemma of all genuine historical labor: the need to balance diachronic and synchronic elements, the cross-cut at any one moment of time is necessary for understanding development through time. But in true autobiography, the inevitable traces of self-portraiture should be subsumed under the urge to understand life as a process.

The Temporal Dimensions: “Unfolding” or “Development”

The more a conviction prevails that life is a biographic and not a biological datum, the more a tendency asserts itself to recapture life in story rather than to encapsulate it in philosophical quintessences. To understand a biographic datum is to understand how it came to be; history becomes then a prime mode of understanding. The proposition “Man has no Nature, he only has a History” is a conscious exaggeration—but a very useful exaggeration because it points along a direction leading to the issues of a full historicist position. The point right here is not so much the phylogenetic history of the human race or the strictly biological composition of man but the conception of man as a being either definable in terms of his “nature” and his formal essence or to be circumscribed most significantly by his history at each and every point in time. As with all interesting questions, the issue is a matter of degree, of stress, of emphasis and balance. For if one assumes to understand the notion “human life as process” in terms of an appropriate balance of man’s “nature” and “history,” then the conception of that balance has considerable consequences for different modes of autobio-

graphic writing. It then becomes particularly important to maintain a distinction between the notion of “unfolding” and the notion of “development,” even if this distinction in many actual cases will become blurred.

The more the weight lies on “natural” processes of life, the more the notion of unfolding comes into play. If all goes right, the acorn becomes the oak. Life is the process whereby beings unfold their nature. What is present “in nuce,” from the beginning, gradually unfolds itself as if by a necessary, predetermined sequentiality. A specified potentiality becomes an actuality. As one applies this way of thinking to autobiography, the sheer biological nature of man (if such a reality could be defined!) becomes a much less significant consideration than whatever might constitute the quintessential nature in a conception of man. If, for example, man is perceived to be primarily the rational creature (and if a uniform conception of rationality prevails), the objective of life becomes the gradual effort of turning the self into a rationally coherent self. However many “accidental” features enter, the basic process of a life-task thus conceived will be guided by an inherent “logic” determining the meaning of the account of such a life; and it is a telling matter that the features outside this logical sequence are thought of as accident and that they are being deemphasized in assessing the meaning of the whole. The “philosophers’ lives,” the autobiographies of the wise men, tend to have the formal uniformity in the basic pattern of life to be expected from a quintessential conception of the nature of life unfolding itself with the compelling power of rational coherence. But the same type of formal autographic patterns exists when the basic conception of man is that of a *zoon politikon*, or that of *homo faber*, or that of the creature given a specific form and destiny by the creator, the creature finding itself a part of a predestined historical process designed by an omniscient Creator so as to enable the creature to regain its proper relation to its Creator. Augustine sought to describe the elements of this upward return of the creature, life as the Christian’s pilgrimage toward the *vita beata*; 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. In the account of that self-searching and self-finding (through learning to search for God and finding God), the stress lies very heavily on the description of the inner necessity of the steps whereby the perversely willing creature, resisting the guiding hand of an ununderstood divine will, is being turned in the direction of the creature’s true fulfillment. Once the scales are falling off his eyes, Augustine becomes filled with the wonder of the inherent order of the life. It is important that life to him is a process and not a static form of being (though this may be its end in eternity); it is equally important that there is a created order (i.e., not a self-given or self-determined one), the life-task being to regain the fitting place in that order. The process is primarily one of an inner unfolding; in conse-

quence he assigns to external factors and events primarily a "catalytic" significance—the world of external fact is important insofar as it "releases" in Augustine a motion in the direction internally set. The precise historical constellation of the world in which his Christian drama unfolds has thus little value or significance in itself. For Augustine's conception of the order of his life it is ultimately of very subordinate relevance that he was born in Africa in A.D. 354, not in 344 and not in 364. The all-important internal drama stands in a much looser, a more detached relation to whatever constituted Augustine's "world" than will be the case, for instance, in Goethe's conception of his own life. Giambattista Vico's *Vita* furnishes us, in the early eighteenth century, another kind of autobiography (though reechoing elements of the classical philosopher's life) illustrating the consequences of describing process largely by reference to the notion of unfolding. Vico saw the significance of his life in having been the author of the *New Science*. He is thus driven by the consciousness that he wrought a "revolution" in thought. A few accidents of life—for instance, his failure in obtaining the better-paying chair of jurisprudence at his hometown university at Naples—he considers important for understanding the course of his life. In addition, he will make it very clear that he felt his life to be harbored in the hand of Providence. But aside from these aspects, almost the entire autobiographic account dwells on the reconstruction of the steps in which his thought gradually, but systematically, moved toward the architectonics of the *New Science*. He establishes how the ramifications of the eventual thought were set by assumptions and basic convictions. He shows how one concern and one thought lead to an amplified version of the preceding; how thought is being linked to thought and how an inner world of ideas unfolds by its own necessity. When Vico wrote the *Vita*, he was deeply impressed by the necessity of this process; the autobiographer thus was predisposed to recount the sequence of construing a new system. He furthermore underlines this process of "unfolding-as-if-by-an-inner-logic" because he stresses his conviction that his system is not an arbitrary construct but corresponds to the structure of a God-given intellectual world. The *Vita* is an impressive work. It is, in a way, a prototype for certain autobiographies, and it illustrates some fundamental problems in such historical forms as the history of thought or ideas. One would expect that a mathematician's autobiography will resemble Vico's; Einstein's autobiographic sketch bears similar marks. A history of mathematics will have such qualities. The directional force in such writings is provided by the inner logic of problems. Lives in the service of thought appear to derive their form, pattern, and meaning from the sequential order of thought. The relation to the circumstantial and contingent world outside becomes problematic. If Vico's thought processes had occurred within the span of one year the account of the life would have the same order as if it had taken fifty years. A history of mathe-

matics (if conceived without reference to the cultural constellation in which mathematical thought occurred) has the order of the sequence of problems-solutions-problems-and-so-on, whether it unfolded over a three-hundred-year span of time or merely a decade.

A somewhat different version of this problem is to be found in the work of Rousseau. His example illustrates the perils arising from an adverse or hostile stance toward the circumstantial world. 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. He directed most of his great thought experiments—the *Social Contract*, the *Nouvelle Héloïse*, and the *Émile*—toward an investigation of the conditions which would have to prevail so that man might be permitted to translate his natural potential into actual life. He wrote his *Confessions* as the tragic story of a man, filled with the love of humanity, desiring to teach men how to live with their true and uncorrupted selves, and who was condemned to live as the persecuted outcast of an incorrigible society. Society and civilization had become the problem. 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. The hostile posture toward the real world thus cut the effective interplay of a self and its world, the very process in which the conception of historical *development* rests.

Edward Gibbon, a great historian in a century that contributed so much to the emergence of a modern historical mindedness, wrote his autobiography in a different spirit. Unlike Rousseau, Gibbon did not carry on a quarrel with his world but assented gratefully to his fate of being a member of a civilized race. Entirely like Vico, he conceived it as his autobiographic task to show the world how this man became the author of a great work, the *Decline and Fall*. Quite unlike Vico, he did not undertake this task by concentrating on the inner logic of factors driving him to the composition of his magnificent history. He instead narrates the gradual development of the historian as a constant process of a personality forming itself in the world, interacting effectively with the often strange turns in his circumstances. The Oxford education was useless, the conversion to Catholicism a near disaster, but Gibbon “made something of it”; having to serve with the Hampshire grenadiers was a waste, but Gibbon knew how to integrate it into the gradual formation of the historian. “Accident” is not seen as the force deflecting an inner process but is being built into life as an enriching new element. The unpredictable course of the wider world is not reduced to an irrelevancy

but is perceived as a formative element in the personal life. Gibbon lived and developed with his contingent world as a free person.

A still fuller execution of such a historical development of a self is to be found in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Goethe's autobiography. 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 knew he could not give his story without also giving the story of "his" world. A very specific given, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, at a very specifically constellated moment (the autobiography begins playfully but symbolically with a horoscope), and within a specified context, is being joined ineluctably into a culture, into a world. Goethe therefore insists (as the first one among autobiographers) that he and his life would have been something entirely different had he been born ten years to either side of 1749. He and his world were joined; life was to be conceived as a coexistence. The individual as he grows selects impulses from his world, he works them through, digests them, makes them appropriately his own, and may—especially if he is a poet—return in modified form to the world what he ingested from it. He thereby (however slightly) modifies his world—and Goethe had a clear sense of the impact his work had had on his world, he knew he had changed it. (As a single person, few ever changed their world as much as Augustine, but he, unlike Goethe, does not express this fact—exactly because for his own self-conception this Goethean interaction between self and world was insignificant.) 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. This preserves an element of contingency, of unpredictability, something that the individual can experience as freedom within an enveloping cultural-historical skin. The course of such a development cannot be conceived in terms of an inwardly directed unfolding, although there always remains an element of unfolding insofar as what was given initially has a potential "to fulfill." What the person becomes is thus a remarkable personal fusion of what was initially given, what his world brings to him, what he selects from this, how he builds this into his makeup, and how he in turn affects the world. There is no other way to account for this course of development, for this life, than to tell its story as a part of the story of its world. At this point, personal life can be understood only by viewing it under its historical dimension. The account of personal life takes a historical form. Autobiography seems to be a historical genre.

When the phenomenon of autobiography is viewed from the ground of all such considerations, it seems wise to peel out of a widely varying genre of autobiographically colored writings that particular form in which an author undertakes to formulate a retrospective vision over a significant portion of his life, perceiving his life as a process of interac-

tion with a coexistent world. This particular form would seem to be the essence of autobiography. It approaches its ideal form the more it is seen as a form with a powerful historical dimension.

II. *Autobiography and Personality Conceptions*

Another important line of argument underlines this historical dimension of genuine autobiography. Autobiography is inseparably linked to the problem of self-conception. The manner in which men conceive of the nature of the self largely determines the form and process of autobiographic writing. Perhaps it had better be said at the outset that there is no concern here with modern "scientific" or other *theories* of personality formation and their application or applicability to the history of autobiography. Historically one can study self-conceptions without having to be a Freudian, Jungian, Skinnerian, or what have we; it has nothing to do with psychohistory. The more modest task is to come to an understanding of the self-conception an Augustine, for instance, had of himself, and not whether he "correctly" (to be judged by some modern theory) understood himself, or "correctly" assessed his relation to his mother. The issue is not the reconstruction of the "true" historical Augustine, but the historical reconstruction of the Augustinian self-conception. And if the focus is to be on a study of the gradual emergence of that form of self-conception called an individuality, it is not very helpful to consider everyone in the past an individuality because *we* tend to believe that all men are individualities; the altogether crucial question is as to whether men in the past thought of themselves as individualities and consciously placed a value on cultivating this form 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. If we place the premium instead on the view that Man is a Proteus, that he, like the servant of Poseidon, can take on many varied forms of being, that he expresses his Protean nature in many varied actualizations of the vastly variable human potential, then the history of autobiography becomes the story of men's ever-changing self-conceptions. And insofar as men reflect in their self-conceptions also the culture in which they live, the culture which helped shape them and which they, in turn, will shape, the history of self-conceptions can also be one sort of barometer of different culture configurations. Then autobiography, as Dilthey saw decades ago,

can have a very special function in elucidating history—and in helping us understand life as continuous process.

Classical and Medieval Aspects

Even a totally inadequate historical sketch, of the varied self-conceptions which guided or could have guided the autobiographic effort, will show some distinctive relationships between the ideal of self and the nature of the society in which it is found. In tribal societies, where kinship ties have extraordinary strength, where the individual is firmly embedded in the enveloping social realities, where only a very limited degree of functional differentiation prevails, the personality conception tends to be but a prolongation of fairly pervasive social realities. 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. The quality of a man depends on the quality of his descent—as it also did in the Roman family where the *maiores*, the better ones preceding us but exhorting us by the busts in the atrium yard, set the ideal for the sons. In such aristocratic warrior societies, with a limited economic base and very little social differentiation of key functions, the development of the personality will be dominated by the socially useful ideal of the perfect warrior. Whatever variations there are between an Achilles, a Hector, an Odysseus, an Ajax, or Agamemnon, they are but variants of one heroic, intensely agonistic warrior ideal. They are part of thoroughly shame-oriented societies in which social approbation or the fear of incurring shame governs behavior and where there is no call for the inner-directed man. Of course, we have no autobiographic self-conceptions from those ages (neither Greek nor Roman), but one may surmise what form they would have taken. The extensive analysis of Germanic and pre-Islamic Arabic heroic poetry made by Georg Misch (vol. 2, pt. 1, of *Geschichte der Autobiographie*) suggests the outlines in the case of quite analogous social frameworks.

For the Hellenic and the Roman personality conception it became decisive that the ideal of the great hero and the ideal of the *pater familias* were modified by the force of the polis ideal (as already suggested in some traits of Hector). Where the good life of each depended on the strength and quality of the polis, on the “collective hero”—the Myrmidons depended on Achilles alone—on the coordinated pooling of the energy of all, there the ideal of the fully devoted public man will dominate personality formation. The clearest formulation of the ideal was to be found in the Spartan *agoge*, the cycle of training; but this ideal of the public-minded man emerges from Pericles’s Funeral Oration with the same force. Men define their selves in keeping with dominant social

norms, their actions are still governed by the fear of incurring shame. If this human type were to engage in autobiographic writing, the likelihood would be great that he would produce *res gestae* rather than “autobiography.”

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 lover of wisdom, being himself a personal harmony under the aegis of reason, and fitting as a rational creature into the rational cosmos, becomes a fully justified form of being human. In some of the Hellenistic and Roman schools of philosophy (especially Roman Stoicism), the ideal of the wise man was kept in a close relation to the ideal of the public man; in others the two separated, and one of the most prominent themes in autobiographic writings becomes the quandary: to choose the *vita activa* or to choose the *vita contemplativa*? 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. Most ancient autobiographic writing thus belongs to the subgenre of *res gestae*/memoirs, or to the class of philosophers' lives.

With the advent of Christianity the turn toward an inner-directed personality—a personality stressing virtues often very different from classical aristocratic ones—is sharper still. The ideal of the independent *artifex vitae*, doing proud battle with fate in shaping his own life, gives way to the faithful servant of the Lord for whom humility is the chief virtue. Living by an internalized ethics of love, constantly having to ascertain his motives, with his hopes trained on a hereafter, whereby the continued fate of culture and institutions (other than the church) becomes a much more adiaborous matter than it ever could be for classical men, the Christian personality, by the force of its inner realities, turns toward the ideal of the monk, the athlete of God, whose askesis, or training, directs the course of life. In the early medieval biographies (down through the twelfth century), this monastic ideal dominates most autobiographic writing—much more so than the more complex Augustinian pattern with its Neoplatonic metaphysics as a part of its weave. As medieval society—in origin a complex amalgam of different heritages, of different ethnic stock and traditions, of local and universal patterns—takes on its more stratified form of differentiated functional status groups, as lay literacy increases, etc., the different personality ideals corresponding to the differentiated status groups also come more forcefully to the fore. After 1100 autobiographic writings, expressing the ideals of the scholar (John of Salisbury (?), Boncompagno, Raymond Lull), of the poet (the *Vita nuova*), of the Christian knight (Wolfram of Eschenbach and Ulrich of Lichtenstein), of the Christian King (James I of Aragon), attest, in some way, to the greater variety of personality ideals made possible by the characteristic differentiation of medieval society.

The Issue of Models

These very inadequate hints at certain historical aspects of the Western personality are not so much meant to suggest any specific development as to suggest a key feature of almost all personality conceptions. Cultures compress the essential values and convictions in human models. In our Western tradition there were such ideal models as the Homeric Hero, the Hero of the Germanic peoples, the ideal of the Roman *pater familias*, the Stoic Wise Man, Aristotle's *aner megalopsychos* (the great-minded man), the ideal of the truly committed Monk and Saint, the true Knight, the Good Burgher, the true Scholar. The most startling ideal of all, the model most forcefully reminding us of the force of models, was the ideal expressed in the *Imitatio Christi*. All such ideal models have concrete content: they demand these or those qualities, they urge this or that set of virtues, they call for specific life-styles, they prescribe norms and conduct. 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. For the present considerations it makes small difference whether the model is assumed to be the true model for all men, or can be seen to be only a dominant model of a specific culture configuration, or is indeed only the model for those within a specific status group. Of present importance are the processes discernible in a life which is forming itself, discovering itself, or justifying itself by adhering to such a model conception of the personality.

When a man's inner compass is set on the pursuit of such a model form of being human, he has dedicated his life to the attainment of an objective ideal steadily before his mind's eye. He finds his guidelines in his model. The essential contours of life and personality are prescribed. In his actions and his striving he need not ask himself as to whether this or that is fitting for him, fitting for his personal nature. The entire objective is to make his being conform, as fully as it can, to its normative ideal. His striving will not give him a feeling of being hemmed in by a prescriptive mold; there is no occasion to lament not being permitted to "be himself." In trying to form himself by the power of his model, he will not suffer from a sense of "falsifying" his own nature. Insofar as no such model can ever be completely "filled out," or be prescriptive for each and every aspect of existence, the individual will always find room for his idiosyncrasies in the interstitial spaces of the basic components of his model. Granted: no two knights in pursuit of the ideal knight lost their specific identity, no two Stoic wise men were ever the same, and no imitator of Christ's life ever duplicated that life. Within the confines of the same type there always is room for idiosyncratic variation. But the all-important issue is whether the prime value is seen to lie in the personal variegation or in the basic commitment to the model. Do such lives

place a premium on the cultivation of the idiosyncratically different, or is this valued chiefly as a fitting aspect of the captivating model?

When men, with their eyes fascinated by the attractive power of their models, write their autobiographic accounts, they will have scripts for the basic outlines of their lives. The story of their selves can be fitted into basic literary forms. Philosophers' "lives" tend to have common literary features, and there are even subtypes for the Epicurean, the Cynic, or the Stoic. There are basic patterns to the typical Christian *vita*; within it there are distinguishable patterns for the mystic and his experience, or for the numerous Puritan autobiographies. Most early medieval autobiography fits into the hagiographic mold. A life as idiosyncratic and unique *to us* as Abelard's, a life so original in many ways that it might be thought to stand outside the given culture patterns, was fitted by himself, in his *History of My Calamities*, into the most basic pattern of monks' lives. In his own retrospective interpretation the extraordinary love affair with Heloise is made to fit into the lifeline appropriate to the *role* of the Christian philosopher.

The power of models has dominated self-conceptions and thus also autobiographic form for a long time. It presumably always will remain to be a factor. Models are of particular importance in youth and adolescence; they are part of a man's professional self-perception. And yet, the most dominant personality conception of modern Western man does not fit the model type; it is even antithetical to the very thought of a model.

Individuality

Since the time of the Renaissance, Western man has by a series of complex and gradual developments formed a particular attachment to the ideal of personality we call an individuality. This ideal is characterized by its very rejection of a valid model for the individual. The conception is apposite to a belief in society as a highly differentiated social mass. The subtle set of differences whereby any individual is distinguished from every other individual is now not perceived as an "accidental" variation from the norm, or as a discountable matter, but as a matter of great importance. 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—*Erst alle Menschen machen die Menschheit aus*. 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. Quite possibly no one can "prove" the existence of all this individual distinctiveness; but it is important if men believe in it. The philosopher Leibniz told an apropos story: When the princess Sophie Charlotte walked one day with some courtiers in the palace garden of Charlottenburg, she startled them by announcing that no two leaves in this garden could be found to be alike. The courtier who set out to prove her wrong has not been heard from since. Sophie Charlotte could not possibly know whether her assertion was right or wrong; but obviously it was a matter of great importance to her to believe in the individuality of each leaf. It is one thing for a scholastic logician to conclude that no individual fact can ultimately be defined by means of general categories, that there always remains an indefinable remainder. It is quite another matter when a human being attributes cosmic value to such ineffability, as the young Goethe did when he wrote in 1780 to his friend Lavater that an entirely new vision of human reality opened up for him when he began to reflect on the motto *Individuum ineffabile est*. For 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.

Two Caveates

In thinking about this personality conception, it is wise to guard against two easy misconceptions. (1) Individuality should not be confused with *individualism*. Individualism, strictly speaking, entails a statement about the appropriate *relationship* of an individual existence to the larger social context of which it is a part. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, in contrast to collectivism, as "the social theory which advocates the free and independent action of the individual." The

notion of individualism thus says something about the degree of social control over the individual. It holds it to be a desirable objective that the control of society over the individual be reduced to a minimum and that the individual pursue its course with the highest degree of autonomy, that is, self-given or self-accepted law. It advocates leaving men free to define themselves. But as a theory about society it says nothing about the nature of the individual personality conception. And it does not follow necessarily that in a society marked by *individualism* the freely self-defining men will define themselves as *individualities*. It is entirely conceivable that in a truly individualistic society all men might pursue the same model of personality: for instance, the model of the truly rational man—as is perhaps implied in Kant, in Marx, in Comte, or in Freud. Or, a personality may appear to possess individualistic traits insofar as it strives to give expression to another model of existence than the one its society seeks to enforce; Alcibiades thus has a certain individualistic coloration insofar as he inverts the Periclean ideal of the fully polis-minded man, while his own personality conception need not have the characteristics of individuality at all, being instead a throwback to the older model of the individual Homeric hero. In relating the two concepts individualism and individuality we thus have the complication that individualism can be found without a commitment to cultivate individuality, while it may be the case that the cultivation of individuality is possible only in a society permitting the individual full freedom for self-definition, a society committed to individualism. (2) The close and often confused relation of the notion of individuality to that of individualism (especially when the latter is naively equated with free enterprise capitalism) has at times evoked the impression that an individual must “define itself” by contradistinctions to the society in which it sits. In that perversion of the term, society appears as the homogenized *juste milieu* of a consensus of common mediocrity; society is seen as the constant threat to a true self desiring to express itself in its uniqueness and honest spontaneity. An exaggerated sense of uniqueness, the cultivation of supercilious eccentricity, and the claim to an absolute right of “doing one’s thing” (however idiosyncratic this may be), do easily discredit the notion of individuality. And the stress on the alleged antagonism of society and “the self-true-to-itself” does harm to society *and* the individual. As the Greeks knew, it is “idiocy” to conceive of personal development and well-being in atmospheric isolation, free of the impact of the social context. No one expresses his self in a language made by himself for this self but in a language inherited as the work of others. Individuality requires the belief in personal uniqueness; but how unique is unique? And of what does such uniqueness really consist? The individual in pursuit of his individuality shares with his fellowmen by virtue of a common biological nature, common norms of rationality, universal human needs and aspirations. It shares with its companions in time and

culture whatever affects everyone at that time and in that culture. But the individual can create a very personal harmony of the elements of his time and place and within his very own self. The uniqueness of individuality is thus the uniqueness of a style. The elements that go into this styled whole may all be shared with others; but what immense individualized variety, for instance, has not been formed by combining and recombining twenty-six letters? As one thinks of the notion of individuality, one perhaps ought to transfer to it the old adage that "the style is the man."

The Gradual Development of Individuality

This remarkable form of self-conception as an individuality did not fall ready-made from heaven. It evolved gradually in the Western world since the Renaissance. Signposts of this evolution do lie in the history of autobiography since the Middle Ages. And the development of autobiography as a necessary cultural form for giving expression to personal history went hand in hand with this turn toward individuality—that, at least, is the thesis of this essay.

The hold of relatively firm and compelling cultural forms which guided medieval men along certain lines in their self-conceptions gradually weakened. Who among medieval man could have defined his self in contradistinction to the Christian model of the personality? By 1600 this had become a possibility and by 1800 even more of a probability. The cultural situation became more labile at the time of the Italian Renaissance. Jacob Burckhardt had a fundamental insight into the course of our civilization when he remarked that with early modernity Western man gradually became more of a "*auf sich selbstgestellte Persönlichkeit*" (he is thrown more upon his own inner resources) and that he emerges as "*ein geistiges Individuum*," an individual finding its coherence in its own mental vision of itself. The more the power of the traditional models weakens (even if only by a growing degree of indifference), the less security a man finds in his cultural context, in his political and economic reality—all the more he will be thrown up against the questions: Who am I? What do I mean to be? As long as you still have valid models it is easier to answer these questions. In the *Secretum* Petrarch left us a fascinating record of the dilemma. Insofar as his Christian models hold he can simply place himself against them and measure himself off: thus in the second dialogue of the *Secretum* he and his interlocutor Augustine test systematically where Petrarch stands when measured on the scale of the traditional Seven Deadly Sins. When it is the issue, however, as to whether he is truly sincere in his confessions, or why it is that he does not adhere to resolutions, or why he ultimately feels rent by such conflicting cares, the value of a model is not high. Petrarch needs to know what he is, not why he is not what he ought to be according to this or that model.

Complicated processes of introspection open up in this self-searching. Petrarch looks at himself under varying perspectives; he writes a dialogue in which Petrarch talks to Petrarch about Petrarch. And at the end he cannot do more for himself than admit that he wants to do what he likes to do as a poet-scholar-humanist and also wants to be a good Christian, hoping that somehow he may develop the harmony between conflicting cares.

Such self-searching is gradually being complicated for Western man as more and more cultures present their models to him, as the European world diversifies ever more in processes of nation forming, each with its lifestyle, the growth of the vernacular, the decline of a universal church and the splintering into Protestant sects, and the tremendous impact of now a world-wide geographic and cultural horizon. It is easy to sympathize with the dilemma of a Descartes: how can he in that World of Books, this accumulated erudition he encountered in his education, find the certainty of knowing he thinks necessary for leading his life? So he cleans out this Augean stable of conflicting traditions and, on a *tabula rasa*, begins to construct rational verities in terms of what is clear and distinct to the mind. The intense trust in the universal power of reason does hardly lead to a discovery of individuality, but the stress on the method of going by what is clear and distinct to the mind contributes very much to the growing autonomy of the individual. A scientist like Cardano registers every common and every peculiar detail of his existence, convinced that the myriad facts are somehow interlinked in a causal nexus. Can one discover it and thus obtain a calculus of life with which to maintain life? Cellini, not much given to theorizing and reflection, renders his account of life "naively" (i.e., without much reflection) as that unceasing adventure of asserting and expressing his powerful self without much worry as to what it ought to be, using the shaping power of the artist to give it coherent form. Montaigne, skeptical about the power of reason to cut through the claims of truth coming from so many conflicting opinions and models, spends the last half of his life in an extended quest, testing and weighing what might be appropriate for himself. The first essay (but it was not the first essay written) already sets the tone: how, with all the complexities of motives and circumstances, can any one model serve to answer *my* question? By the continued act of auscultation, listening to every reaction within him as he picks up this proposition or that fact of existence, approaching subjects from an ever-varying perspective, he finds the self to which he learns to assent. The same process is also an attack on the ideality of models. If he set out to find *the* answer to how *man* ought to die, he ended up with finding an answer to what form of death would suit his personality; the language of the essays has turned from talk about "*la mort*" to speculation about "*ma mort*." The end product is no science of man, no general anthropology, no philosophy of life, but an art of being *this* very person-

ality, having learned to say "Yes" and "Amen" to what one has discovered as a self.

By and by the traits of individuality, consciously seen and treasured with growing fascination, emerge in these early modern writings. Not all of these are autobiographies in the full sense; several are most interesting experiments in form, fitting the interesting search for the content. Without going too far afield, one may, at least, allude to the fact that the lives written in terms of the more traditional personality conceptions also add elements that ultimately bear upon the emergence of a fuller sense of individuality. The enormous refinement in sensitivity, in registering the subtlest details of inner stirrings, as this can be found in the autobiographic accounts of some of the great mystics, was training in the uncovering of the variegated richness of consciousness. The growing versatility in "portraiture," the inclination and artistry of a Saint Simon, for instance, for rendering a person's inner state by harmonizing it with a mien, a gesture, a wart on a face—the many attempts at characterologies and even a "science" like physiognomy—show a fascination with the delicate variants of human life. The Puritan's intense concern with the certainty of his salvation drives the character formation both to the careful registration of man's inner state and motives and to the unification of the personality. The individualism stressed in contract theories of state and society, in casuistic ethics and utilitarian ethics, the turn to secular conceptions of culture and to notions of progress in which the indefinitely perfectible human being works for an ever-expanding human potential, even such transformations in cosmology as the one from a belief in a fixed eternal order to a preestablished harmony among monads of an evolving world, contribute, though not directly (and some of the factors even may stand in opposition to individuality), to preparing the ground in which a commitment to individuality can flourish.

Development of Historical Sense

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. Most of the early modern autobiographic writings did not press hard on a genetic mode for understanding personal growth. Some authors, like Petrarch, will glance comparatively at a "then" and "now," without giving a genetic account of themselves. Cellini tells his life as one continuous adventure, exploiting the opportunities the world offers for testing his *virtu*; but the story is inhabited by a continuous character. Except for the matter of his steadily growing artistic skill, Benvenuto is the same personality in the beginning as at the end. Both Cardano and Montaigne had a strong sense of the constant interaction between their selves and the world around them, but both

were more intensely involved in discovering their very specificity, and in learning to accept it, than in coming to understand how it had come to be. Descartes and Vico described the inner unfolding of their thought more than their personality. 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.

The problem of the historical conception in autobiography reflects the problem of all historical understanding prior to the eighteenth century. The various dominant elements of a later historicist view of reality advanced gradually; they gelled into a coherent view only late in the eighteenth century. Fully in keeping with its Christian commitment, the main Western view of history was for a long time the providential view declaring the basic purpose and pattern of history to be God's design for the salvation of man. Bishop Bossuet gave a grandiose reformulation of this view as late as 1681 in his *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*. A transcendent God, standing beyond the course of history, was its prime mover assigning it a purpose and a fixed pattern, discernible through his revelations and signs. Man with his measure of free will fared well when he learned to execute God's will. Events derived their meaning from their relation to eternal verities, pointing always to a symbolic (or "figural") objective. The history of God's People was the main line of history and whoever turned from this main line either had to return to it or would be among the lost. While this view taught Western man to perceive life as a process of becoming, it also held him to a very specific manner of viewing this process. 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. The culture shocks of the Renaissance and the discoveries of such peoples as Chinese, Indians, and Americans, whose histories were difficult to fit into the established providential pattern, helped evoke the question how long man might continue to view the human past from the perspective of Jerusalem and by a Christian timetable. By submitting Sacred History to the same standards of evidence applied to secular history, the Bible became a different history than it had been held to be before. 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.

When the political and military history of states had not been written in earlier centuries as an adjunct to providential history, it tended to be dominated by natural law conceptions. That is simply another way of saying that it had been written from the perspective of a fixed conception of human nature, of an eternal rationality in the nature of states, and an eternal morality. Such historical writing was dominated by models, especially those derived from antiquity. It might have a pragmatic purpose, the training of statesmen; it might teach about the natural cycle of governments. It taught by example. And much of history was chronicle and memoir. Such patterns were gradually being altered by historians of "national" law, for instance, who began to argue the specific historical evolution of "national" legislation, the specifically historical nature of states. But such attempts at a genetic and individualistic mode of understanding were easily again undone either by the inclination to elevate the discovered historical reality to a normative position or by the urge to perceive in the specific fact but an illustration of a universal verity. As long as the tendency was stronger to search amid all the variety for the underlying rational universal than to declare variety the more interesting matter, the orderly quest of an intensely rationalistic culture stood in the way of a more fully historical view of life.

During much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries this universalizing attitude prevailed while the elements for a different position prepared to break through. An absolutizing tendency of reason was also being modified by a relativizing one. A Voltaire had a firm conviction about the absolute norm of civilized life, condemning all forms that did not live up to this norm; he believed in the universality of reason and mechanical order and he was not tolerant of deviations from his standards of good taste. But he also had a certain ability to be struck with wonder at the sight of the variable diversity of human life; he had a sense for the different spirits among nations; and he understood that more might be understood about man by viewing his history than by theorizing about him. The prime impulse in a Montesquieu was to find the causal order in law and forms of states, but he knew the value of empirical study and of ascertaining the specific fact; he perceived the relativizing effect of geography, of ethnic diversity and historical experience. Gibbon unhesitatingly judged historical actors by the absolute superiority of his own society and enlightened view, but he also knew that no theory of history could take the place of narrating history in all its unpredictable turns and accidents. Rousseau might have an unshakable trust in the universal nobility of uncorrupted natural man and an unchanging moral sensibility, but he had a sense for the varying effect of geography and he taught men that the child had to be judged by its own needs of development and not by the norms of men. Vico's thinking resulted in the discovery of typical and ever-repeated forms of human

development, but he also had seen the error in attributing fully developed rationality to early men only beginning the gradual ascent to it. For understanding beginnings it is wiser to assume that *homo non intelligendo fiat omnia* than to believe with the older natural law philosophers that *homo intelligendo fiat omnia*. Vico suspected that the nature of things is nothing but their birth at certain times and under certain conditions. For the art historian Winckelmann the Greeks had set the unalterable norms for artistic excellence, but he had explained their works as the unique style in which they expressed their character and experience and had thus shown art to be more than the creative expression of individual artists.

A full form of historical mindedness came to the fore when the trust in the power of genetic explanation became wedded to the fascination with individual specificity as a treasured thing. When the love for the *res singulares* in their ever-changing manifoldness and seemingly inexhaustible fecundity of varied form became as strong as or stronger than the urge to captivate them in a universal category it meant a significant shift in our mental orientation. "There have, in the entire history of thought, been few changes in standards of value more profound and more momentous than that which took place . . . when it came to be believed not only that in many, or in all, phases of human life there are diverse excellences, but that diversity itself is of the essence of excellence. . . ."² 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. Trying to understand how any specific reality had come to be what it was and trying to understand individuality was the same thing.

The new attitude appeared in the writings of such men as the young Herder and Justus Möser, the historian of Osnabrück. Möser understood and loved the quaint "state" he served as *advocatus patriae*, a state of but forty-five by forty-five miles and a population of 120,000. Its order was a peculiar amalgam of feudal custom, Germanic laws, medieval forms of corporations; it was a bishopric in which a Catholic bishop and a Protestant bishop alternated rule. From the enlightened vantage point of a Voltaire it would have been the perfect exemplification of all the imaginable idiocies of history! But Möser loved it for what it was and saw no virtue at all in substituting ideal constructs for the given historical reality. He saw in his state a historically grown organism in which specific needs, specific talents, specific realities and changing experiences had fused in a gradually evolving coherence all of its own, a historical order

2. Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 293.

having its justification in the fact that it was a functioning order sustaining the life of this particular human community. It possessed a historical rationality that did more justice to local peculiarity than any simpler rational construct, with its disregard for historical "accident," could provide. The historically grown had its own sense and its own meaning. It was lovable for what it was: one of the many different expressions of a people living and working in its very own way. The young Herder similarly rejected the claims of universal goodness of the enlightenment heritage and condemned the arrogance of a Voltaire in denying value to human effort which did not suit his taste. Herder was captivated by the vision of the human Proteus constantly expressing a new variant of his immensely rich human potential. Each individual man might be a limited vessel, unable to combine in his own self-formulation all that man might represent. History thus was necessary so that men in succession might follow each other in ever-new formulations of their humanity revealing an ever-expanding panorama of human richness. Historical understanding was sympathetic understanding of each individuality on its own terms. In a way Herder was more fascinated by "collective individuality," the unique experiences of a *Volk*, a collective historical organism, a people, expressing its inner life in its poetry, its art, its deeds, its very specific way of being a people.

Both these men profoundly influenced the young Goethe. It was he who first wrote his own life as the history of an individuality. He saw his personal formation as the effective interplay of his self and his world. It was thus fitting that his self-conception should incorporate one of the most fundamental changes in outlook wrought by men of the generation preceding his own. And by rendering his own life story as the history of his self in harmony with the history of his world, his autobiography was both the history of his own individuality and the history of an individual age. History of self and history of a world are inextricably linked. Hegel, in a heavily weighing Teutonic formulation, summed this up by saying that individuality is whatever is, in its world, its own—*Die Individualität ist, was ihre Welt als die Ihrige ist.*³

The recognition of a strong historical dimension of all human reality and a modern mode of self-conception as an individuality for good reasons emerged in more coherent form of consciousness at more or less the same time. Autobiography in this context obtained a cultural form and function it did not have before. It became the literary form in which an individuality could best account for itself. The only way to account for a specific person was to tell its story. Self-conscious cultivation of individuality was the same as living in the world with historical consciousness of the world. In that view of the historical dimension of individuality also

3. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phaenomenologie des Geistes, Sämtliche Werke, Jubiläumsausgabe* (Stuttgart, 1927), 2:239.

may lie the chief protection against the aberrations to which this ideal so easily falls prey. For, the very insight that individuality makes sense only in that binding framework of being a living part of our society, our culture, the understanding that real self-cultivation is cultivation of self and of our world, that it involves responsibility to self and to the world—all of this might cure us of those false forms of self-cultivation that lie in blindly staring within ourselves or in a dangerous devotion to arbitrary whim.