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AUTOBIOGRAPHY: CONSTRUCTION OF THE REMEMBERED SELF

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Abstract

“Leslie Stephen remarked long ago that distortions of the truth belong to the values of autobiography and are as revealing as the truth, and it will become apparent that we are concerned here in the main with untruths which do not damage materially the value of the autobiographies concerned” Roy Pascal. Autobiographies are presented as truthful accounts of the narrator’s life; ye they employ structuring devices associated with fictional narratives. Brian Finney calls the ‘classic autobiographical dilemma’ of the autobiographer- ‘the need to choose between telling the truth and convincing the reader that he is telling the truth’. The autobiographer has an obvious pact with the reader and within the confines of this pact he tries to expose his most humiliating deficiencies but this exposition obfuscates a secret desire to be absolved.

Keywords: Autobiography as history, interpretation, reconstruction, memory, retrospective distortion.

A book categorised as autobiography creates generic expectations in the reader of a kind of factual account of the writer’s life which distinguishes it from fiction on the one hand and history on the other. Like a novel, it depends on the interpretation of experiences and also offers an almost unlimited opportunity for the exploration of personality, not only of the author’s, but also of those with whom he is closely concerned. But it does not allow itself the novelist’s freedom of invention. Like a work of history it tries to be factually true, but ‘autobiographies are suspect to historians’ as Roy Pascal states, not because of ‘particular incorrect facts as because of the perspective of the writer, who must see the past from his present standpoint, in the light of all his experiences and knowledge since the facts recorded took place.’(69) These latter experiences ‘sift the past’ and determine the

meaning these experiences acquire in retrospect. There is obviously a place for factual records of a life within the ambit of the autobiographical gamut but autobiographical truth is concerned as much with facts as the meaning the autobiographer attaches to these facts. Brian Finney, in his profound exploration of the versions of truth employed by modern autobiographers, sums up that a well written autobiography does not deprive itself of ‘that fascinating interplay between inescapable biographical fact and imaginative interpretation, even reconstruction, which imbues autobiography at its best with the dual satisfaction of historical veracity and artistic creativity’(24).

Writing an autobiography presents the writer with an opportunity ‘to pursue the truth about himself from within the self’ (Finney 23). Self-awareness is a complex process and is associated

with a multiplicity of problems. Often it leads to a realization of the irrevocable nature of the past and leads autobiographers to shift their attention to the present moment of written recollection. We find extreme examples of this attitude in Barthes for whom the 'I' is 'always new' (163) and in Nabokov who dissolves the identity of his protagonist from the past into that of the narrator communing in the present with his memories.

Moreover an autobiography does not have to be a mere accumulation of facts as Georges Gusdorf pointed out way back in 1956:

'An autobiography cannot be a pure and simple record of existence, an account book or a log book' because 'a record of this kind, no matter how minutely exact, would be no more than a caricature of real life' (42).

It is concerned with the juxtaposition of facts as the author knows them, the significance these facts acquire in retrospect as well as their arrangement in sequence which influences interpretation. George Orwell explains this important feature of autobiographies in the following words:

'As for the truth of my story, I think I can say that I have exaggerated nothing except in so far as all writers exaggerate by selecting. I did not feel I had to describe events in the exact order in which they happened, but everything I have described did take place at one time or another' (114).

Autobiography, as Roy Pascal maintains, is 'an interplay, a collusion, between past and present' (11) in the sense that it is an interpretation of the past from the present standpoint. In other words, it has to present the meaning that an experience acquires in retrospect, when viewed in the perspective of a whole life. 'All autobiography,' Roy Pascal writes, 'is recollection and memory is the most powerful unconscious agent in shaping the past according to the will of the writer' (69). The unconscious choices exercised by memory bring the author to 'extract nurture out of disparate incidents and ultimately bind them together in his own way,' so that 'painful as well as advantageous experiences can be transformed into the substance of the

personality' (69). In Roy Pascal's words, 'Memory itself performs this sifting process.' (70) Gerald Brenan calls it "the ordering and sifting principle" (xii). 'Memory is a great artist' (Maurois 111), and Brian Finney calls it 'notoriously unreliable' (44). Even when the autobiographer has recourse to supplementary sources like letters or diaries, it is still memory that gives meaning to the incidents selected for their significance. But, as W. H. Hudson pointed out in his autobiography,

'It is easy to fall into the delusion that the few things ... distinctly remembered and visualised are precisely those that were most important in our life' (2).

Yet, doubts about whether he did actually remember the things of most importance in his life did not stop him from writing his autobiography. Like Hudson, J. C. Powys relied almost exclusively on memory, not letting chronology and dates affect his spontaneous composition. The truth remembered is the only truth that matters, he says:

It is important in writing the tale of one's days not to try to give them the unity they possess for one in later life. A human story, to bear any resemblance to the truth, must advance and retreat erratically, must flicker and flutter here and there, must debouch at a thousand tangents (237).

Autobiographers are aware of the fallibility of this faculty on which they rely so heavily. The distortion of truth imposed by the act of contemplation is recognised by Brian Finney as 'one of the features of the genre' (44). On the other side of the spectrum are the writer's conscious censoring, distorting and sometimes inventing material to enhance self-image. The most typical strategy adopted is to warn the reader, for example, not to expect the whole truth. Thus, A. E. Coppard admits on the first page of his autobiography:

'There have been episodes in my life, important and privately fascinating occasions, which not even the prospect of an eternity of hell fire would induce me to reveal' (9).

Likewise, when Wyndham Lewis declares that his main aim in writing his autobiography *Rude Assignment* (what he calls, 'a narrative of my career up-to-date') is 'to spoil the sport of the irresponsible detractor, to improve my chances of someday not being too much lied about' (103), the reader is automatically alerted to a self-justificatory bias. Yet, it is not easy to hoodwink. Georg Misch, in his pioneering study of the origins of autobiography in antiquity, discovers how impossible it is for any autobiographer to conceal his true nature:

'Even the cleverest liar, in his fabricated or embroidered stories of himself, will be unable to deceive us as to his character. He will reveal it through the spirit of his lies' (11).

Untruth is uncovered by the spirit with which a writer pursues his quest of the self, his degree of self-awareness and self-verification.

Other problems involve retrospective distortion and the impossibility of seeing the self simultaneously as the 'I' and 'he', first and third person protagonist-cum-narrator. All these problems originate from the same source- the desire of the self to know itself from within and yet as if from without. The autobiographer feels compelled to present his subjectivity under the garb of objectivity so as to render the subjective comprehensible to itself and others. However, wilful or conscious omissions and distortions instigated by self-justification or lapses of memory assume renewed significance in the light of psychoanalytic discoveries. With the help of psychoanalytic concepts like the timelessness of unconscious memory, the effects of infantile sexuality on later behaviour, or the defence mechanism of the ego such as regression, fixation and sublimation Freud shows the numerous ways in which the unconscious works to suppress unpleasant memories. His study regards conscious memory as that part of one's past still available to consciousness after the ego has repressed those memories likely to produce anxiety. He himself dreaded disclosure despite longing for recognition. The following lines suggest the possibility of reading other of his texts as autobiographical or of recognizing that there may be more than one text about the self:

And here I may be allowed to break off these autobiographical notes. The public has no claim to learn any more of my personal affairs- of my struggles, my disappointments, and my successes. I have in any case been more open and frank in some of my writings (such as *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *The Psychoanalysis of Everyday Life*) than most people usually are who describe their lives for their contemporaries or for posterity. I have had small thanks for it and from my personal experience I cannot recommend anyone to follow my example (135).

This brings us to what Brian Finney calls the 'classic autobiographical dilemma' of the autobiographer- 'the need to choose between telling the truth and convincing the reader that he is telling the truth' (70). The autobiographer has an obvious pact with the reader and within the confines of this pact he tries to expose his most humiliating deficiencies but this exposition obfuscates a secret desire to be absolved. With the support of all his imaginative and interpretative powers, he tries to seduce the reader to absolve the writer, in any case, he tries to limit the scandal by giving it an aesthetic form. The attempt to win the reader's interest by use of an ingenious structural design or by resort to literary techniques like theme, form, characterization, style, imagery, etc. simultaneously informs the reader about the truth of the author who shares an identity with his narrator and his protagonist, so that its literary features become part of the overall autobiographical design. It comes as little surprise then that in the title chosen by Roy Pascal in his elaborate study of the structure of truth in autobiography 'Design' precedes 'Truth', giving priority to the first term over the second. It is this which prompts Andre Maurois to say that 'the severest autobiography remains a piece of special pleading' (159).

Numerous modern autobiographies are motivated by a desire to liberate themselves from their past by re-experiencing it. This is especially true of the confessional mode in which there is an inherent justification to ratify the current reformed self while foregoing a past pattern of behaviour

which no longer conforms to its adult needs. The therapeutic urge to undertake the impossible, to write out one's sickness,¹ is probably most outstanding in the autobiographies of the 1920s written by men who had first-hand experience of the horrors of the Western Front during the First World War. Both Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon suffered a mental breakdown during the course of the war and found themselves reliving their lives in the trenches long after the end of the war- in nightmares and hallucinations, in their poetry, and in their autobiographies. Furthermore, the confessional mode appears to commit the writer to a higher degree of self-exposure than other modes of subjective autobiography, and the greatest of its practitioners, Augustine and Rousseau, have both recognized this necessity.

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¹D. H. Lawrence claims that 'one sheds one's sicknesses in books- repeats and presents again one's emotions, to be master of them'. *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*. Ed. G. T. Zytaruk and J. T. Boulton, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1981. p. 90.

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