

AUTOBIOGRAPHY
ITS GENESIS AND PHASES

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I

So numerous are autobiographies to-day that one may forget how rare they were in the past. Though the self is the one subject of which everybody is supposed to have the details, and so the most natural subject in the world, and though talk about themselves supplies most people with their chief topic, the writing down and publishing, not only episodes, but the whole of one's history was almost unknown till within the last 200 years. The very word "autobiography" was coined only in 1809,* though the thing was by then extant. Even to-day the urge to self-publication is still exceptional and it is generally recognised by autobiographers themselves to require some excuse, explicit or implicit, though not necessarily the true one.

We are all reluctant to give ourselves away, to reduce our armaments in the face of a world we vaguely fear. This distrust may be a bequest from primitive man who bristled with suspicions and who, concealing even his true name, the key

* It is first used by Southey in the *Quarterly Review*.

as it were to his personality, lived under a lifelong alias. The need for perpetual vigilance became gradually less acute and the barriers of reserve were lowered. But men, outside autobiographies, "still keep something to themselves they scarce would tell to any". The expansive man remains as close as a clam on what really matters and expands only on the unimportant, the creditable, and the misleading. All fear the direction of public attention, and possibly ridicule or censure, on their private lives. Since they have never lived them before, they prefer, like learners on the fiddle, not to be overlooked in the process. Moreover, they all live a kind of double life. Be they in the world's eye as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, and as transparent as the day, they are not quite what they seem ; they are pettier in their motives, less disinterested in their generosity, and less nice in their scruples. "That I, or any man", says Trollope, "should tell anything of himself, I hold to be impossible. Who could endure to own the doing of a mean thing? Who is there that has done none?" So most men keep the shabby arrangements and the threadbare pretences of the house of life dark behind the shutters. It may even be a haunted house into many of whose rooms the tenants rarely peep, preferring to live in the outhouses and the verandah. Browning was never more normal than in those poems in which he declined

to "sonnet-sing us about himself", to unlock his heart and invite the public indoors—

"For a ticket, apply to the Publisher".

No : thanking the public, I must decline,
A peep through my window, if folk prefer ;
But, please you, no foot over threshold of mine !

I have mixed with a crowd and heard free talk
In a foreign land where an earthquake chanced :
And a house stood gaping, nought to baulk
Man's eye wherever he gazed or glanced.

The whole of the frontage shaven sheer,
The inside gaped : exposed to day,
Right and wrong and common and queer,
Bare, as the palm of your hand, it lay.

The owner ? Oh, he had been crushed, no doubt !
"Odd tables and chairs for a man of wealth !
What a parcel of musty old books about !
He smoked—no wonder he lost his health !

"I doubt if he bathed before he dressed.
A brasier ?—the pagan, he burned perfumes !
You see it is proved, what the neighbours guessed ;
His wife and himself had separate rooms".

Friends, the goodman of the house at least
Kept house to himself till the earthquake came :
'Tis the fall of its frontage permits you feast
On the inside arrangement you praise or blame.

II

WITH a simplicity, at first sight surprising, Dr Johnson held that "Those relations are . . . commonly of most value in which the writer tells his own story. . . . The writer of his own life has at least the first qualification of an historian, the knowledge of the truth ; and though it may be plausibly objected that his temptations to disguise it are equal to his opportunities of knowing it, yet I cannot but think that impartiality may be expected with equal confidence from him that relates the passages of his own life, as from him that delivers the transactions of another. . . . That which is fully known cannot be falsified but with reluctance of understanding and alarm of conscience : of understanding, the lover of truth ; of conscience, the sentinel of virtue. . . . He that speaks of himself has no motive to falsehood or partiality, except self-love, by which all have so often been betrayed, that all are on the watch against its artifices". Autobiographies, he continues, are the more reliable if they are not written for publication during the author's life to vindicate his conduct in a single action, but are published posthumously "to review his life for the admonition of posterity, or to amuse himself . . .

since falsehood cannot appease his own mind, and fame will not be heard beneath the tomb ”.

Johnson's essays were often “written in haste as the moment passed, without ever being read over by him before they were printed ” ; and that declaration of faith in autobiography from one of them is rather a measure of the man's own sterling honesty than a considered judgment which will bear much examination. No doubt, if he had written an autobiography, he would have told the truth, and nothing but the truth. But would it have been the whole truth ? Had Johnson in 1759, before Rousseau had even dreamed of his *Confessions*, any real idea of what autobiography could be ? Certainly the *Confessions* would have amply confirmed him in his opinion of Rousseau as “one of the worst of men ; a rascal, who ought to be hunted out of society, as he has been ” ; and they might have led to some legislative remarks on the decencies and limits of autobiographical writing after this manner, to parody *Rasselas*—“The business of the autobiographer is to remark general properties and large appearances ; he does not number the hairs of the head, or describe the different shades in the colouring of the iris. He is to exhibit in his self-portrait such prominent and striking features as recall the original to every mind ; and must neglect the minuter discriminations,

which one may have remarked, and another have neglected, for these characteristics which are alike obvious to vigilance and carelessness". Johnson accepted and emphasised his age's preference for the general to the particular, for the totality rather than the unit of impression. He was too little of an egoist himself to believe that the world wanted all the details of any man's life, and he assumed that there were sanctities of personality which none had a right to violate and mental reservations which were in no sense an economy of the truth. He was aware of the complexity of personality only to the second degree, beyond which he had no desire to go. The recesses of the mind and its motives and the subjectivity of Rousseau belonged to another age and required another revelation.

Despite Dr Johnson, autobiography seems to me the most difficult kind of narration. For it is impossible for a man to get out of his own skin, and the events to be related are of a kind which most seriously unsettles his judgment. One man is honest but lacks analytic perceptiveness. Another has self-knowledge without objective honesty. And even in the wisest and honestest there are innumerable reasons for concealment, addition, exaggeration, or distortion. Moreover, few are ever simply fair to themselves; they tend to be either self-indulgers or self-tormentors,

self-aggrandisers or self-detractors. The man who has no character to lose may be candid to the fault of glorying in his own shame. He will, then, be no more reliable than the man who *has* some reputation. The latter would preserve his façade intact, and, perhaps, has an uncomfortable feeling that he is the façade. Perhaps, too, this self-knowledge at which the autobiographer aims is at best only an approximation to the truth. Nay, if metaphysics is the chasing in a dark cellar of a black cat which isn't there, may not the quest of self-knowledge be no less vain? There may be no integrated self to know, but only a congeries of jarring motives and desires, appetites and sensations—a psychological nebula. The soul, that very fiery particle, may be no more a particle than the physicists have proved the once stable unit of the atom—"animula, vagula, blandula"; and self-knowledge would then be truest when we know that we can not know. But even if we reject this refinement of scepticism and assume that the self has a solid core, we still must admit it to be too elusive and Protean for most to capture. It seems to be wrapped in layers like an onion, each coat of which seems to be ultimate and is not.

In view of such considerations one may be tempted to regard autobiography as not merely difficult but impossible, and swing from Dr Johnson's thesis to the downright antithesis

of Bernard Shaw—"All autobiographies are lies. I do not mean unconscious, unintentional lies ; I mean deliberate lies. No man is bad enough to tell the truth about himself during his lifetime, involving, as it must, the truth about his family and friends and colleagues. And no man is good enough to tell the truth in a document which he suppresses until there is nobody left alive to contradict him". But this passage seems to me to indicate a misunderstanding of the very nature of autobiography ; for it concentrates pedantically and prosaically on truth in the details instead of on a higher artistic truth in the total impression left. After all, is truth of fact possible in any kind of history ? "This notion of historians" (in the latter part of the nineteenth century), says Whitehead, "of history devoid of æsthetic prejudice, of history devoid of any reliance on metaphysical principles and cosmological generalisations, is a figment of the imagination. The belief in it can only occur to minds steeped in provinciality—the provinciality of an epoch, of a race, of a school of learning, of a trend of interest—minds unable to divine their own unspoken limitations". If, as Whitehead also maintains, "the notion of 'mere knowledge' is a high abstraction which we should dismiss from our minds, for knowledge is always accompanied with accessories of emotion and purpose", and if, as Herbert Spencer remarks, "in the

genesis of a system of thought the emotional nature is a large factor—perhaps as large a factor as the intellectual nature,” autobiography is peculiarly liable to emotional disturbance. This, however, does not reduce its value, so long as we do not misunderstand where that value resides. If the reading of an autobiography is a good substitute for its author’s presence and conversation, it is a good autobiography though its author was a liar of the first magnitude.

A view of autobiography, which is a kind of synthesis of Dr Johnson’s and Shaw’s, is implied in the title of Goethe’s *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit*. I do not know whether the order of the words “Dichtung” and “Wahrheit” indicates the proportion of the ingredients. But it is clear that Goethe believed he had a true knowledge of some facts in his life and could communicate it truly. Concerning what he did not know with scientific accuracy he believed himself to possess a poetic knowledge, which he could express through a reconstruction in the light of experience and which would be truer than the truth, accentuating without falsifying, sifting without loss. The autobiographer must somehow see the end in his beginning and have a scheme for his narration before he begins at all. He is not the mere annalist of his life, but its philosophic historian. The result is not a scientific record, but a work of art; an expression of

personality, not an objective narrative, though the higher the degree of self-knowledge and the more rigid the author's respect for the truth, the better.

For obvious reasons an autobiography must be a deliberate selection from the multifarious incidents of a life. Even *Ulysses* which gives 800 closely printed pages to the record of a single day in the life of a man is admittedly incomplete. Much more so, then, an autobiography of 25,000 days in a volume of moderate size. Such a difficulty occurred to the pedantic mind of Herbert Spencer as a serious objection to autobiography—"An . . . autobiographer", he says, "is obliged to omit from his narrative the commonplace of daily life and to limit himself almost exclusively to salient events, actions and traits. The writing and reading of the bulky volume, otherwise required, would be alike impossible. But by leaving out the humdrum part of the life, forming that immensely larger part which it had in common with other lives, and by setting forth only the striking things, he produces the impression that it differed from other lives more than it really did. This defect is inevitable".

But it is not so serious as Spencer thinks. For it is not only the autobiographer who sees life in relief; we all do, and we need no reminder that the autobiographer rose, washed, and shaved

365 times per annum. Such repetitive activities are a part of existence, rather than of life, and can be taken for granted so long as the proper proportion between significant and insignificant is preserved. Even apart from the humdrum commonplaces of daily existence, much else that a man feels, thinks, says, or does, is fortuitous and without result on the main current of his life. Just as, to quote Aristotle, "The unity of a plot in tragedy does not consist . . . in its having one man as its subject, for an infinity of things befell that one man, some of which it is impossible to reduce to unity ; and in like manner there are many actions of one man which cannot be made to form one action" ; so there is no life which, without strict selection, makes an autobiographical unity.

Unfortunately, however, the autobiographer is not the master of his memory ; besides his own deliberate selection, his memory without his consent selects for him. Up to a point this may be a useful mechanism, which serves like the conscious selection to throw the significant into relief. But the memory is not only unconsciously artistic ; it is also tricky and perverse. Since its retentiveness depends on constantly changing degrees of awareness, it may retain unimportant details and drop the all-important entirely. In some it smothers the unpleasant and in others gives them an undue prominence. It is most

reliable for certain periods of life, being probably at its best for the years from 15 to 30, and more or less untrustworthy for others. For childhood, on which autobiographers lay more and more stress, it scarcely works at all except with respect to isolated, if vividly recalled, incidents. From childhood, says Maurois, we retain only tiny fragments, "confused feelings mixed up with associations of which the origin is lost in obscurity. This is not enough to explain the complex individuality which we all acquire by the age of 6 or 7. Of the vast accession of vocabulary, ideas, and emotions ; of our introduction to the world outside ; of the successive pictures of society which are formed in the mental vision of a child—of all this we retain practically nothing ; and so an autobiography of childhood is nearly always commonplace and untrue, even when the author himself is sincere". Moreover, the child lives in an imperfectly understood and semi-mythical world, a construction from the euphemistic and leg-pulling explanations of adults and from his own uncritical and limited experience. The incompleteness of our memory of our childhood leads to the subsidising of it from our elders or by our own attempts to fill in the sketchy outline, with the result that direct memory, the anecdotes of our elders, and plausible invention become indistinguishable. But, as I said, it is not only facts from our childhood, but facts from

every period of our lives that we forget. It is true, that as we become adult, we become aware of what Maurois calls "a social frame", and thus our "recollections are linked on to certain fixed realities which surround and absorb" us. We, therefore, do not recall isolated facts by a pure effort of memory, but by a process in the nature of deduction and reconstruction, which is obviously open to criticism. How little we consciously and directly remember of our lives will be apparent if we isolate, say, our summer holiday of three years ago and then compare our recollections of it with our letters or diaries for the same period. With their aid we will recall a wealth of detail that would not come unaided. Of course, many autobiographers, besides having naturally good memories, have relied on such documentary assistance. It is possible, too, to train the memory, and it is often easier to recall a whole sequence than an isolated event, an autobiography than a bit of one. As Plotinus remarks, "Memory is not a certain repository of impressions, but a power of the soul exciting itself in such a way as to possess that which it had not".

Besides being forgetful and selective, the memory is also creative, and that even on the back of experience, for perception itself is a kind of tendentious deduction. When some little time has elapsed, the memory still more easily glides

on to a greater or less degree of imaginative addition. Thus only the morbidly scrupulous try to tell with absolute accuracy their anecdotes of what they said to the officious policeman and how they lost the train. As Maurois says, " We make our narrative a little more pleasant, a little more lively, a little more exciting than the actual event. Our success in this encourages us to go further. Gradually, we get to the stage of remembering only the narrative and forgetting the actual event and in the course of time the work of our imagination takes the place of those fainter pictures of a vanished reality". It demands a mind of the most perfect integrity and one under an iron discipline to be aware of and then to resist the temptation to create. Even the mind which can be trusted not to falsify the main lines of a life will succumb to an artistic instinct for the adjustment and bettering of the details. There are very few who realise how in absolute truth there is the highest art of all.

A process of the mind similar to this creativeness of the memory is its rationalising tendency. It " creates, after the event, the feelings or the ideas which might have been the cause of the event, but which in fact are invented by us after it has occurred. Actually, the event was the work of chance . . . we discover . . . motives for actions which we have performed unwittingly

and unconsciously". Man refuses to think of his life as determined for him by his passions and mistakes, the will of others, or fortuitous circumstances. He must see himself the captain of his soul, not simply keeping the erratic bark with its head to the wind, but steering it by the pole star of reason towards a desired haven.

III

EVERY autobiography is in some way the result, to return to Browning's metaphor, of the collapse of a frontage. Every autobiographer, I fancy, has passed through a kind of crisis, short and intense or protracted and cumulative in its effects, affecting mind, body, or estate, private or shared with others though on them it made no comparable impression. This experience is, in biological terms, the releasing stimulus. It has somehow isolated him from his fellows and produced a degree of loneliness, a kind of need, more insistent than his normal mistrust of his fellows, for either sympathy, or self-justification, or appreciation, or communication. This four-fold classification cannot of course be pressed, for all autobiographies are, like all human activities, born of mixed motives. The types are to be regarded as limiting cases with which no actual specimens coincide.

The first, the autobiography appealing for sympathy, is the work of the man who accepts the code of society and its right to judge, but has himself offended. It is a piece of special pleading for restoration and pardon, in the nature of counsel's speech for clemency.

The need for self-justification which produces

the second type may be due to antagonism between the autobiographer and another individual, or a party, or society itself. Such an autobiography is not a confession of error, but an assertion of personality in a hostile, critical, or constricting environment. It also is a special plea, coming, however, not from counsel for the defence, but from the proselytiser who would recommend his minority point of view and redress the balance between him and the opposition.

The autobiographer who wants appreciation is aware of a distinction which he, like Gibbon or Herbert Spencer, would make the public notice more than it seems to do. He has done or endured something noteworthy in his opinion, as either commendable or notorious or unique.

Last and most interesting is the autobiography which simply satisfies a need for artistic communication. The experience which has isolated the author has been a self-discovery. Such a discovery may appal the modest, or fascinate the egoist, or affect the middling with a mixture of alarm and delight. The autobiographer of this type has both the desire of the ordinary man, like the barber of King Midas, to escape from an oppressive secret by objectifying what he has realised, and the pride of the artist in the discovery. Perhaps the desire to escape and the pride in the discovery are the obverse and the reverse of the same thing ; for it may be that all artistic discovery begets an

emotion between terror and delight—what Goethe called “ the shudder ”—and so a complex need to reveal and to boast, like that of the child who has seen a gilded beetle and runs away, not for good, but to bring its mother back to share the thrill.

Though these are four of the *verae causae* of autobiography—acting less often separately than in various parallelograms or polygons of forces—they will operate only in particular circumstances and on particular individuals. I would consider, then, two other factors—the environment and the personality of the self-revealer.

All autobiographies, I think, may without too much ingenuity be referred directly or indirectly to three or perhaps four periods of upheaval. “ In every age of well-marked transition ”, says Whitehead, “ there is the pattern of habitual dumb practice and emotion which is passing, and there is the oncoming of a new complex of habit. Between the two lies a zone of anarchy, either a passing danger or a prolonged welter involving misery of decay or zest of young life ”. There are what Whitehead calls “ senseless agencies ” (like the inroads of the barbarians in the ancient world and the harnessing of steam in the modern, and possibly epidemics, changes in climatic conditions, and natural cataclysms) and “ formulated aspirations ” (like Christianity in the Roman Empire and democracy in modern Europe and America), both of which kinds of forces are at work, dis-

integrating the "age . . . that is dying" or preparing the "one that is coming to birth". "Sometimes the period of change is an age of hope, sometimes it is an age of despair. When mankind has slipped its cables, sometimes it is bent on the discovery of a New World, and sometimes it is haunted by the dim sound of the breakers dashing on the rocks ahead. The Fall of the Roman Empire occurred in a prolonged age of despair : Steam and Democracy belong to an age of hope". But, I might remark, what is one age's despair may be another's hope ; and what seems to us now to have been the dominant note of an age depends on whether the hoppers or despairers were more vocal. Such transitional periods were times when "Men knew not what they did", and in which certain sensitive persons felt themselves alone and in need of self-adjustment, self-knowledge, and self-revelation.

IV

MANY periods of change produced no autobiographies ; partly because, while "senseless agencies" abounded, "formulated aspirations" were lacking or not of a kind to stimulate the individual's sense of individuality. Not until the breakdown of the classical system, which profoundly affected certain susceptible men and loosened them from their environment, did autobiography appear in the *Confessions* of St Augustine, the first indisputable specimen, as its author was "the first modern man". My reason for passing over Marcus Aurelius is that his *Meditations* are the very opposite of an autobiography, not merely because they were entries jotted down from day to day in a commonplace-book and for no eye but his own, but because, apart from the first book with its allusions to his education and the enumeration of his obligations to others, they consist of counsels of perfection, not of a narrative of his achievements and failures.

Such cold objectivity was utterly foreign to the mind and constitution of the probably half-African, half-Semitic St Augustine, that "child of many tears", that man of *vagabunda loquacitas*.

Refusing to treat himself as a third person, he introduced into literature the description of his mental states and began an art in which he is still scarcely excelled. This subjectivity, partly temperamental, bears an intimate relation to his intensely personal Christianity. Two things there were, he declared, that he desired to know, God and the soul, and had he but known himself he would have known God also. Hence the remarkable ideal which he set before himself and which became one of the principles of Western monasticism—"Go not out of doors ; return into thyself ; in the inner man dwelleth truth". No one was ever better equipped to read his own mind. Long before Descartes he emphasised the certitude of consciousness and said that he who doubted knew not only that he lived, but also that he remembered, that he knew, and that he willed. Long before modern psychology he paid great, but critical, attention to dreams, analysed finely the process of forgetting and imperfect recall, and was fascinated by the memory—"This power of my memory, my God, is great. How great it is !" And it was this power to see into the heart of man which enabled him to enrich Latin literature with a greater store of beautiful, original, and weighty sayings which come home to the bosom of the modern man than any classical author or any other Father or Doctor of the Church. Such an inward religion was the

fulfilling of the psalmists and prophets in whom, much more markedly than in Greek or Latin literature, one can see the beginnings of an autobiographic tendency ; and it was the continuation of the practice of self-examination which, from the first, the profession of Christianity entailed, not only in the apostolic writers and Fathers but in the generality of believers. St Augustine himself was made still more self-conscious by other factors in his environment. He lived amid the clash of opposites—the conflicts of the barbarians and the Empire, Christianity and paganism, the Church and the State—*civitas Dei* and *civitas terrena*, Catholicism and Donatism, orthodoxy and heresy, especially Manicheism and Pelagianism, determinism and free-will, to name some of them. Then again he was the son of a mixed marriage between a pagan, the warm-blooded and violent Patricius, and a Christian, the saintly Monica. He himself inherited characteristics from both parents which were perhaps never fully reconciled. For years before his conversion he lived a divided life—the professor of rhetoric loath to leave the secular life and the catechumen hungering after the spiritual. He hovered long between competing theologies and philosophies. He resisted conviction and delayed baptism, thereby prolonging the process of conversion, inflaming his conscience, and intensifying his self-awareness. It was natural

for such a man from his own experience to deduce that men were *nihil aliud quam voluntates* ; and in his portrayal of the divided will he has been surpassed only by St Paul. Such factors begot in him a habit of mental triangulation, of estimating nicely his distance from, or approximation to, institutions, doctrines, and theories, and hence a state of psychological tension favourable to autobiography. His baptism in his 33rd year, at which date the *Confessions* end, enabled him to look back in a detached way on his life, in condemnation certainly and with remarkable frankness and humility, but almost as if his pre-baptismal self were another person. As narrative, the *Confessions* are a little disappointing. The bulk of the book is devoted to long prayers and meditations on what St Augustine regarded as significant episodes—lapses and recoveries—in his circuitous approach to Catholic truth, set down for his own confirmation and the edification of others. It is thus rather a sacrifice of penance than a narrative of life or a full revelation of a character and its evolution. But the narrative passages are intensely vivid and memorable—the stealing as a boy of some pears ; Monica's dream of his ultimate conversion ; his grief at a friend's death ; the murderous excitement with which the crowd in the circus infected Alypius who had determined to shut his eyes when carried forcibly there by friends ; his conversation at a balcony

in Ostia with his mother on the eve of her last illness and death ; and the crisis in a garden near Milan, after reading the life of St Anthony.

St Augustine was psychologically far ahead of his own day and died, appropriately enough, when the Vandals were besieging Hippo, and his friend Boniface, *ultimus Romanorum*, was boldly defending it amid the terror and despair of the populace. For centuries there was no one, not even Boethius, with anything like his self-consciousness. Perhaps auricular confession, which was becoming general,* satisfied such need of self-revelation as there was. At any rate, except for passages in medieval mystics, who in this were the spiritual heirs of St Augustine, and in some of the greater medieval poets, there was no fresh autobiographical impulse till the Renaissance and the Reformation.

Both movements may be taken as rediscoveries of personality, and that at a higher level than ever before. They were reaffirmations of individuality, which, though accepted in theory by the Church, had in practice been subordinated to ecclesiastical authority, to the fixed social gradations of feudalism, and to the rigid castes of guild and community. The effect of the Renaissance was both the earlier and the more powerful. For, on the one hand, its influence on personality is

* It was not compulsory till the Lateran Council, 1215.

apparent as early as Dante, Petrarch, and Chaucer ; and on the other, it went much further in its declaration of independence for the individual from institutions, creeds, moralities, and even the intractable facts of existence. Moreover, the Reformation was for long rather political and ecclesiastical than psychological in its results. Whereas in the classical world self-conscious individualism was rare, the rediscovered classical thought and habit at the Renaissance released a new sense of personality ; and as in the fourth century there was a conjuncture of opposites from which men took their bearings and discovered themselves in the process—the medieval and the classical worlds, supernaturalism and humanism, feudalism and nationalism, the traditional and the new conceptions of the Universe. To these must be added a contrast even more insistent—that which the Reformation supplied in the opposition of Catholicism and Protestantism, both of which, by appealing to apostolic Christianity, revived a religious individualism that had become latent.

The first specimens of autobiographical writing in the Renaissance are three almost contemporary works—the *Autobiography* of Benvenuto Cellini, 1558-63, the *De Vita Propria* of Jerome Cardan, 1570-76, and the *Essays* of Montaigne, 1571-89. On the minds of all three the complex agencies of the sixteenth century were at work ; and all

three had personal qualities which in response to their environments issued in self-portraiture.

Cellini's fascinating book is the first full-dress narrative of a man's life told by himself. In an age which approved of egoism and self-display, he was a prince of egoists ; and his motive for telling his own story was the desire to secure adequate recognition. He believed it incumbent on him as an " upright and credible " performer of " noble and praiseworthy " exploits to record them ; though his narrative shows he had no idea what any of these adjectives mean. Self-seeking, lying, overbearing, envious, malicious, quarrelsome, ferocious, vindictive, treacherous, murderous, lustful, and a sexual pervert, he possessed on his own showing all the major and minor vices, together with a naive self-righteousness and formal piety. He readily accepted the easy absolution of an indulgent Church, and was blissfully emancipated from conscience, self-control, or self-reproach. The *Autobiography*, therefore, is the story not so much of a recognisable human type, as of a *lusus naturae*. It shows its author innocent of self-knowledge ; and however much it enthralls us by its vivid and varied pictures of the late Italian Renaissance, it is defective as the record of a human being made and marred by his environment. In reading it we soon discover all the facets of his transparent, if unique, character, which the rest of the book

merely repeats in different settings. The interest is all external and kinetic, not internal and psychological.

But if Renaissance individualism manifested itself thus objectively, it also took an introspective turn in Cardan and Montaigne, who, though neither wrote strict autobiography, are of the first importance as self-portrayers. The life of Cardan, one of the strangest figures of the century, was singular to the verge of the romantic. The loneliness, out of which autobiography in a sense always rises, was provided for him by his base birth and the many humiliations which resulted from it, by genius allied to lunacy and accompanied by a lively sense of merit, by the bigotry of professional rivals and the idolatry of the laity, by one son's execution for murder and another's general knavery, by many accusations, by imprisonment and banishment, and finally by dependence on a papal pension. In his book he classifies all the attributes of man and proceeds to describe his own peculiarities under each head, *De Statura et Forma Corporis*, *De Valetudine*, *De Moribus et Animi Vitio, et Erroribus*, and so on. He thus gives a regular inventory of his effects, physical, intellectual, and moral, down to the absurdest details. A zoologist might so describe a monster he had never before seen and never expected to see again, with just such jejune accuracy. Cardan writes as if he were answering

questions put to him on oath in a court of justice. He had undoubtedly powers of self-examination and was never guilty of deliberate misstatement; but his own imagination frequently got the better of his judgment and for long he lived under a kind of hallucination.

In the history of introspection, Montaigne occupies a unique place and comes nearest to the perfect method of self-portraiture. Perhaps in consequence of his Jewish ancestry, he had achieved an almost Oriental serenity, as complete as the mystic's but at the opposite pole ; for his serenity was the result not of absorption in the Absolute but of utter self-sufficiency. It was, however, "a peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation"—the torture of an incurable internal disease, the bereavements and disappointments of mortal life, the brutalities and fanaticisms of Renaissance France with its St Bartholomew massacre and the intolerance of Protestants and Catholics, the wars of the League and the death agony of the House of Valois. His freedom from the things which agitate men is extraordinary. He had emptied out hope and fear, enmity and partisanship, and abode in detachment in his château, to which he had retired like *Candide* to his garden. A miracle of poise, he presents an example of how life can be lived, calmly and to the full, in the crash of earthquakes and on the lap of volcanoes. "I

have a thousand times gone to bed in mine house", he remarks casually, "imagining I should the very same night either have been betrayed or slain in my bed". Once the house was actually seized by treachery; and once he was robbed and threatened with instant death by marauding cut-throats whom his serenity moved so profoundly that they released him and returned their loot. But Montaigne sufficed for himself; he had been, he was, and would be—for a while at least. He does not narrate his life, declaring in fact that of all men living he had the poorest memory. The events of his life were of importance only as they extended his self-knowledge. "I endeavour not to make things known, but myself". "I look within myself; I have no business but with myself". Watching himself as dispassionately as if he had been a laboratory specimen, interesting but not disturbing, he was as scientific a self-recorder as Cardan, but with an unshakable sanity as well. His method was to know himself by his likeness or unlikeness to others, especially the men of antiquity. "If I study", he says, "I only endeavour to find out the knowledge of myself"; and he carried the process of mental triangulation to a fine art, the chief landmarks on his horizon being the *Parallel Lives* of Plutarch, *notre bréviaire*, as the old secularist calls it. The result is that no one has ever achieved such a balanced self-estimate.

Well might he say, " Never man handled subject better than I mine ". The *Essays* form " a book consubstantial with its author ; a member of my life ". " All the world may know me by my book and my book by me ". " Whatsoever a long acquaintance or continual familiarity might have gained a man in many wearisome years, the same hath he in three days in this register, and that more safely and exactly. . . . Many things I would be loth to tell a particular man, I utter to the whole world ; and concerning my most secret thoughts and inward knowledge, I send my dearest friends to a stationer's shop ". Free from sense of guilt or of wrong, he neither minimises his failings nor exaggerates his virtues. " I find not so much good in myself, but I may speak it without blushing ". " My best good hath some vicious taint ". On the other side he says, " I dare speak what I dare do ". " I have said all, or indicated all. What I cannot express, the same I point at with my finger. I leave nothing to be desired or divined of me ". If he was an egoist, it was not, like Cellini, from vanity, but from necessity. He took to writing as an escape from melancholy due to worry ; and as he had no better subject in his solitude, he wrote of himself. Autobiography he regards as excusable in the great and famous ; " But [this admonition] concerneth me very little. I erect not here a statue to be set up in a market-place of a town,

or in a church, or in any public place. It is for the corner of a library, or to amuse a neighbour, a kinsman, or a friend of mine withal, who by this image may haply take pleasure to renew acquaintance and to reconverse with me. Others have been emboldened to speak of themselves because they have found worthy and rich subjects in themselves ; I, contrariwise, because I have found mine so barren and so shallow, that it cannot admit any suspicion of ostentation ". " I labour not to be beloved more and esteemed better being dead than alive ". " All I seek to reap by my writing is, that they will naturally represent and to the life portray me to your remembrance ". " Others fashion a man, but I repeat him ". Perhaps, unconsciously, if there was anything in his mind of which he was unconscious, he wanted by self-repetition in his book to enlarge the party of the Montagnards who were in a minority in a mad world, to understand his difference from it and so confirm his own sanity in his private asylum for the sane. But as his theory of life was to have as few theories as possible, he was the least propagandist of men and wrote, " not to establish truth, but to find it out " ; and his motive for autobiography was as nearly as possible æsthetic, the pleasure of discovery and the desire to communicate it. What he discovered happened to be himself. " Whosoever shall so know himself ", he says (as Socrates did,

who was wise only in proportion to his self-knowledge), "let him boldly make himself known by his own mouth". The fruit of such knowledge is its own excuse ; the pleasure of the discovery is its own reward ; and the value of the discovery is, as in all art, *sui generis* and quite distinct from its ethical worth or importance.

The third impulse to autobiography—to pass over other examples which resulted from the gradually diminishing Renaissance stimulus—came with the new bound forward of the human spirit at the Aufklärung and the new mental horizons opened by it. Once again we encounter a war of two ages and the consequent clash of loyalties and beliefs. On the one side stands the natural man, backed by democracy, liberalism, internationalism, humanitarianism, and sentiment ; and on the other, the artificial man, relying on an aristocratic *vis inertiae*, the philosophy of the *status quo*, conservatism, and nationalism. The French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, the *Sturm und Drang*, the Romantic Revival, and the various readjustments in politics, art, letters, philosophy, and religion were some of the phases of the struggle. Such conditions produced a need in some people for orientation and self-understanding, and accentuated self-consciousness, because they divorced certain progressive and unconventional persons from their conservative fellows and provided

them with an isolation, a kind of private eddy, in which autobiography naturally results.

The most typical autobiography of the period, in which all literature tended to be confessional, was Rousseau's *Confessions*, with their sequels, the *Dialogues* or *Rousseau Juge de Jean-Jacques* and the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*. Both the man's environment and his own passionate and sensitive character combined to make these self-portraits what they are. No man ever had a less sociable or accommodating nature than Rousseau. In one sense at least he never compromised with his own principles. He determined to be himself and to live his own life ; and neither poverty and obscurity nor riches and the chance of fame could force or lure him to surrender his independence. In an age when convention permitted none to speak above a conversational note and good manners required even the least subversive opinions to be guardedly expressed, Rousseau shouted at the pitch of his voice, and had the awkward habit of saying boldly and violently whatever was in his mind. Even sympathisers like Diderot, d'Alembert, and Voltaire were also disgusted and shocked by his uncouthness ; those who, like Dr Johnson, did not sympathise regarded him as a rascal against whom every hand was rightly raised. Self-conscious as he would have been at any time and in any circumstances, his self-consciousness was exacerbated and diseased

by his surroundings and his age. A rebel of rebels by nature and by fortune, a man who taught and practised the development of individuality and the conduct of life without reference to an external authority, a man driven from pillar to post by his own *δαίμων* and his distrust of society, he must have felt to an unbearable degree his difference from his fellows. " I am not made like any who exist. If I am not better, at least I am different ". Not only were his autobiographical writings the result of this difference, but so also was his whole political philosophy. He felt that the world was " all out of step but our Jock " ; and in order to harmonise himself and the world, he decided to change the world. The political philosophy, then, pictures the ideal world in which Rousseau could be Rousseau *par excellence*. The *Confessions* and their sequels, on the other hand, show Rousseau as he was, a revelation so frank as to suggest spiritual exhibitionism. " I wish to show . . . a man in all the truth of nature. . . . Let the trumpet of the last judgment sound when it may, I shall come, the book in my hand, to present myself before the Sovereign Judge. I shall say boldly : See what I have done, what I have thought, what I was. I have spoken the good and evil with equal frankness ; I have concealed no sin, I have added no virtue. . . . Gather around me the innumerable crowd of my fellowmen ; let them hear my confessions, weep

over my infamies, and blush for my miseries. Let each in his turn open his heart at the foot of Thy throne, with the same sincerity, and then let anyone say, if he dare, *I am better than that man!*” Just as St Augustine could look back on his pre-baptismal self in detachment, so Rousseau, having rationalised his own lapses into examples of the distortion of human nature by institutions, like a seedling grown crooked under a boulder, could narrate his own life with no sense of responsibility for its aberrations. “He accuses himself”, says Maritain, “but only to give himself absolution, the crown and the palm; he has turned Christian humility inside out, like a glove”. St Paul had called himself the chiefest among sinners: Rousseau was the saddest victim of society, and his *Confessions* are an exculpatory manifesto.

Their influence on later literature, especially of the more personal kind, is obvious and is still active to-day. But I suggest that we are living in a period which has received still another impulse to confessional writing. Is the present autobiographical output the despairing effort of human individuality to perpetuate itself, like the abundant fructifying of a plant when it is about to die? There have been many more or less “senseless agencies” hostile to personality in the last twenty years—war, the supersession of private enterprise by big business, the extinction of

democracy and free thought in Fascism, Communism, and Hitlerism, cosmopolitan fashions, manners, literature, and amusements, and the rise of semi-behaviourist and antinomian views of conduct. If this reading of the situation, which I throw out for argument's sake, seems too alarmist, more acceptable reasons for the plethora of contemporary autobiographies and semi-autobiographies are easily found. Perhaps in the backwash of the War, politicians and military and naval leaders felt the need to restore their prestige by writing apologias ; and thus professional literary men, whom the last two decades plentifully supplied with experience, came to realise the possibilities of the autobiographical genre, the more so since the decay and mutation of the novel.

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