

JAMES OLNEY

Metaphors of Self

The Meaning of Autobiography



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METAPHORS OF SELF

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the meaning of autobiography

BY JAMES OLNEY

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For my Mother and Father

preface

Leslie Stephen may have overstated the case for autobiography slightly when he said that no man had ever written a dull one. But I wonder if it might not be true to say that for the common reader autobiography, taken by and large, is the most appealing form of literature and, after autobiography, biography; true to say that autobiography is the literature that most immediately and deeply engages our interest and holds it and that in the end seems to mean the most to us because it brings an increased awareness, through an understanding of another life in another time and place, of the nature of our own selves and our share in the human condition. I should imagine that novels and history, not to mention philosophy and scientific studies, would come well behind biography and autobiography in popularity; and that they are popular not simply with readers looking to fill an idle hour with the excitement of recorded gossip, but also and especially with readers who are looking for an order and meaning in life that is not always to be found in experience itself. For its choice of subject, a book about autobiography need offer no apologies. There are, on the other hand, as one could expect, given something as central, as various, and as comprehensive as autobiography, many different ways of coming at the subject. About the way of this book, one might give a word of explanation.

The present study is in no way “definitive”—neither in the sense that it attempts a precise and restrictive definition of autobiography nor in the sense that it tries to deal with all relevant aspects of the subject. I am more interested in why men write autobiographies, and have written them for centuries, and in why, after the lapse of those centuries, we continue to read them, than I am in the history of autobiography

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or in its form per se. I am interested, in other words, in the philosophy and psychology of autobiography. It is my notion that, though it treats often of specific places and times and individuals, and must do so to make its experience real, autobiography is more universal than it is local, more timeless than historic, and more poetic in its significance than merely personal. "Je pense," Jean Cocteau said, in a phrase that expresses nicely my own idea of autobiography, "que chaque ligne, chaque tache, chaque onde qui s'échappent de nous (et peu importe ce qu'elles représentent) composent notre autoportrait et nous dénoncent." As for fixing the formal limits of autobiography, had I tried to do that, I am afraid that it would have meant parting company not only with Eliot and Montaigne but also, probably, with Jung and Fox and Newman. Strictly speaking, only Darwin and Mill, of the seven writers considered in this book, wrote autobiographies; but then I do not, as I have implied, intend to speak very strictly when it is a question of literary genre. I have felt quite free to move about from century to century, from poetry to autobiography, and from Switzerland to France to England, hardly bothering to notice the time or the place of events, concerned instead with the significance of their record.

Language is a different matter. Except in the instances of Montaigne and Jung—the two "theoretical" autobiographers—I deal only with works originally in English; had it been possible, I would have chosen none but writers of English. Montaigne and Jung, however, especially taken together, offer what one can find in no writer in English: a philosophical and a psychological theory for autobiography that coincides with an actual autobiography (*Essays and Memories, Dreams, Reflections*). In any case, fine translations of Jung's works are available in the nearly completed Bollingen/Princeton and Routledge and Kegan Paul publication of the *Collected*

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Works, and Donald Frame has provided an excellent modern translation of Montaigne.

Surprisingly little has been written about autobiography at all, and virtually nothing about its philosophical and psychological implications. A complete list of studies would include only a handful of books in English: Anna Robson Burr's early book, *The Autobiography: A Critical and Comparative Study*, published in 1909; formal and historical studies by Roy Pascal (*Design and Truth in Autobiography*), Wayne Shumaker (*English Autobiography: Its Emergence, Materials and Form*), and John N. Morris (*Versions of the Self*); Robert F. Sayre's analysis of three American autobiographies (*The Examined Self*); brief monographs of varying interest by A. M. Clark, J. Lionel Tayler, and Lord Butler; and an entertaining two-volume anthology, compiled with a commentary by E. Stuart Bates, *Inside Out: An Introduction to Autobiography*. One might also mention Georg Misch's *Geschichte der Autobiographie* (translated, in two volumes, as *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*), a work that is, in the best manner of German scholarship, both exhaustive and exhausting; Wilhelm Dilthey's writings in the theory of history in which he points out, again and again, the central importance of autobiography for understanding human history and culture; and a number of articles published in English in the last few years (by Stephen Spender, Richard Hoggart, Alfred Kazin, Barrett J. Mandel, and Stephen A. Shapiro). And that is all, at least of any consequence. Even to these few sources I have made virtually no reference, and for a very simple reason: I had not read them at the time when I was writing. This book was conceived in its present form and largely written in first draft during two years that I spent "up-country" in Liberia. As anyone who has visited the interior of that country will easily recognize, it was a piece of great good fortune that I

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could find, for example, Nickalls' edition of Fox's *Journal* without worrying about what might have been said, or was being said, about the *Journal* as autobiography. When I came out of Africa, I read the books and found occasional similarities with what I had said, but nowhere, I think, with quite the same intention nor in the same context. Hence, I have been content to let any similarities remain in this book as what, in a sense, they were for me: confirmation of thoughts I pursued in Suakoko, Bong County, Liberia. Nor, and for the same reason, does it seem to me of much value to go back to my text and mount what would surely be artificial arguments over incidental dissimilarities and disagreements. Only one piece of writing has seemed to me of sufficient interest and relevance to the concerns of this book to cause me (in Chapter V) to resume and extend my discussion: an essay by the French philosopher Georges Gusdorf, published under the title "Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie" in a *Festschrift* for Fritz Neubert (*Formen der Selbstdarstellung: Analekten zu einer Geschichte des literarischen Selbstportraits*).

It is the great virtue of autobiography as I see it—though autobiography is not peculiar in this: poetry, for example, does the same, and so does all art—to offer us understanding that is finally not of someone else but of ourselves. When William James, speaking in that double character of psychologist and philosopher that he carried so well, wrote to Henry Adams that "autobiographies are my particular line of literature, the only books I let myself buy outside of metaphysical treatises," he expressed what I take to be the attitude of the common reader, the point of view of the present book. My interest in autobiography, that is to say—and I believe this would be James's interest as well—is on the one hand psychological-philosophical, on the other hand moral; it is focused in one direction on the relation traceable between lived experience and its written record and in the other direction on what that

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written record offers to us as readers and as human beings. We shall never have the experience in consciousness that the autobiographer had, and consequently we shall never know what, in his deepest and inaccessible self, he was. But we might, from autobiography, as from drama or poetry, know what man has been, or what forms have proved possible to humanity, which is a knowledge that one seeks with the intention more particularly of knowing what man is. And this knowledge is again, to each of us, necessary for a very particular reason: behind the question "What is man?" lies another, more insistent question—the ultimate and most important question, I should think, for every man: "How shall I live?" If autobiography can advance our understanding of that question, and I think it can, then it is a very valuable literature indeed.

acknowledgments

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The writing of this book has been rather lonely than otherwise; hence there are no colleagues that it seems necessary to name either for thanks or for exculpation from responsibility for what I have written. Personal obligations incurred in writing the book, on the other hand, have been incalculable; in fact, they are co-extensive with the book's very existence. I mean the debts of gratitude, which I here acknowledge and in part discharge, that I owe to my parents, to my brothers and sisters, to my wife Judith. I must also thank Mrs. Joanna Hitchcock, who has done an ideal job of editing the book, and Mr. William McGuire, Associate Editor of Bollingen Series, who has given expert and sympathetic advice (especially in Chapter 3) beyond anything an author could legitimately expect. Finally, I think of one other obligation that requires recognition: there may be somewhere a publisher as kind, as generous, and as helpful as Mr. Herbert S. Bailey, Jr., the Director of Princeton University Press—but I doubt it. My gratitude to him is consequently great.

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METAPHORS OF SELF

Know thyself.

Delphic Oracle

I beseech You, God, to show my full self to myself.

St. Augustine

Here we see that solipsism strictly carried out coincides with pure realism. The I in solipsism shrinks to an extensionless point and there remains the reality co-ordinated with it.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

We may come to think that nothing exists but a stream of souls, that all knowledge is biography, and with Plotinus that every soul is unique.

W. B. Yeats

and in Melodious Accents I

Will sit me down & Cry I, I.

William Blake

one : A Theory of Autobiography

my metaphysics . . . my physics

The most fruitful approach to the subject of autobiography, I believe, is to consider it neither as a formal nor as an historical matter, which would be to separate it from the writer's life and his personality, but rather to see it in relation to the vital impulse to order that has always caused man to create and that, in the end, determines both the nature and the form of what he creates. In this view, there is no evolving autobiographical form to trace from a beginning through history to its present state because man has always cast his autobiography and has done it in that form to which his private spirit impelled him, often, however, calling the product not an autobiography but a lifework. If this is so, then the final work, whether it be history or poetry, psychology or theology, political economy or natural science, whether it take the form of personal essay or controversial tract, of lyric poem or scientific treatise, will express and reflect its maker and will do so at every stage of his development in articulating the whole work. To turn the matter around, a man's lifework is his fullest autobiography and, he being what he is and where and when he is, neither the lifework nor the autobiography could be otherwise. When, moreover, a man writes, in addition to his other works, something that is confessedly autobiographical—Mill's *Autobiography*, for example, or Fox's *Journal*, Newman's *Apologia pro vitâ suâ*, Darwin's *Autobiography*—then we may expect to be able to trace therein that creative impulse that was uniquely his: it will be unavoidably there in manner and style and, since autobiography is precisely an attempt to describe a lifework, in matter and content as well. A man's autobiography is thus like a magnifying lens, focusing and

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intensifying that same peculiar creative vitality that informs all the volumes of his collected works; it is the symptomatic key to all else that he did and, naturally, to all that he was.

But if there is no history of autobiography to trace nor any form that a book must observe in order to be autobiography, there have been, nevertheless, men who have provided, in their psychological and philosophical speculations, in their comments on themselves and on life in general, hints and suggestions that may be seen to add up to a theory that accounts for both the fact and the nature of autobiographical expression. Heraclitus was the first, according to historians of Greek philosophy, to declare that every cosmology begins in self-knowledge; he was the first to elaborate a physiology and a physics and to project a cosmology that consciously reflected himself, that unique man, as its center; he was, in other words, the first theoretical autobiographer. As the cosmologer is, Heraclitus recognized, so will be his cosmology. And it is most relevantly his cosmology: not yours and not mine, not Everyman's, not a machine's, most of all not God's cosmology. A picture of the cosmos, indeed the very idea of "cosmos" (from the Greek word meaning "order" or "universe"), is a man-made thing that depends entirely upon its creator for its distinctive configuration. A world view, about which one hears so much—one is told that it has been lost or is no longer coherent or was more elegant in the sixteenth century—is a vision held not by the world but of the world. With his yearning for order—a yearning greater, I should think, than his desire for knowledge—man explores the universe continually for laws and forms not of his own making, but what, in the end, he always finds is his own face: a sort of ubiquitous, inescapable man-in-the-moon which, if he will, he can recognize as his own mirror-image. Man creates, in fact, by the very act of seeking, that order that he would have. However we take hold of the question of knowledge, we are always brought

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back, with Heraclitus, to the beginning: knowledge in this state, in this fallen and sinful condition as the scholastic philosophers would say, must always be, can only be, human, individual, and subjective. A theology, a philosophy, a physics or a metaphysics—properly seen, these are all autobiography recorded in other characters and other symbols.

What Heraclitus is best known for in the history of philosophy, however, and the subject on which he is most often quoted, is his notion that the elements are in continual flux and transformation, and so also are men: "Fire lives the death of earth and *aer* lives the death of fire, water lives the death of *aer*, earth that of water."¹ For the human being, too, "It is death to souls to become water, death to water to become earth, but from earth comes water and from water soul" (Frag. 36). Thus Heraclitus argues that the variability or flux is internal as well as external, but he maintains also that there is, in both instances, a balancing opposite to this continuous changeability; there is, he says, an invisible, and, being invisible, greater and more pervasive, harmony behind discord and an integral constancy behind flux whether in the soul or in the cosmos. The suffix with which, in modern European languages, we harmonize the various elements of our bodies of knowledge ("-logy") is etymologically the same word as the one to which Heraclitus gave such philosophical cogency: "logos." This, the principle of harmony, of measure, of proportion underlying all change, transforms human variability from mere chaos and disconnection into significant process; and, since logos is both a universal and an individual principle, it is realized in the cosmos and in the self as teleological change,

¹ W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1962), 1, 453. The authenticity of this view, as coming from Heraclitus, is questioned and rejected by G. S. Kirk, *Heraclitus, The Cosmic Fragments* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1954), pp. 341-44; but the point remains the same: this *is* what Heraclitus has been best known for.

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as variation with a purpose, as, if one may so put it, rhythmic flux. Like the elements, individual man never is but is always becoming:² his self, as C. G. Jung will say some twenty-five hundred years after Heraclitus—nor did man change much in the interim—is a process rather than a settled state of being. The order that men seek is never static and out there but always going on, and going on within them, and always coming into being. Only with the coming of death must the self settle its accounts. Hence, the same man, according to Heraclitus, cannot step twice into the same stream, and this is doubly true: for the man and for the stream. But there is a oneness of the self, an integrity or internal harmony that holds together the multiplicity and continual transformations of being, and it is not an “imitation” of the unity of the Logos, nor is it the individual’s “piece” of the Logos. In every individual, to the degree that he is individual, the whole principle and essence of the Logos is wholly present, so that in his integrity the whole harmony of the universe is entirely and, as it were, uniquely present or existent. What the Logos demands of the individual is that he should realize his logos, which is also more than his own or private logos—it is the Logos. If one takes these four notions together—the intimate relation of self-knowledge and cosmology; the flux of all the world; the “becomingness” of the self; the identity of logos and Logos—Heraclitus’ conclusion is logical and wholly human, the con-

² After a philological discussion of considerable length and of very great interest on “logos” in fifth-century Greece, Guthrie says of the word as Heraclitus uses it in Fragment 50 (“Listening not to me but to the *Logos* it is wise to agree that all things are one”): “the *Logos* is (a) something which one hears (the commonest meaning), (b) that which regulates all events, a kind of universal law of becoming, (c) something with an existence independent of him who gives it verbal expression” (1, 425; italics are mine). G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1966), say the “logos” is “the unifying formula or proportionate method of arrangement of things, what might almost be termed the structural plan of things both individual and in sum” (p. 188).

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clusion of the philosopher and the artist, the conclusion, more simply, of the autobiographer and the man: "I searched out myself."³ One can do no better than to give W.K.C. Guthrie's excellent gloss on this primary statement in the literature of self-description:

The verb . . . has two main meanings: (1) to look for . . . (2) to question, inquire of somebody, find out. . . . Thus by the two words of fr. 101 Heraclitus meant, I suggest, first, "I turned my thoughts within and sought to discover my real self"; secondly, "I asked questions of myself"; thirdly, "I treated the answers like Delphic responses hinting, in a riddling way, at the single truth behind them, and tried to discover the real meaning of my selfhood; for I knew that if I understood my self I would have grasped the *logos* which is the real constitution of everything else as well." (1, 418-19.)

Thus Heraclitus anticipated, in these two words and in his thought generally, the entire history of autobiographical literature: in his characteristically brief comment, one finds set forth and drawn tightly inward the motives and the methods of autobiographers of all times; and in his search, Heraclitus realized the philosophy and psychology of writers about the self from Plato and Plotinus and St. Augustine to C. G. Jung and T. S. Eliot and beyond. And the subject is as inexhaustible as the Logos itself, for, as Heraclitus says in Fragment 45, "You could not discover the limits of the self, even by traveling along every path: so deep a logos does it have."⁴

In this cosmology-cum-autobiography, one might remark, perhaps in a sort of hyperbole, the problem of the One and the

³ The translation is from Kirk and Raven, *Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 212; Guthrie's translation is "I searched myself"; Philip Wheelwright, in *Heraclitus* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1959), p. 19, translates it, "I have searched myself."

⁴ Taking the hint from Wheelwright (p. 59) that the word traditionally translated "soul" could equally well be rendered as "psyche" or "self," I have adapted freely from the translations of Guthrie (1, 476-77), Kirk-Raven (p. 205), and Wheelwright (p. 58).

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many is resolved by a simple reverse. For all purposes of organization and understanding, one of the many in the heretofore meaningless created universe becomes, in the formal projection of cosmography-and-autobiography, the creative One of his own coherent, richly meaningful, intensely organized, altogether self-oriented universe. "Man tries to make for himself in the fashion that suits him best," according to a greatly individual cosmographer of the present century, "a simplified and intelligible picture of the world; he then tries to some extent to substitute this cosmos of his for the world of experience, and thus to overcome it. This is what the painter, the poet, the speculative philosopher, and the natural scientist do, each in his own fashion. Each makes this cosmos and its construction the pivot of his emotional life, in order to find in this way the peace and security which he cannot find in the narrow whirlpool of personal experience."⁵ It must also be, as one can see from the nature of the picture, that his construct will appeal ultimately not to the intellect of the viewer alone but also to his emotions as a whole man. Does it satisfy my feeling and my need for order? This would seem to be the final question we can ask and must ask, not only of the poem or the theological doctrine, but also of a psychology or a philosophy, a theory of evolution or a formal syllogism. "In language, in religion, in art, in science, man can do no more than to build up his own universe," Ernst Cassirer says, "—a symbolic universe that enables him to understand and interpret, to articulate and organize, to synthesize and universalize his human experience."⁶ Perhaps the greatest mystery is that men so often refuse credit for what they have achieved, disclaiming their accomplishment as something objective or scientific or impersonal or divine instead of proclaiming it as their

⁵ Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1962), p. 225.

⁶ *Essay on Man* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1944), p. 221.

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own and emotionally satisfying. In his own Heraclitean, symbolic, and oracular manner, William Blake, who never, the few times he had the chance, refused the credit due him as a creative maker, whether artist or philosopher, remarked, in the margin of Swedenborg's *Wisdom of Angels Concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*, "Man can have no idea of anything greater than Man, as a cup cannot contain more than its capaciousness."⁷ Yet philosophy, in disregard of this human truth and imagining its metaphysics to be objective and verifiable, is forever filling its cup to overflowing in the delusion that for once its capacity might surpass its capaciousness; and psychology, calling itself an exact science, perpetually chases its own tail, sending its naked intellect after its back end in the vain hope that this time it may prove a little faster than last time, or may surprise the tail and come upon it unawares. These are both, no doubt, edifying spectacles, but they are not, perhaps, destined for a more vulgar success than that. Montaigne, more realistic than the metaphysician, more practical than the scientist-psychologist, and obviously closer in spirit to Heraclitus than either, gets away with both games by refocusing metaphysics and science and reconstituting them as autobiography and art: "I study myself," he proclaims; "That is my metaphysics, that is my physics."⁸

One is surprised, in reading the history of pre-Socratic Greek thought, to notice how many of these early "philosophers" either were actual doctors or at least seem to have practiced a little medicine on the side, having deduced a medical theory from their general picture of the universe. Thus, Alcmaeon carried the cosmological principle of dualism developed by the Pythagoreans over into medical-physi-

⁷ *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Nonesuch Press, 1961), p. 737.

⁸ "Of experience," *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1957), p. 821.

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ological theory, saying that health is the proper balance of opposites; Philolaus drew an analogy between cosmogony and embryology (life, whether originating in the universe or in the womb, is “composed of the hot”), as also did Anaxagoras, who maintained that all life came from the moist; Empedocles, with his theory of respiration and the circulation of the blood, claimed to be sought by many who wished “to hear the word that heals all manner of illness”; and Diogenes of Apollonia seems to have written a medical text either in conjunction with or as a complement to his book on cosmology.⁹ For these men, physics, physiology, and philosophy were intimately related, if not identical, studies; cosmology, medicine, and ethics were the inseparable and quintessential human concerns. The models that these philosophers constructed to order and explain experience, whether on a macrocosmic or a microcosmic plane, whether projected onto the whole universe, the whole society of man, or the whole human body, whether the experience to be organized was phenomenal or noumenal or both together—in any case, these models were first of all a reflection of the internal order of their makers rather than an imitation of external reality. And so, hesitant as present practitioners in these fields may be to admit it, are contemporary models and theories in physics, philosophy, and biology.

That there was some sort of relation, probably indescribable, between life on the largest and life on the smallest scale, between intelligence in the universe and intelligence in man, between the elemental processes in nature and the elemental processes in the human body, suggested itself as an hypothesis to the early Greeks, as it has to so many thinkers since—as, indeed, it did also to the nonthinker George Fox, who, because God had opened to him the loving principle underlying all creation, nearly chose to be a medical practitioner. And

⁹ See Kirk and Raven, *Presocratic Philosophers*, esp. pp. 232, 234, 313, 321, 341-42, 393, 429, and 444-45.

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C. G. Jung was to build a life, a career, and a book on a rock that, he felt, united human medicine with the psyche of the universe. It is as much a theory—but no more—to say that there *is* an analogy between the human body and the processes of nature, or between the human mind and God's mind, as it is to say that there is no analogy or only a specific and partial one. Which of these one chooses to hold depends upon what one is; and what one is, it may seem odd to say, depends largely upon which of these one chooses to hold. "So that it is almost a truism to say that the world is what we perceive it to be. We imagine that our mind is a mirror, that it is more or less accurately reflecting what is happening outside us. On the contrary, our mind itself is the principal element of creation. The world, while I am perceiving it, is being incessantly created for myself in time and space."¹⁰ In his Eastern way, Rabindranath Tagore had little use for Western technology and science, but what he says here is as relevant to the activities of the theoretical scientist as it is to the speculative philosopher. Every natural science, even physics itself as Max Planck has said, is based on an act of faith, and without this faith no science could presume itself into being: a faith, first, that there is a causal order in nature and the universe; a faith, second, that there is some unfailing relation between the formal organization of the human mind and the formal organization of nature; and a faith, therefore, that the human mind is capable of discerning and describing the ordered processes that rule the natural universe. But why should any of these be true, except perhaps the last one *if* the first two are? The only objective evidence for or against these articles of faith is, of course, God's, or the mind's that draws out and lays down the rules for the very natural order that we are supposing or questioning and of which we are but parts, if it exists. If one

¹⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, *Personality* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1917), p. 47.

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believes in that natural order, in that mind, in that God, one can say, "I know because . . . I believe"; or, "God exists because . . . I am sure he exists"; or, "The universe is an orderly place because . . . I know it is." There one is left with witness not of God but of one's self.

Newman, in his *Development of Christian Doctrine*, maintains that "Reason . . . is subservient to faith,"¹¹ and he is unquestionably right: for the reason that we discover in the universe, and the reason that we bring to that universe, are both founded alike and together in an act of faith. They are both epiphenomena of autobiography. And if science and theology are based on acts of faith, as they undoubtedly are, so, as W. B. Yeats told his father in a letter, is art; the object of the artist's faith might be differently described, but upon the intensity and quality of that faith will surely depend the value of the artifact. "All our art is but the putting our faith and the evidence of our faith into words or forms and our faith is in ecstasy."¹² And this "will to believe," which is given and chosen, goes a long way toward making what is believed be true: if the scientist, the artist, the worshiper imagine deeply enough and believe intensely enough, and if they build their whole science, art, and worship, those edifices in which they move and have their being, unfalteringly on their belief, then they will find in their experiments, whether in laboratory, poem, or church, the order that they have themselves first created, posited, and believed in. What each is in effect doing, Planck, Yeats, or Newman, is to find, as Stephen Dedalus puts it, "in the world without as actual what was in his world within as possible." It is men of little faith who will not ask and who refuse to knock simply because the way is all sub-

¹¹ *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1909), p. 336.

¹² *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davies, 1954), p. 583.

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jective: to them it shall not be given nor the door opened. "On to God," Planck says, is the cry of both natural science and religion.¹³ And why not? For the first item in the credo of both is "There is a God."

We can only be said to believe something (e.g., "There is a God") if there is an alternative possibility to that belief (e.g., "There is no God"). Newman, in his *Apologia*, will go even further than Planck and maintain that the statement "There is a God" is a certainty altogether prior to belief: it is a mere matter of consciousness and self-consciousness and is no more than to say, "I exist," to articulate the awareness of being that each of us has and that is beyond question or belief. And I presume that Newman would say the same of the scientist's belief: that his faith in universal causal order is concomitant upon his consciousness of order existing in himself. Hence what the most brilliant scientist finds in the universe is, like the Deity of the simplest believer, predicated on and determined by what he first found or intuited or felt in himself. Whether or not an awareness of self-existence and an awareness of God-existence are coextensive and, as Newman would have them, virtually identical, there can be no doubt that any understanding of God and his universe, or the laws of the natural world, or the structure of human society, must come out of and will inevitably be deeply colored by the nature of the self and the knowledge that one has of that self lying at the center, and being the very heart, of the understanding that one comes to. "I begin," says Yeats, as he spirals in on the *anima hominis* so that he might spiral out on the *Anima Mundi*, "I begin to study the only self that I can know, myself, and to

¹³ "Religion and Natural Science," in *A Scientific Autobiography and Other Papers* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1950), p. 187. See also, in the same volume, the "Scientific Autobiography" and "Phantom Problems in Science" and the book entitled *The Universe in the Light of Modern Physics*, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1937).

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wind the thread upon the pern again.”¹⁴ They seem very different things, study of the self and study of the world, yet the two cannot be ultimately separated, as subject and object join and merge in consciousness. One sees, looking out from the subjective center, various objects—shapes and forms, people, movement, expressive gestures—yet even these objects “become” in that study, they only exist or are for that study as they relate to me. Inwardly, on the other hand, one “sees” nothing, but “feels” a subject; there is only subjective consciousness without objective shape, there is only, as Hopkins will call it, “that taste of myself, of *I* and *me* above and in all things.”¹⁵ It is to this, “that taste of myself,” that one first awakes in the morning, not to the world. In experience as in logic, a sense of the subjective self must always be prior to a sense of the objective world.

According to Montaigne, whenever anyone brought a question to Socrates, who was a sort of personal and philosophic patron saint for Montaigne, it mattered little what the nature of the subject might be, for his method of investigation was invariably the same: “he always brought the inquirer back first of all to give an account of the conditions of his present and past life, which he examined and judged, considering any other learning subordinate to that and superfluous” (*Works*, pp. 376-77). With the same autobiographic logic as his predecessor Heraclitus and his successors Montaigne and Yeats, Socrates saw ethics and cosmography as essentially allied pursuits, both raised up from foundations sunk deep in subjective experience. And what, in Montaigne’s description, was Socrates’ philosophic sauce for others was the same for himself; so in the *Phaedo*, as he prepares to construct his last model of

¹⁴ “Anima Mundi,” in *Mythologies* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1959), p. 364.

¹⁵ *Sermons and Devotional Writings* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959), p. 123.

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subjective reality and his final picture of what man is, Socrates first gives his fellow inquirers a very brief autobiography. The point of that autobiographical sketch of the philosophic mind, which acts as prelude to Socrates' "myth of earthly paradise," is this: that the philosopher, i.e., man, must carefully guard against being swamped by a chaos of meaningless facts; and that the only way that Socrates himself has discovered to prevent this destructive inundation is to advance a theory, possessed of just as much primary validity as the individual imagination or faith can give it, then to test the theory with every possible objection. The theorizing subject that reaches out in consciousness to organize the objects of the world is, according to Socrates, very valuable—indeed, it is all that we have—but it is also very delicate and fragile, only too likely to suffer mutilation of its distinctive shape and identity by the swarm of external reality; and, if destroyed, it is certainly irreplaceable. "I was worn out with my physical investigations," Socrates says, and then he goes on in simile and metaphor: "It occurred to me that I must guard against the same sort of risk which people run when they watch and study an eclipse of the sun; they really do sometimes injure their eyes, unless they study its reflection in water or some other medium. . . . I was afraid that by observing objects with my eyes and trying to comprehend them with each of my other senses I might blind my soul altogether. So I decided that I must have recourse to theories, and use them in trying to discover the truth about things."¹⁶ For Socrates, theory first of all is the thing: a unitary safeguard, a single, radical and radial energy originating in the subjective center, an aggressive, creative expression of the self, a defense of individual integrity in the face of an otherwise multiple, confusing, swarming, and inimical universe. The billion phenomena that bombard us can, at best,

¹⁶ *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1959), p. 158.

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advance our understanding negatively by proving a particular theory invalid or insufficient. On their own, however, they will never fall together into a pattern nor formulate a rule or a law; without the mind of man, they could never become an explaining, containing, protective, and satisfying theory. Theory is knowledge with meaning, and meaning everywhere depends upon a mind that means: such mind as we know only immediately and subjectively. Knowledge, then, must start there, with the mind and the self, and so also must theory.

But there is theory and there is theory, as Einstein argues: there is the faith that underlies every science and all knowledge, but there must also be faith in that faith, for "even scholars of audacious spirit and fine instinct can be obstructed in the interpretation of facts by philosophical prejudices. The prejudice . . . consists in the faith that facts by themselves can and should yield scientific knowledge without free conceptual construction."¹⁷ This "free conceptual construction" is the only way man has of making the universe stop pounding and washing away at his little light of consciousness; it is the only means he possesses of imposing the order of his own creative shape on chaos. In his free act man creates a significance in the universe that would otherwise not be there. "I have learned," Einstein says in another autobiographical passage,

something else from the theory of gravitation: No ever so inclusive collection of empirical facts can ever lead to the setting up of such complicated equations. A theory can be tested by experience, but there is no way from experience to the setting up of a theory. Equations of such complexity as are the equations of the gravitational field can be found only through the discovery of a logically simple mathematical condition which determines the equations completely or almost completely. Once one has those sufficiently strong formal conditions,

¹⁷ *Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp, 2 vols. (New York: Harper, 1959), 1, 49.

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one requires only little knowledge of facts for the setting up of a theory. (Einstein: *Philosopher-Scientist*, I, 89.)

Form, which in the language of scholastic philosophy is closely related to soul or essential being, is not of the order of facts but of the order of process: an activity exercised continuously outward from a center. Tracing form back from manifestation to source, one sees it recede into a fine and finer point, and there, where it disappears into its own center, is the spiritual mind of man, a great shape-maker impelled forever to find order in himself and to give it to the universe. The Einsteinian "strong formal conditions," very little different in origin and effect from the relational groupings that determine meaning in symbolic logic, must come all from within, none from without.

The task of the philosopher is to search himself and to find his own Einsteinian equation against chaos, his own Socratic theory to prevent blindness of the soul. Having concluded his autobiography and demonstrated his perspective and method in the *Phaedo*, Socrates offers to recreate the entire universe—i.e., his universe—from theoretical scratch in order to prove to his companions, on the basis of a single, agreed hypothesis, that his soul cannot die though in a very short time he is to drink the hemlock that will end the life in his body. "If you grant my assumption," he says, meaning the assumption of the existence of Ideas, "the existence of absolute Beauty and Goodness and Magnitude and all the rest of them," then

"I hope with their help to explain causation to you, and to find a proof that the soul is immortal."

"Certainly I grant it," said Cebes;

and in a few minutes he, together with his comrades, is altogether satisfied by the construction and fully convinced of Socrates' conclusions about the nature and destiny of man.

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The elaborate myth of earthly paradise that follows Socrates' little autobiography and his theory about theory, with its imaginative description of the upper and nether earth, with all its physical detail and geographic specification, is what all myths are: an attempt at explaining something about human nature and the human condition. As is characteristic of Socratic, and I should think, of any, philosophy, the myth has simultaneously a psychological motivation and a moral intention. It constitutes an expression of psychic self (self-expression: what it is like to be human) at the same time that it formulates a moral imperative (how we shall, or how we must, act, being as we are and as we find ourselves situated). The myth says nothing, obviously, and intends to say nothing, about an objective, scientifically observable realm. Indeed, like any myth and all human explanation, it never could say anything about such an external realm, looking as it does from within and with human eyes: being a man, and content to be so, Socrates can hardly assume to speak from a godly point of view. "Of course," he admits, "no reasonable man ought to insist that the facts are exactly as I have described them." The point of his myth, however, is that *he* is exactly as his theory and his vision suggest, and he, for the moment, is humanity realized. "But that either this or something very like it is a true account of our souls and their future habitation . . . this, I think, is both a reasonable contention and a belief worth risking; for the risk is a noble one" (*Phaedo*, p. 178). If we agree with all the philosophers, scientists, and artists who tell us that order and meaning are of ultimate importance, then it is not only "noble" but also peculiarly human, this will to believe and this risk we run in maintaining faith in our own creations. The myth of an earthly paradise that each of us makes tells in all ways more about us than about a material universe: it expresses us in our selfhood as it creates us, and it gives us a reason for living as it suggests to us how to live.

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Having pictured how it is to be human, Socrates takes the final step of the philosopher and concludes by describing how it should be. Awakening to the *donnée* of human life, to a confusing condition, composite of body and soul, to that consciousness that is the real mystery and the ultimate puzzling fact for the philosophic mind, what, for the individual, is right action and wrong action? If one has agreed to Socrates' picture of his soul and has believed in the theory he has spun out of his own deepest consciousness of himself, one must also agree with him and believe that

There is one way, then, in which a man can be free from all anxiety about the fate of his soul; if in life he has abandoned bodily pleasures and adornments as foreign to his purpose and likely to do more harm than good, and has devoted himself to the pleasures of acquiring knowledge; and so by decking his soul not with a borrowed beauty but with its own—with self-control, and goodness, and courage, and liberality, and truth—has fitted himself to await his journey to the next world.

(*Phaedo*, pp. 178-79.)

When he made that conclusion, Socrates was only a few minutes from his own "journey," and one imagines him finding his interim eternity in "the next world" just as he had himself, from the evidence of himself, believed it intensely into existence.

Perhaps it was the voice of Socrates, or perhaps of Plotinus, or of "that William Blake / Who beat upon the wall / Till Truth obeyed his call," but it was surely the voice of some great man now passed from the earth that Yeats once heard in the night: "One night I heard a voice that said: 'The love of God for every human soul is infinite, for every human soul is unique; no other can satisfy the same need in God'" (*Anima Mundi*, pp. 347-48). This voice, which, as in another case with Yeats, was a "strange voice," but undoubtedly