DESIGN AND TRUTH IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Roy Pascal

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Contents

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Preface

IT may not be out of place to introduce this book with an autobiographical comment on how I came to undertake it.

I had spent some years in the intensive study of imaginative and philosophical literature, and was continually brought up against the problem of the contrast between the meaning of a man's work and life for us, the "likeness" we make, and his own image or idea of himself. We generally underestimate the importance in a man's life of his "life-illusion", and I wanted to compensate this bias by studying autobiography, the record of this illusion.

Personal experiences reinforced, and perhaps in reality prompted, this purpose. I was frequently startled to find that for other people I was a person with definite characteristics, who in given circumstances could be expected to have certain views and to act in certain ways; while I remained in my own eyes rather indefinite and capable of unforeseeable reactions. I came to realise that I was deluding myself in some degree, but felt that the others were deluding themselves about me also. I am not so fixed as I appear to them, and I am not so indeterminate as I assume. Thinking over recent changes in my thoughts and habits, I found it immensely difficult to decide whether they were foreseeable, as the assertion of a deeper trend over less fundamental attitudes, or whether they were something really new. In either case, it seemed curious that I should be so anxious to persuade myself that I was consistent, that this "I" was an identity; for even if something new had emerged, I tried to prove to myself that it grew organically out of the old. As if freedom could mean something to me only if it was destiny, as if a choice was satisfactory only if it imposed itself as my nature.

This intellectual problem presented itself however as an insistent moral pressure. I do not mean concern for the morality of

my behaviour and thoughts, though old faults and follies of course cause sleepless nights. I mean a need for meaning. I do not believe that an individual life has a religious or transcendental meaning, and I cannot even comfort myself with the metaphysical despair, the Angst, of the existentialists. Nor is it enough to prove to myself that I am fulfilling a social purpose in a useful job. The meaning had to be personal, subjective. I did not pitch my hopes extravagantly high, and felt one could be content if one could feel one's self to be consistent, to have developed naturally and organically, to have remained "true to itself", and if within this framework one could order certain intense experiences whose significance defied analysis but which were peculiarly one's own. The terms are vague, and I cannot say where this pressure comes from, but I think I am delineating a state of mind from which autobiography springs.

When I tried to jot down some early experiences that seemed to insist on being expressed, I found however hindrances and problems with the apparently simplest and clearest memories. My own difficulties led me to realise how peculiar is the task of the autobiographer, and to investigate the various ways in which men and women have been able to write the truth about themselves. I was surprised to find that, though there is a huge and growing bulk of autobiographical statements, very little has been written about how the autobiographer accomplishes his task.

It was not easy to find a satisfactory form for this study. To classify autobiographies by motive is psychologically interesting, but does not lead to any decisive insight into the reasons for the specific shape or style of a work—at the same time, motives are usually mixed. A historical account is of great value for the centuries when autobiography was finding itself, but is only confusing in the modern period, when autobiographies of all sorts jostle for attention. The plan I ultimately adopted was devised in order to work towards the secret of autobiography as the account of the truth of a life, and it perhaps needs a little explaining.

After defining what I understand an autobiography to be, I recount in historical chapters its emergence as a recognised and "self-conscious" literary form. From this point I turn to what I take to be the main issue, what is the particular sort of truth to be found in autobiography, and I first face the difficulties by

enumerating the numerous ways in which autobiographies are not truthful. Even the best fall short in this respect, if they do not do worse, and yet they impress us with their truth; and I suggest that this riddle is solved if we approach them from the point of view of the author's intention, which itself is determined by his personality and achievement. They are, therefore, then examined by types, for this classification allows us to understand the principle upon which the author builds his story and the style in which he writes. Childhood falls into a category of its own and had to be treated separately. In all cases, the search for a formal principle leads to a discussion of the specific content of the book, just as the discussion of the content leads repeatedly to a problem of form.

The question imposed itself, why have many authors found it more appropriate to probe into themselves through the medium of invented circumstances, in the form of the novel? Hence a chapter on the autobiographical novel.

In my final chapter I have tried to define what is specific and unique in the autobiography—what sort of self-knowledge the autobiographer seeks, and in what way self-knowledge differs from knowledge of other people.

Many autobiographies have been referred to, and many more have been ignored. I have chosen to refer repeatedly to certain significant or typical works, rather than to make passing references to a greater variety, so that I could do greater justice to my themes and the works themselves. I have included what I think are the most important in a list given at the end of the book; in the case of foreign works I quote, as far as possible, from translations.

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I

What is an Autobiography?

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES claim our attention for a host of reasons. At the least, they satisfy a legitimate curiosity about the ways of men. It is fascinating to enter into the private life of some-one else, so different from us even if he is a neighbour, to hear of the small circumstances of private and social life, of emotional involvements, prejudices and passions, beliefs and convictions, that are normally each man's secret; in the case of men of notable achievement, to learn the personal story of well-known events, of motives and intentions that are hidden behind them. Beyond the interest of such particulars, autobiographies offer an unparalleled insight into the mode of consciousness of other men. Even if what they tell us is not factually true, or only partly true, it always is true evidence of their personality. Knowledge of this type, direct historical and psychological knowledge, is not simply interesting and instructive; it is necessary to us if we are to get on terms with ourselves. And in autobiographies this knowledge is given in a particularly attractive way, as a story in which, as in a novel, we are won over to the "hero". Not that the author must try to win us by proving that he, the hero, is worthy, morally or by his achievements, of our admiration; if he does so, we tend to feel alienated. But we are won over simply by being admitted to his intimacy. Look at Sargent's portrait of Henry James: James holds you off, reserved, a little ironical, perhaps suspicious of irruption into his privacy, as he would have been if you had called on him at Rye. But in his autobiography James not only confides in you, it seems almost as if he were appealing for your understanding and glad of this intimate communion.

Few autobiographies lack some sort of interest, but some have a peculiar quality—"Autobiographies are the most entrancing of books, and sometimes they are works of art" (Bonamy Dobrée). How do we recognise them as works of art? This is the question I want to examine. It is not a matter of examining the "form" as opposed to the "content"; what needs to be discussed is, on what principles is the content of a life organised in this literary form, the autobiography?

Autobiography is only one form among many in which a writer speaks of himself and the incidents of his personal experience. Misch, in his great investigation of the origins of the autobiography, has to include in his account a great variety of utterance, from lyrical poetry and philosophical reflection to accounts of achievement, *res gestae*. No national literature is without these forms. But with autobiography a peculiar step is taken, which does not necessarily follow upon these other forms, many of them of great antiquity; and indeed this new departure scarcely took place at all in the literatures of the Far or Near East. It belongs to Europe, in its essentials to the post-classical world of Europe. In it, the spiritual identity of the personality is sought as it is expressed in what Misch calls "its concrete experienced reality"; the multiple experiences of a life are linked reflectively in the consciousness; there is a realisation that the individual is "ineffabile", as Spinoza put it, and yet may be grasped in his successive collisions with circumstance.

An investigation into the historical and psychological origins of this literary genre must lead one deep into the cultural history of the West; but I am concerned with the genre as it has come to be established and recognised. Misch rightly points out that its form arises in a very special way out of the actual manner in which the author experiences reality; but his over-riding historical purpose leads him to overlook the difference between the shape of life and the shape of an autobiography.[1] There is an autobiographical form, and indeed a convention, which one recognises and distinguishes from other literary modes; writers know roughly what they expect to do if they write autobiographies, and critics are in no great difficulty to define their subject-matter when they write about autobiographies. At the same time, there is sufficient

[1] Misch, *Geschichte der Autobiographie*, i. 4–6.

confusion and uncertainty to make it worth while to see if a more precise and coherent definition may not be discovered.

It is necessary first to discriminate between autobiography proper and other literary forms that have an autobiographical content. Cocteau, when asked to contribute to a volume of studies on autobiography, rightly wrote that every line we write, every blot, "compose our self-portrait and denounce us".[1] But while we are not likely to confuse autobiography and lyric poetry, common linguistic usage indicates that autobiography is frequently confused with literary forms nearer to it. Authors often refer to their life-stories indiscriminately as autobiography, memoir, or reminiscence. Mrs. Burr and H. N. Wethered in their books on the autobiography do not distinguish between autobiographies and diaries or even letters. I would limit myself to what I hold to be true autobiography, not in order to make things easier for myself, nor I hope out of pedantry, but because autobiography involves a distinctive attitude on the part of the author, a distinctive mode of presentation—and, if one is concerned with its historical significance, gives evidence of a distinctive psychological characteristic of European civilisation. I do not, of course, wish to imply that this "true" autobiography is the only autobiographical form to rise to the level of art. There is an art of the letter, and in the hands of a Gide or Ernst Jünger the diary or journal has become a shaped literary form (though when these most private forms are consciously composed as art, which means among other things as something to be communicated, they undergo a somewhat disconcerting metamorphosis).

The formal difference between diary and autobiography is obvious. The latter is a review of a life from a particular moment in time, while the diary, however reflective it may be, moves through a series of moments in time. The diarist notes down what, at that moment, seems of importance to him; its ultimate, long-range significance cannot be assessed. It might almost seem that the best diarists are those least concerned with long-range significance; Pepys and Boswell are ravishing precisely because they are so diurnal, so devoted to what the day offers. And they are men, one inclines to think, who would have found it impossible to write autobiographies. It is we, the readers, who have to

[1] *Formen der Selbstdarstellung*, ed. Reichenkron and Haase, Berlin 1956.

try to synthesise their characters out of their infinite fragmentation.

The use of diary-material in autobiographies may give them "a remarkable authenticity", as André Maurois says, but it is also full of pitfalls. Autobiographers proceed much more royally with their journals than biographers would dare. I do not mean that they simply ignore a great deal; that is unavoidable. But they alter earlier judgements and detect significances which escaped them at the time. Often a diary-entry will provide the material for a vivid picture which otherwise might have escaped memory—some of the brilliant scenes in Benjamin Haydon's autobiography are taken from his diary; but often a direct impression will be altered in the autobiography. Ruskin notes that the despondent account of his aesthetic obtuseness on an early trip along the Riviera which he gives in *Praeterita* does not conform with his diary—"I see, indeed, in turning the leaves [of my journals], that I have been a little too morose in my record of impressions", and he then corrects any possible misapprehension by inserting a page of the journal.[1] What is characteristic is that Ruskin did not simply amend his autobiographical account, but left the two statements side by side, as if to say, one is appropriate to the autobiography, one to the diary. When Haydon writes: "I write this life [the autobiography] for the student. I wish to show him how to bear affliction and disappointment by exhibiting the fatal consequences in myself, who did not bear them",[2] he is asserting a principle of composition which must radically distinguish the autobiography from the diary, which can never be so systematically retrospective. The difference is summed up in a review of Lord Alanbrooke's diaries, *The Turn of the Tide*, in which vital questions of strategy during the Second World War are discussed. The reviewer states that the journals, however carefully edited leave us dissatisfied: "If this were an autobiography, we should know that it contained the considered judgement of Lord Alanbrooke."[3]

There is no less difference between the whole tone of expression in diary and autobiography, so that, if extracts from diaries are

[1] *Praeterita*, ii. 61.
[2] World's Classics ed., 184.
[3] R. H. S. Crossman, review in *The New Statesman*, Feb. 23, 1957.

quoted in autobiographies, they, involuntarily or not, startlingly bear witness to a change of focus. It is the same with letters. When it was suggested to Goethe that he should embody letters in his autobiography, he refused on the ground that "incoherent *realia* strewn about must necessarily disturb the good effect"; and the remark applies not only to matter in the letters that he considered irrelevant to his account, but also to the incoherence of style, the uneasy juxtaposition of different points of view. Beatrice Webb used, in *My Apprenticeship*, a great number of diary entries, and they are often confusing. From time to time, it is true, she will make some comment to the effect that the entry quoted illustrates some feature of her character in her young days, for instance that she was priggish or snobbish. But often the diary entry is unaccompanied by comment, and is meant to fit into the narrative as an adequate statement of what she was. In such cases we find it very difficult to evaluate the entry, and we want to know whether the mature writer fully accepts it now, or in what sense she would now criticise it. Such entries contrast glaringly with other passages where, in the normal autobiographical manner, she describes her youth from the point of view of maturity. There is of course no difficulty at all when we read her diaries as they have been published; we expect from a diary all the uncertainties, false starts, momentariness that we find in them. From the autobiography however we expect a coherent shaping of the past; and if diary entries or letters are quoted, we need the explanatory, interpretative commentary of the author.

The line between autobiography and memoir or reminiscence is much harder to draw—or rather, no clean line can be drawn.[1] There is no autobiography that is not in some respect a memoir, and no memoir that is without autobiographical information; both are based on personal experience, chronological, and reflective. But there is a general difference in the direction of the author's attention. In the autobiography proper, attention is focused on the self, in the memoir or reminiscence on others. It is natural, therefore, that the autobiographies of statesmen and

[1] One could distinguish memoir from reminiscence by saying that memoir concerns itself with public events, reminiscence with private relationships. The difference is primarily one of content, and does not affect the manner of composition or writing.

politicians are almost always in essence memoirs. The usual pattern includes true autobiographical material about childhood and youth. But when the author enters into the complex world of politics, he appears as only a small element, fitting into a pattern, accomplishing a little here or there, aware of a host of personalities and forces around him. If he puts himself in the centre, he falls into rank vanity; it is as an observer that he can make a unity of his experiences, not as an actor. At the same time, the character of public political life imposes itself so relentlessly that there is often no essential relationship between the personal character of the man and his work, so that the childhood and such private life as is described remain detached from the main current, and therefore often run the risk of appearing a sentimental self-indulgence. In political life, too, there is a greater risk than in other spheres of the autobiography's being an apologia, a risk, that is, that it is written to persuade. Of course, even the most biased memoirs of this type illuminate a personality; but the illumination is involuntary. The works of de Retz, Godoy, Metternich, are invaluable as memoirs, thin and unconvincing as autobiography.

However, true autobiographies of statesmen are possible where their political activity stands in an essential relationship to their personality, where it can appear as the efflux of their personality. Even here, the forces of political life are so complex that the statesman may restrict himself to indicating the manner and effect of his intervention here and there, instead of giving a coherent story in autobiographical form. Bismarck wrote his *Thoughts and Recollections* with the intention of justifying himself, and he was in no mood to be modest; yet he confined his account to the "inside" story of particular, separate events, supplementing and correcting what was publicly known. I am not concerned at this moment with the question of the truth of his account; all autobiographies have their problems in this respect. But it is significant that the work is not autobiographical in form, above all since the simple weight and complexity of public issues could not be done justice to in the form of autobiography. More must be said below on the political autobiography; it must suffice now to indicate that its possibility arises, but rarely. The outstanding example is Gandhi's, for his political activity, arising from a

deep personal conviction, was creative in the truest sense, so that he could conclude his account of his political struggles in Africa and India with the remarkable words: "To describe Truth, as it has appeared to me, and in the exact manner in which I have arrived at it, has been my ceaseless effort".[1] His work could be autobiographical because his political achievements had meaning for him only in relation to the spiritual source from which they sprang.

Memoirs are common in other spheres than the political. What is characteristic of the best is that, while they have the sharpness due to a particular social position and personal slant, the slant is taken for granted or at least not subjected to prolonged attention. Gossips and hangers-on can write memoirs of interest, if they know they have in themselves little claim to our attention; if not, they devastatingly show up their superficiality, like Ford Madox Ford. But the distinction between the memoirist and the autobiographer can clearly be detected even in those who might have written both. Logan Pearsall Smith leaves us in no doubt as to why he called his *Unforgotten Years* "reminiscences". He does tell us something about his early years, but tersely, with astringent and disillusioned irony, evidently reluctant to take himself seriously: "I detect in myself a tendency to sentimentalise over these early years of my existence. It is not that I wish to recall my youth. It is rather that I feel a kind of impatient pity for that half-baked young fool of an American boy about whom I have been writing." "Existence", "impatient", "half-baked"—they are not terms the autobiographer can use, even if like Henry Adams he intends to show us that his youth was misdirected. Pearsall Smith is at his happiest when he is, in his own words, "saving the places and people one has cared for from being utterly forgotten"—recalling them not because of any influence they had on him, but simply because they were lovable.

Appearances here may easily deceive, for it is not always possible to distinguish the autobiographer from the memoirist by the amount of external life that is described. A reviewer said of

[1] *Mahatma Gandhi, His Own Story*, ed. C. F. Andrews, 1930, 333–4. This is a condensed version of several autobiographical writings of Gandhi, which have such significant titles as *The Story of my Experiments with Truth* or *Satyagraha (Soul-Force) in South Africa.*

Yeats' *Autobiographies* (a collection of the poet's autobiographical writings) "It is probably better to take these papers not so much as an account of the man who was all the time a poet . . . but as a record of people and things he thought important".[1] This is more true of the later papers than the *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*, yet even this consists largely of recollections of relatives and friends. Henry James planned his autobiography as a memorial to his brother, his father, and friends like Mary Temple. But in both cases, with Yeats and James, the ostensible form and intention come to serve a different and truly autobiographical intention, since all these objective identities, these other people, become forces within the writer and are referred back, implicitly more than explicitly, to the writer, whom their impact shapes and who develops in subtle response to them. The opposite is true of the five volumes of Sir Osbert Sitwell's autobiography. For though he seems to have set out with an autobiographical intention, and many personal experiences and achievements are recorded, Sir Osbert falls more and more into reminiscence. It is the figure of his eccentric and engaging father that holds the books together and provides their climax, not himself, and, as Stephen Spender rightly observes, these reminiscences "tell us little about what it feels like to be in Sir Osbert's skin".[2] There is in this account a sort of bristly shyness, which we readily respect, but which holds us off.

One must distinguish autobiography too from philosophical reflection on the self, static analysis, and the self-portrait—as in Marcus Aurelius, Boethius, or Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, and many journals which note down the changing aspects of a character, like the tortured confessions of many pietists. What is common to all these methods is the attempt, by means of introspection, at a static representation of the personality. The autobiography is on the contrary historical in its method, and at the same time the representation of the self in and through its relations with the outer world. Perhaps one might say that it involves the philosophical assumption that the self comes into being only through interplay with the outer world. It is true of all autobiographies, I think, that they have in them, in some measure, the germ of a description of the

[1] L. A. G. Strong, review in *The London Magazine*, June 1955, vol. 2, No. 6.
[2] "Confessions and Autobiography", in *The Making of a Poem*.

manners of their times, as has been noted even of Augustine's *Confessions*. Autobiographies that are so engrossed with the inner life that the outer world becomes blurred, as is the case with many autobiographies of medieval mystics, like those which at the other extreme restrict themselves to *res gestae*, fail to realise the potentialities of the genre.

These distinctions have led us a good way towards a definition of autobiography proper. It involves the reconstruction of the movement of a life, or part of a life, in the actual circumstances in which it was lived. Its centre of interest is the self, not the outside world, though necessarily the outside world must appear so that, in give and take with it, the personality finds its peculiar shape. But "reconstruction of a life" is an impossible task. A single day's experience is limitless in its radiation backward and forward. So that we have to hurry to qualify the above assertions by adding that autobiography is a shaping of the past. It imposes a pattern on a life, constructs out of it a coherent story. It establishes certain stages in an individual life, makes links between them, and defines, implicitly or explicitly, a certain consistency of relationship between the self and the outside world (or a consistency of misrelationship, as with K. P. Moritz or Denton Welch). This coherence implies that the writer takes a particular standpoint, the standpoint of the moment at which he reviews his life, and interprets his life from it. The standpoint may be the actual social position of the writer, his acknowledged achievement in any field, his present philosophy; in every case it is his present position which enables him to see his life as something of a unity, something that may be reduced to order. Autobiography, as A. M. Clark said, is not the annals of a man's life, but its "philosophical history". There is point in the suggestion that Goethe called his autobiography *Poetry and Truth* because he wished to distinguish between the actual facts of his youth and the interpretation of the old man writing.[1] Collingwood's case is typical. It was only in 1938, when he thought he had come to the understanding that his life had a coherent purpose, that he could write his autobiography. He concludes his book: "I know that all my life I have been engaged unawares in a political struggle, fighting . . . in the dark. Henceforth I shall fight in the

[1] Erich Trunz, in his notes to his edition of Goethe, vol. ix, Hamburg, 1955, 608.