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Author(s): Marc Eli Blanchard

Source: *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Spring, 1982), pp. 97-115

Published by: Duke University Press on behalf of the University of Oregon

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1770757>

Accessed: 15-07-2018 22:44 UTC

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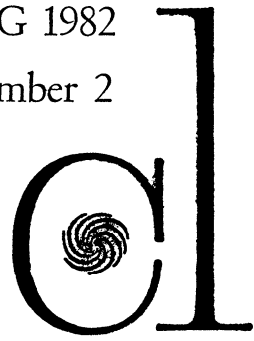
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SPRING 1982  
Volume 34, Number 2



MARC ELI BLANCHARD

## The Critique of Autobiography

ONE OF the lessons of structuralism is that the subject is not and can never be a part of the discourse he utters. It is no accident that this rule of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which formalizes and extends the Freudian discovery of the unconscious by making the unconscious a structure of language, actually verifies years of investigation in structural linguistics. Already in the 1950s structural linguists like Benveniste had demonstrated that in the pronoun system of the European languages, the first-person singular pronoun is the only one which cannot properly refer, because it transcends the structure of oppositions on which the system itself is based: the opposition of “I” to “you,” of “we” and “you” to “they.” Benveniste had ascribed this transcendence not to an individual “self,” however, but to a more general, ill-defined entity: “Man” (*L’Homme*) as he appears in his role as producer and consumer of language (*dans la langue*).<sup>1</sup> But if “Man” is always present in language, his “self” is specifically the product of an individual locutor’s speech (*a parole*). It is only when the locutor-subject seeks to ascertain the propriety and pertinence of reference in the message that he is led to inquire about the modes of expression used by a hypothetical “Man” to transmute a private speech into a common language (as in structuralism) or to foster and nurture the image in which he hopes to discover the truth, the essence of his own search (as in the hermeneutics of the Geneva School or the Heidelberg Circle). In both cases, the “self” appears to be a redundancy—Starobinski euphemistically calls it the “hermeneutic circle”—albeit the most puzzling redundancy in language, because it does not appear to be governed by the basic rule of all communication that a message can only be communicated on the condition

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<sup>1</sup> Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, Fla., 1971), Ch. v.

that its marks not be redundant.<sup>2</sup> Whether the self is basically a portmanteau word which covers modes of distinction based on the lure (*leurre*) of an impossible identity of the speaking subject or whether it is a monadic reduction of the context in which the beginning and the end of first-person discourse coalesce to keep the subject from being alienated from a past for which he seeks to assume responsibility—in either case, the study of a literature of self mandates a reactivation of the search for an origin, for a reference which would not only precede all judgments but would also antedate all previous guarantees for past judgments. Thus Philippe Lejeune in his book *Le Pacte autobiographique*, after stating that autobiography “is in all cases a narrative in retrospect made by a real person about her past,” goes on to suggest the need for a typology of four different classes (form/theme/reliability/point of view), the basis of which is a single reference to the “real” person as warranted by the *autobiographical pact*, i.e., the belief that an autobiographer is always perforce honest with his reader, even if what he says is almost always less than the truth.<sup>3</sup> For Lejeune, this autobiographical pact is a contract, not between the impersonating subject and his various personas but between the narrator supposedly talking about himself as if he were another person and the reader having accepted the possibility of the experiment. The point has been refined by Antoine Compagnon in his recent book *La Seconde Main* (a historical and semiotic study of quotation), where the definition of an emblematic model for Montaigne’s *Essais* affords the insight that the model is not static but mobile and thus continuously able to produce the displacement which allowed the production of the model in the first place.<sup>4</sup> The advantage of Compagnon over Lejeune is that the picture of an origin, instead of being fixed, reflects the homothetical process required of anyone looking for his own beginning. In this case, the process of Compagnon looking over Montaigne’s shoulder, who is in turn looking over Plutarch’s shoulder, tends in effect to make the whole metacritical enterprise of defining quotation an image, a reflection of the autobiographical process itself.

There lies another, if not the ultimate, redundancy. Aiming at himself as if he were another, the subject “shoots for” an objective self, even though that object is only an illusion coextensive with the act of shooting. To paraphrase Heraclitus, life and death and nothingness are only one; or rather, the moment of maximum tension associated with a beginning and an end, an origin and an end between tensor and tensed

<sup>2</sup> Jean Starobinski, *L'Œil vivant II (La Relation critique)* (Paris, 1970), p. 165; hereafter cited in the text.

<sup>3</sup> *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris, 1975), pp. 13-46.

<sup>4</sup> *La Seconde Main, ou le travail de la citation* (Paris, 1979), pp. 302-13.

on the bow of life, holds the secret of life.<sup>5</sup> Focusing on what makes critical theory and autobiography so relevant to one another and the current vogue of autobiographical criticism so clear, Starobinski, commenting on one of Rousseau's classic autobiographical passages, suggests that the task of the critic is essentially to weave a pattern through which, in effect, the end of the investigation may appear as the very beginning of the text he has been reading (pp. 154-69). I take this to mean more than the *métamorphose du cercle* with which Poulet and the Geneva School have tried to integrate literature and criticism in a model of existential awareness. It is no longer a process through which the critic's consciousness "re-creates" the work. It is the representation of the way in which the work under study becomes a principle of explanation—on the model of *Oedipus Rex* read by Freud and used by him in his elaboration of the Oedipal conflict, or the *leçon d'écriture* used by Lévi-Strauss to reflect the writing of his own *Tristes tropiques*. Contextualized in time and space (the England of Pepys and Boswell; the France, Switzerland, and Italy of Rousseau; the Brazil of Lévi-Strauss), autobiography reflects only itself. It is an act where the writing, the *γράφειν* on either side of the life, the *βίος* it encloses, is itself the life and death, the presence and absence which it seeks, but only gives us as through a mirror: an image. The proper autobiography, then, aims at the re-creation of a primal mirror-stage, where the experience of recognition (the narrator recognizes his past; the critic recognizes what the narrator is talking about) subsumes a symbolic content of reality. As a matter of fact, the next chapter in Starobinski's *La Relation critique* is titled "L'empire de l'imaginaire," where the unreality of the imaginary object is constantly balanced, though not quite controlled, by a conscious choice of the critical consciousness (pp. 173-254).<sup>6</sup>

Autobiography then is not concerned with the establishment of a truly *selfish* reality in the eyes of an impartial, autonomous subject, as in "autobiographies" where the narrator claims to be different from the author and tells the story of another person (*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is a perfect example). Nor can the critic of autobiography be concerned with the truth or the value of the imitation, as though autobiography were but one of the cardinal genres in the Aristotelian stock of mimetic objects—a genre which, incidentally, did not really come into being before the end of the eighteenth century, and

<sup>5</sup> "For the bow the name is life, but the work is death," in Heraclitus, *The Cosmic Fragments*, ed. G. S. Kirk (Cambridge, 1954), p. 116.

<sup>6</sup> Starobinski picks up Lacan's distinction between the *imaginary* (that which is a conscious construction of the subject) and the *symbolic* (that which is actually responsible for this construction and which is elegantly suggested by Starobinski)

even then never ceased to appear apologetic, as is clear from the format and mode of confessions from Augustine to Rousseau to Musset, to Wilde's *Portrait of Dorian Gray* and Gide's *Cahiers d'André Walter*. In this sense, Northrop Frye's classification of autobiography as a sub-genre of romance, while serving the overall pattern of the *Anatomy* remarkably well, also does the greatest possible disservice to the autobiographic enterprise by making it lose its specificity as the Other of literature. As if it were but a minor accident, Frye notes merely that a confession is "made up of essays in which only the continuous narrative of the longer form is missing."<sup>7</sup> But, as we have seen, much of everything else is missing in autobiography. Autobiography is only a model-building activity: it has nothing to reveal, it only produces a discourse containing the discursive subject which constitutes the topic of discussion, albeit a subject who conceals his difference, his originality and specificity under the mask of Everyman. Thus André Gorz's very Sartrean autobiography, which runs the gamut of all the personal pronouns (from "they" to "I" and back again), is appropriately titled *The Traitor*. In a world of others, the subject who claims to be himself is a liar. Perhaps it is this defect in the autobiographical method which explains the inevitability of the confessional tradition exacerbated by Augustine and Rousseau. Yet it is a structural defect. As Gorz's traitor puts it: "He turns back, he rereads his words, he recognizes himself. Take any event, pursue your sense of it as far as you can go, and it will be like pulling one thread in a tangled skein."<sup>8</sup>

In the *Discourse on Method* the *cogito* is made possible by a doubting process leading to the ultimate logical distinction beyond which Descartes thought it unnecessary to proceed. I suggest that, although no autobiography ever formalizes its methodology in the Cartesian manner of the *Discourse on Method*, the autobiographer's search for a satisfactory image to produce, through an *expérience de pensée*, the certainty which, in turn, guarantees the viability of his enterprise is akin to the Cartesian experience of doubt. It is as though the writer's subjective consciousness, alternatively dominating its object and being dominated by it, were too fragile for words: "It occurs to me that the closest reproduction of the mind's birth obtainable is the stab of wonder that accompanies the precise moment when, gazing at a tangle of twigs and leaves, one suddenly realizes that what had seemed a natural component of that tangle is a marvelously disguised insect or bird."<sup>9</sup> But there is more

<sup>7</sup> *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, N.J., 1957), p. 307.

<sup>8</sup> *The Traitor*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1959), p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, rev. ed. (New York, 1966), p. 298; hereafter cited in the text.

to the Cartesian doubt than discovering that one's own insecurity is actually the necessary condition for establishing the authenticity of one's existence. First, it could be argued that what is guaranteed by the doubting process is *not* the sum total of doubtful experiences, i.e., the past history of the doubter. Second, it could also be argued that what is established by the Method is less the moment of recognition where everything becomes certain than the full development of the doubting process. Here we are reminded of Kant's critique of the Cartesian *cogito*, according to which it is foolish in the search for existential proofs to use a reference to God, whose condition for existence is fulfilled as part of the proof itself.<sup>10</sup> But the main point of the Kantian critique, leading to the model of an "empty" *cogito* without any possible inference from the sensible world into the intelligible, is that it shows how Descartes's emphasis on the moment after the doubt, the reversal of uncertainty into a certainty founding the method and allowing a beginning, is only a fiction based on the idea that the uncertain *other* produced by the doubting process is really the same as the person writing. In Descartes's *Discourse*, as in most autobiographies, there is a shift from the moment of actualization of a writing persona to the fiction of a coherent self delivered through the autobiographical process. Many, if not most, autobiographers are guilty of this shift into what should be called the *fiction of self-writing* (the idea that the other produced by the doubting process is the same person as the "I" who was writing). The fault, however, is an inescapable one. Thus the Nabokov who so delicately weaves the pattern of identity and difference in the episode of the birth on the branch falls prey to the illusion that he has indeed found a beginning and the promise of a definite coherence for his ongoing reminiscence. Although he must admit this is but an illusion ("Sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers," p. 100), ultimately it is this "crumbling" which mandates his whole search. Like the Cartesian philosopher who doubts, the Nabokovian autobiographer *needs* the doubt, the uncertainty before he can master his fiction: "my thought mingles with that of the leaf shadows" (p. 171). People, experiences, and things appear in the "tremulous prism" of his memory, and he is more inclined to preserve this tremulousness of the autobiographical experience than to establish the historical facts it conceals: "The past is not searched out. It is, rather, carefully selected—the changing form may be likened to breathing—and poetically fixed."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Transcendental Dialectic," Ch. iii, Sec. 4, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London, 1951).

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Part: A Critical Narrative* (Boston, 1967), p. 34; quoted in Elizabeth Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore, Md., and London, 1976), p. 135.

Like Heraclitus' reader caught between life and death in the tension of the bow, of consciousness and desire—and who needs a morphologist to certify to him that the difference between two apparently identical entities is based on a phonological distinction of accent<sup>12</sup>—the autobiographer needs to experience the tension of his writing to grasp in one moment what is fixed, albeit breathing. It is precisely because of this tension and tremulousness that the object can *poetically* be “fixed,” or to take *poetically* in its etymological sense, appear in the making of its appearing and still convince us of the truth of its appearance.<sup>13</sup> This fixation is short-lived, however. With the careful selection it entails, Nabokov's distinction between the bird and the branch soon becomes the epistemological model for an investigation in which, through further distinctions of interpretive content, decisions about the articulation of autobiographical data, the qualitative time of all experience is turned into a chronology of historical sequences: “I soon became aware that if my views, the not unusual views of Russian democrats abroad, were received with pained surprise or polite sneers by English democrats *in situ*, another group, the English ultraconservatives, rallied eagerly to my side but did so from such crude reactionary motivation that I was only embarrassed by their despicable support” (Nabokov, p. 264). It is as though the vagaries of the doubter have now been corrected by *rules of method*: “I offer this work only as a history, or, if you like, a fable, in which there may perhaps be found, besides some examples that may be imitated, many others that it will be well not to follow.”<sup>14</sup> The moment is fixed, albeit no longer *poetically*. The doubting subject, who remains the model for the *autodiegetic* “I” in the autobiographical process, has become a narrative subject and his narrative has turned into, or rather been reduced to, a deductive model of fictional plot.<sup>15</sup> With autobiography, however, the distinction between the object and its shadow, between a subject and its image, remains imperfect. As Starobinski himself is ready to admit, autobiography is also the mode of incompleteness (pp. 119-21).

This is why Northrop Frye's and Roy Pascal's thesis that there are

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<sup>12</sup> βίος ‘life,’ βίβος ‘bow.’

<sup>13</sup> What occurs in the *co-occurrence* of the event. See Werner Marx, *Heidegger and the Tradition*, trans. Theodore Kisiel and Murray Greene (Evanston, Ill., 1971), p. 226.

<sup>14</sup> René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, in Descartes, *Philosophical Writings: A Selection*, trans. and ed. Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Thomas Geach (London, 1954), p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> I am borrowing the term *autodiegetic* from Gérard Genette (*Figures III*, Paris, 1972). Genette uses the term *diégétique* to refer to the “spatio-temporal universe designated by the narrative.” *Autodiégétique* (p. 253) refers to a variety of narratives where the narrator is not the hero of his own narrative (e.g., Ishmael in *Moby Dick*) but rather a witness, a spectator.

indeed degrees of autobiographical truth on the Aristotelian scale of mimesis, and that these degrees are determined by the reader's projections and expectations, is extremely problematic.<sup>16</sup> This is also why following up on linguistic postulates to establish a posteriori rules of conduct for the autobiographer, according to the kind of public he has in mind and the commitments he intends to live up to, proves extremely difficult. Thus a speech-act theory of autobiography attempting to establish degrees of commitment in autobiographical discourse fails because the linguistic area of autobiography remains that of illocution: of a statement which can only be understood in the context of its elaboration by the locutor and thus does not and should not involve the outside reader, the interlocutor, except as yet another image of the autobiographer himself.<sup>17</sup> In autobiography, however, in contradistinction to the rest of literature, the locutionary act is not perceived primarily as a speech act. It is, first of all, an attempt to suggest a state of being—something which could be captured by phrases like “I am hungry,” “I am happy”—while the pertinence of statements expressing those states is rendered problematic by the lack of identity of the subject making them: what he felt then he no longer feels now, and what he feels now he did not feel then. Neither constative (autobiography is not concerned with facts) nor performative (it does not achieve what it describes at the time it is describing it, but rather uses it as an exemplum), autobiographical discourse is simply a mimesis, a pretense of illocution.<sup>18</sup> The illocutionary dimension is partial because writer and reader are collapsed into one. This collapsing of the dual subject (present reflecting the past and vice versa) into a narrative monad is, in turn, possible only because the “I” having no substance outside a set of linguistic operations is a floating deictic.<sup>19</sup> It is problematic, and it tends to appear

<sup>16</sup> Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960).

<sup>17</sup> The distinction between *locutionary*, *illocutionary*, and *perlocutionary* statements is a constant of speech-act theory as expounded by John Langshaw Austin (*How to Do Things with Words*, New York, 1965) and by John R. Searle (*Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, London, 1969). While *locutionary acts* are carried out simply by uttering a certain sentence with a certain sense and reference and *perlocutionary acts* make it impossible to consider the utterance apart from its consequences (e.g., it is convincing, persuading, misleading), *illocutionary acts* have a certain conventional force (informing, warning, ordering). In other words, the *illocutionary acts* take effect through an understanding of the meaning and of the force of the locution. As Austin remarks, “The performance of an *illocutionary act* involves the securing of an uptake” (p. 117). For a study of autobiography from a speech-act perspective, see Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts*.

<sup>18</sup> For the distinction between *constative* and *performative*, see Austin, pp. 90-91.

<sup>19</sup> *Deictics* are morphemes whose meaning can only be determined by reference to the speaker(s). Thus first- and second-person pronouns refer respectively to the speaking subject and to the person to whom this subject speaks; by extension the term *deictic* refers to all other parts of speech whose linguistic definition is



mostly in conflictual episodes where the narrator attempts to disentangle his own image from the conglomeration of present and past and the comings and goings of others. Several of those images patiently framed next to one another by the narrator soon approximate what we like to think of as a plot. But they remain images, traces of an ideal, impossible reality. In autobiographical discourse, there is no story to tell anyone: "I am myself the matter of my book." Even if there were a story, it would only be a miniature story, a scale model. It would only give us the plot while what we seek is the thought. We would be left with something like Cardinal Newman's "autobiography."<sup>20</sup> Thus Barthes writing his *Roland Barthes* sprinkles his book with pictures whose function it is to work up a chronology of sorts, while the text continues to weave a chimera of lexical entries. The implication is clear. The reader is at leisure to associate Barthes's character, his persona, with any of the entries, and Barthes the critic, even if he should cover all bases and be everything to everyone (as he attempted to do by reviewing his own book for a Parisian magazine), is incapable of taking sides, of making proper sense of causal relations in a linear plot.<sup>21</sup> It is as if the writer had renounced his privilege to define his topic. We know this topical disarray goes back to Montaigne, and in this, perhaps, Barthes picks up an old French tradition of rhetorical education. But the important point here is less the French character of the endeavor than the attempt to destroy the notion of linearity subsuming all interaction between subject and object.

Autobiography is the domain of the intransitive. The autobiographer seeks to capture something other than a mere chronological sequence. The reason may be the extreme complication of the choices involved in attempting any kind of chronology. As Goethe says in *Poetry and Truth*, "As I endeavored to describe in right order the inner stirrings, the external influences, the stages through which theory and practice had borne me, I was thrown out of my narrow private life into the wide

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impossible outside an interpersonal context (demonstrative, adverb). For a discussion of *deictics*, see Yehoshua Bar-Hillel, "Indexical Expressions," *Mind*, NS 63 (1954), 359-79, and Roman Jakobson, *Shifters, Verbal Categories, and the Russian Verb* (Cambridge, Mass.: Russian Language Project, Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Harvard University, 1957).

<sup>20</sup> John Newman, "Autobiography in Miniature," in *Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Henry Tristram (London, 1956), p. 5; quoted in James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton, N.J., 1972), p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> *Roland Barthes/by Roland Barthes* (sic), trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1977). Barthes's *self-interview* appeared in the *Magazine Littéraire*, 97 (February 1975), 32.

world.”<sup>22</sup> But more to the point: the image, the Nabokovian emblem the autobiographer seeks to retrieve from a world on the brink (hardly born and yet ready to dissolve), the tremulousness with which he now sees the story of his own life anew, are more symptomatic of his need to see himself in the act—to be his own voyeur—than to register, in the historian’s or the novelist’s mode, true narrative progress. The autobiographer is attracted by the mirage of his own vision, the look of himself gazing at a spectacle in which, as the hero of an unsuspected adventure, he not only seeks to go through all the acts he remembers carrying out but also attempts to isolate them, to fixate them in the moment of their recollection, and to withdraw them from the circulation of memory signs. To use Michel Leiris’s words, the autobiographer seeks those moments when he can feel *tangential* to the world and to himself.<sup>23</sup> They are brief, even incidental. But in their brevity, their contingency, they acquire an extraordinary value. What they show is not a segment of the life of “X” or “Y” but rather “X” or “Y” looking at his or her life as if it were a relief delineated in space, arrested in time. It is remarkable that such diverse works as Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, Leiris’s *L’Âge d’homme*, Benjamin’s *Childhood Reflections*, and T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* display the same preoccupation for the particular, the contingent. More remarkable, however, is the compulsion of all these writers to appeal to the visual sense. In their discourse, they all strive for the spectator’s place, even if the spectacle is invisible:

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight  
Even while the dust moves  
There rises the hidden laughter  
Of children in the foliage.<sup>24</sup>

To Freudian and especially Lacanian critics, this triangular scheme of vision is only a remake of the triadic model controlling the Oedipal interdict. It is impossible simply *to be oneself*, or as Mehlman says, “to be present to the condition of one’s being in the realm of speech and desire,”<sup>25</sup> because that would entail for the Narcissistic subject the end of his reflecting process—or to put it another way, his self-inflicted violation and death. Mehlman suggests that to bypass this prohibition the subject then resorts to poetic illusion, to textual drifting. By simply

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<sup>22</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Preface to *Poetry and Truth*; quoted and translated in Pascal, p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> *Miroir de la tauromachie* (Paris, 1964), p. 22; quoted in Jeffrey Mehlman, *A Structural Study of Autobiography* (Baltimore, Md., 1975), p. 66.

<sup>24</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton,” *Four Quartets*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York, 1952), p. 122.

<sup>25</sup> Mehlman, p. 121.

looking at *how it was*, or rather at *how it might have been*, he may with impunity fulfill his desire and by the sheer magic of memory, substitute for the reality of time past a scene, a tableau, where implicitly, indefinitely repeatable acts are no longer those of a subject upon an object but rather the scheme of a voyeur constantly reenacting a fragmentary scenario. His is a vignette where he is now defined by what he perceives: clear as a picture, even a still life, he now feels free. He does not have to be responsible for what he knows. The most famous example of this is Marcel looking at himself spying on Albertine and Mademoiselle Vinteuil performing their sadistic ritual prior to intercourse at Montjouvain and much later again trying to discuss the episode with Albertine.<sup>26</sup> The place, the locus of the voyeur, is the one which affords and mediates pleasure through the sheer witnessing of the transgression. Marcel the narrator has now become master and go-between. He has made the scene his very own, without the abandon which had left him so vulnerable in the past. Now he knows better. Not only does he succeed in cleansing Mr. Vinteuil's memory of any affront, he also manages to free himself from the alienation inherent in his being a shadow to a scene he had not understood and whose understanding now causes him pain—because he can no longer alter the past—but also joy—because he has somehow come to grips with it.

Here then is the crux of autobiography. The autobiographer incapable of coinciding with the subject in the past can only articulate a vision which allows him to see himself in the past as in a painting. Without the power to alter the past he is restricted to seeing himself *qua* subject and deriving his feelings not from the performance of the act but from the representation of that performance. He is a viewing subject who sees himself performing an act at a certain time in the past, yet never quite completing it because the narrative of memory has produced a vignette, a still life in which, much like Marcel before the magic lantern showing the slides of Golo, the narrator longs to be a voyeur, the vicarious subject of an action never quite his own, though of eternal relevance to him.<sup>27</sup> Yet for all its illusions, its displacements, autobiography offers profound synthetic knowledge. Nowhere else in human experience, except through the very operation of communicating the work of memory to oneself and to others, is it possible to find another instance of the interpenetration of past and present. The vision afforded the autobiographer is both fragmentary and complete. On the one hand, it offers segments momentarily cut off from the chronological sequence which subsumes them and whose succession they now delay; on the other

<sup>26</sup> Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott-Moncrieff (1922; rpt. London, 1951), I, 220 ff., and VII, Ch. iv.

<sup>27</sup> Proust, I, 9 ff.

hand, these segments now constitute scenes which, while unfinished, have the power not only to delay the rest of the narrative but to reshape the past, the present, even the future of the narrator. Writing about himself, the narrator can gain an understanding of the way in which selected reminiscences compel him to redeploy the axis of contiguous sequences, and how it is not simply this or that specific episode but the whole of his life which now appears to him in a new perspective. This knowledge is synthetic in the Kantian sense because it is not concerned with the establishment of a model of understanding, nor with the utterance of a series of propositions binding on the subject uttering them (which eventually leads to a reductive biography of the type ironized by Cardinal Newman). It is committed to modifying the relationship of the subject to the content of his life. Thus the narrator of *Remembrance of Things Past*, on hearing the truth about Albertine's lesbian tendencies, suddenly reminisces about the sadistic scene he has witnessed at Montjouvain, and this reminiscence in turn forces him to reconstruct his perception of the incident. Yet more important than a simple maneuver which would allow him to quickly redistribute his feelings and continue to occupy the place of the voyeur, he discovers *that he has known it all along*.

Memory, then, retrieves the past as an eternity which transcends the specificity of the event. No wonder that from Plato to Augustine to Proust, to know is essentially to remember truths temporarily obfuscated in the prevailing cultural tradition. However, my point is not to suggest a Platonic theory of autobiography. Rather, I am interested in autobiography's prescription of an ongoing present of the mind.

It is no accident that most histories of autobiography begin with an examination of Augustine's *Confessions*, as if the personal history of the Bishop of Hippo marked not only a beginning in a literary genre established in the modern period but a new direction in the long history of the relation between man's individual consciousness and the forms of his culture. There the critic discovers the role of memory in this relation and the fashioning of personal identity. He also detects the beginning of a metacritical reflection by the subject on the functioning of his and all memory. By the same token, he finds that the unity of the autobiographer's subjective experience is contingent upon the establishment of memory as a repository of universal figures and tropes, referring all individual experience to a continuing process of cultural self-preservation which runs from Quintilian's reflection on strategies of discourse to Montaigne's array of citational devices. Finally, but this point is only a corollary of the preceding ones, he realizes that the mere sugges-

tion of a rhetoric of memory poses the problem of the subject as a producer and consumer of figures and raises, ipso facto, the question of the validity of subjective experience.

Of the two parts of Augustine's *Confessions* not directly concerned with reminiscing about the past, but rather with a systematic speculation on the general context of reminiscence and the place of the *Confessions* in the overall tradition of the Christian reader, the one in Book X specifically deals with memory and the other, in Books XI through XIII, deals with what has generally posed a problem of contiguity for Augustine scholars: a critical account of the beginning of the world in Genesis. The attempt to establish a link between the reconstruction of one's past and the history of the world and to make one's personal experience a part of objective understanding of the world may be seen as typical of the autobiographer, although it is clearly not what distinguishes autobiographical from nonautobiographical writing. Thus it has been suggested that the way in which realist and naturalist novels seek to capture the exact detail of a context and explain a character's behavior through a meticulous description of his milieu is also related to the narrator's systematic use of metonymy.<sup>28</sup> However, there are metonymical elements in *any* narrative. By collecting cultural and environmental data pertinent to the behavior of the hero, any description tends to produce an image of this hero according precisely with the delineation of his context. Psychoanalytical theory would show that our perception of the realism of the hero and our subsequent interest in him relate directly to our perception of a conflict between his desire to stand for himself and to appropriate the meaning of the world around him. It would also show that the particular world view the hero defends tends, through the concentration of descriptive details about his surroundings, to make him appear as the product of a symbolic superego.<sup>29</sup> But the autobiographer is less concerned with the ordering of contiguous details of his past than with the particular mode in which discrete fragments of this past are retrieved. Even if, in the process of memory, there always occurs a concatenation of these fragments into a fictitious universe acceptable to the remembering subject and capable of providing him with a clear metaphor of his involvement with the past—e.g., *Time Regained* is the product of the various parts of *Remembrance of Things Past*—it is the use of metonymy which sets autobiographical writing apart from

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<sup>28</sup> Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 350-77, and "On Realism in Art," in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1971), pp. 38-46.

<sup>29</sup> Remember Balzac's contention that he was competing with *L'État-Civil*.

any other. A metonymical approach to the past is not simply a temporary aid in the constitution of a fictional universe in the same sense that an elaborate description in a novel by Balzac or Tolstoy can be viewed as providing the proper context for the unfolding of narrative. It is not designed to bolster the representation of reality by creating an artful substitute for the systems already governing our perception of social reality (schools, books, museums, archives). It is designed to allow the functioning of a system which produces an imaginary space and an imaginary topography by integrating the time of the subject—the time it takes him to describe himself—with the operation of his memory. The time of the subject writing and rereading himself has become an integral part of the memory's production. In other words, the explanatory principle (a particular vision of the world is always a subsystem of another, etc.) which every autobiographer seeks for his own writing is now a part of the writing itself. The time it takes to go through the explanation, to move from one fragment to another, *is* the explanation. Remembering and writing one's memories in the form of autobiography lead to the establishment of a world view in a direct, contiguous, metonymical relation to one's own life: "So I gave up trying to find a solution in my imagination, which produced a whole series of pictures of ready-made shapes, shuffling and rearranging them at will. Instead I turned my attention to material things and looked more closely into the question of their mutability, that is the means by which they cease to be what they have been and begin to be what they have not been."<sup>30</sup> It must be noted, however, that the incorporation of the writer's experience into the process of his own writing does not imply that the narrative derives its authority from the presentation of personal references. If such were the case, autobiography could only claim the legitimacy of the memoir. Paradoxically, one of the outcomes of the autobiographical experience is the production of a system in which the producer has achieved the tour de force of making the production of the system contingent upon the development of his self-consciousness, complete with the doubt and forgetfulness it entails. He has managed to make an acceptable vision of the world coincide with the specific requirements of his own imagination while, at the same time, offering his own person as an exemplum, i.e., the product of a text where the unique events which shaped his individual personality are now reconciled with the recognizable general laws which make the identification of that personality possible.

In an article on Proust's metonymies reprinted in *Figures III*, Genette shows how most of what is generally believed to be a product

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<sup>30</sup> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, XII.vi, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London, 1961), p. 283.

of Proust's ongoing metaphorical process is actually due to the perseverance with which the narrator searches for isolated fragments in his past and allows the process of his reminiscing to be projected as the time it takes him to progress from one fragment to the next, slowly moving from one space of memory into another.<sup>31</sup> Thus the narrative of a train ride through wheat fields leads to an *encounter* with a church and produces a vision of its spire covered with wheat spears—a vision soon to be transformed into a fantasy of fish scales as the train approaches a Norman sea resort. The whole pastoral landscape has been “marinized” due to the proximity of the sea. Genette concludes his study by suggesting that the narrator's metonymical approach is responsible for the full development of metaphor in the Proustian narrative. In contradistinction to the memory of his mother's kiss, which freezes Combray in a metaphor of symbiosis and thus keeps the narrator from seeking to retrieve any information not directly pertinent to the primal need underlying his remembrance, the reverie on the two worlds of Combray and Guermantes provides the space for a broader picture of Marcel's childhood. Genette sees the metonymical approach as especially conducive to the famous Proustian moment of crystallization crowning the narrative as a symbol of time regained (e.g., the *madeleine*). What Genette does not say is that the metaphorical spinoff constitutive of the *Recherche* also leads to a different knowledge of the past. The narrator discovers that an object can only be known and the memory of it clarified if its perception involves a translation of meaning coupled with the theory of that translation. Thus Marcel's memories of famous walks to Combray or Guermantes allow him both a reflection on names and the construction of a new system of nominalization and recognition where sight couples with taste (Marcel's *madeleine*) and with hearing (Vinteuil's *petite phrase*) to allow a special acculturation of the past. This is possible because, having the time to stop and reflect upon what is now irretrievably past, and without, moreover, any advance clues to what his own memory holds in store for him, the autobiographer is free to seek the proper context for his thoughts, and also to shift to other contexts, other thoughts.

This is where autobiography is radically different from history. The historian does not associate: he explains, and this difference accounts for the reductions, the condensations of most historical narratives. Curiously, however, the recent development of a kind of history which, instead of relying exclusively on traditional models of exposition, questions its own mode of inquiry (Braudel's *Écrits sur l'histoire*, de Certeau's *L'Écriture de l'histoire*, Said's *Beginnings*, White's *Tropics of*

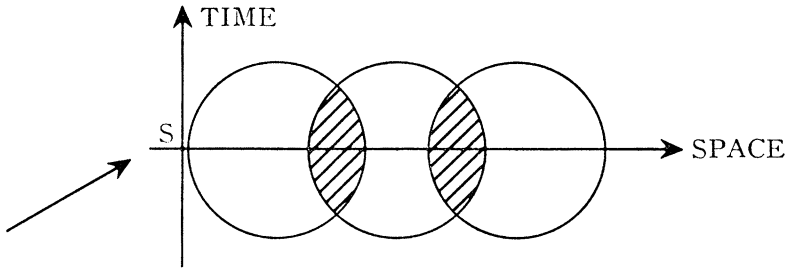
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<sup>31</sup> Gérard Genette, “Métonymie chez Proust ou la naissance du récit,” in *Figures III*, pp. 41-63.

*Discourse*<sup>32</sup>) seems to indicate that the production of historical models has now become a structural activity in its own right. If history is to continue to provide mimetic models for the description of objects in the culture, e.g., the French or the American Revolution, it must become a metacritical activity in which the historian is as problematic as the data he collects.

In the end, however, autobiography is not a speech act (*parole*). It functions as language (*langue*) although deriving its rules from the exercise of *parole*. What are these rules?

The first rule is that all autobiographical exercises must be circular. In structural terms, the work of reminiscing must be absolutely clear in the product of the reminiscing process. However, projected on the plane of a chronological succession, the autobiographical project must appear not as the interpretive circle described by Starobinski but as an open juxtaposition of intersecting spheres which allow the subject (S) to account for his progress in a linear fashion :



The associative metonymical approach enables him, each time he discovers a new context, a new contiguity, to return to that which caused him to move to a contiguous area, and having thus rounded his discovery, to give it a place in his chronology and continue his narrative.

The second rule, derived from the first, is that the autobiographical narrative must clearly be a product of the associative process and not the reverse. Accordingly, the ideal autobiography is one which allows the consciousness of this associative metonymical process to become an integral part of the narrative.

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<sup>32</sup> Fernand Braudel, *Écrits sur l'histoire* (Paris, 1963); Michel de Certeau, *L'Absent de l'histoire* (Paris, 1973) and *L'Écriture de l'histoire* (Paris, 1975); Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York, 1975); Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, Md., 1979).



The third rule is that the reader is to be considered an associate, not a reference or a judge, as the confessional tradition would have it. Montaigne's books, Augustine's *God*, Proust's *Marcel*, Joyce's *Stephen* are all necessary witnesses of and silent participants in the autobiographer's exercise. They are not a part of him. They are *near* him, helping him give substance to this empty space of his.

Although autobiography has always jeopardized the principle of a detached, objective Aristotelian mimesis by inserting a median term—the image of the writer himself—between the writer and his audience, it is only recently that the subversive potential of the autobiographical enterprise has been perceived. Thus Augustine's *Confessions* were never thought to constitute a departure from the classical culture in which they originated; they were taken as evidence of spiritual life and soul-searching in the midst of political decomposition. As for Abailard's *Historia Calamitatum* and Rousseau's *Confessions*, they never appeared to serve a radical purpose. It was agreed that Rousseau's apology was moderately interesting and that the success of the book could be explained in modern terms by the subject's uncanny ability to experiment with his own image-making and to keep track of his own fantasy life. Abailard's *Historia* was considered less a recapitulation of the lover's miseries and of his efforts to right himself than a display of the person's ability to respond to change. With Montaigne's *Essais*, however, autobiography was to receive its first disclaimer, and Pascal and Rousseau's negative comments on the *Essais* only added to the Church's condemnation. This was due to the fact that Montaigne's work was the first to resist public pressure. It was a work that had nothing to do with established models (the epic, rhetorical *compendia*, philosophical treatises, lyric poetry). Indeed, Montaigne's preoccupation with taking his distance from all societal models enabled him to concentrate on what he saw as his own business: following and depicting himself. However, I think that the conventional image of Montaigne as a staunch individualist recognizing no master is only marginally interesting because it has now become a cliché through which unsuspecting critics have helped to undermine the *Essais*'s radical posture and allowed their *récupération* by a bourgeois culture eager to absorb any challenge to its social and artistic rules. In many respects, the *Essais* have now become a model of urbane dissent for the conservative libertarian. Much more interesting is the reality of a Montaigne coming to grips with his cultural heritage. Specifically, his use of impersonal texts to construct topoi, spaces where an individual subject can examine the various social

and intellectual roles that his reading of these texts suggests, constitutes a radical transformation of memory's function and offers insight into the interpersonal, textual forms this memory can take.

It was Montaigne who had some of his favorite quotations inscribed on the ceilings or walls of his library. It was also Montaigne who professed to use the Great Masters freely to suit his own purpose and who expected his readers to do no less with his *Essais*. Both of these facts imply a conceptualization of culture as external space where the subject can conduct his own self-examination with reference to an anonymous system. While the process includes the private time of thinking and writing as an integral part of the growth of self-consciousness, it involves little reference to the personal history of the autobiographer. It has often been remarked how much we do *not* learn about Montaigne's chronology by reading the *Essais*. It is in the great books of his culture that Montaigne seeks the proper locus for his self-examination. There, outside himself, his whole introspection begins. Very soon, however, the outsider becomes an insider. Pieces of historical knowledge and cultural assumptions easily provide topics—see most of the titles of the *Essais*—through which the essayist's personal experience becomes topical in its own right. This would confirm Foucault's view of sixteenth-century culture as one of experimentation with analogy and repetition: the way to make a sign signify is to repeat it.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, a reading of the *Essais* suggests that any attempt to reminisce in a personal manner automatically becomes part of a larger, impersonal whole. Private memories merge with that segment of culture already intent on remembering itself as culture and asserting its viability as culture by turning concrete historical evidence into knowledge or episteme (e.g., the saga of the Conquistadores becomes reference material for an anthropological critique of both the Old and New Worlds). Autobiographical texts can thus use memory not as a private speech but as a universal language by using as a *grille* other texts which already constitute the past. The *Essais* may appear to do this smoothly, un-systematically. But they are a system, nonetheless, if only because of their distribution in various chapters complete with rhetorical titles. They can be and have been taken as a *compendium* of sentences and arguments in the tradition of Plutarch which, picked up by the Latin rhetors and Quintilian, flourished throughout late Latinity and the various stages of medieval commentary. But they are more than that. With their acceptance of texts as both products and generators of memory, the *Essais*, to the highest degree, and all other autobiographical

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<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970; rpt. New York, 1973), Ch. ii.

forms, to some degree, allow us to project human life, complete with its epistemological processes, into a mental space whose primary feature is that it includes representation of the subject slowly going through all the steps, meticulously surveying the various planes which made this mental space possible.

In this sense, then, the autobiographical work from Augustine to Joyce cannot be part of a tradition of model-building, which runs the gamut from Plato's *Republic*, especially the *Critias*, to the great French and English Utopians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, because in the models of that tradition, the philosopher's purpose is simply to illustrate his text through a picture of the mind without bothering to inscribe his own cognitive progress. Those philosophical representations are rather similar to the kind used in the sciences: models without any trace of the modelizing subject. Instead, autobiography is within a tradition which runs from the *Odyssey* to the *Aeneid* to the *Divine Comedy*, where the poet includes himself in the representation of his work—his cosmogony—and lives the heroic dream of being the creator of a world which remains separate from him, yet which he can possess by making himself an integral part of its description. Dante's description of Hell is the full account of a journey to the Elysian Fields under the guidance of the same poet who had already taken Homer for his mentor. In the *Odyssey*, the recitation of the bard Demodokos allows Odysseus to recognize himself as the hero of the story (Bk. VIII). Both the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* on the one hand, and the *Divine Comedy* on the other, feature explorations of memory which allow the writer to construct his epic as if the universality of his message could be guaranteed by a contact with the past. Thus Odysseus stops enjoying his stay with Calypso when he catches himself remembering Ithaca; thus he escapes the Lotus Eaters whose purpose is to erase all memories; thus he also visits the dead in Hades. The visit to the underworld is especially significant in that it suggests a basic model for the production of meaning through a fictional representation of the workings of memory. In this case the representation, which is but a *simulacrum* (what exactly are the ghosts like in Hades? they live yet have no substance; they cannot be touched lest they dissolve), is not just necessary to the progress of the narrative; it is also the condition for the understanding of that progress. By reading or listening to the *Odyssey*, we learn about other lands, other people, other cultures. We also learn how we become a part of what we learn, as this knowledge enters our memory and makes us a part of memorable texts. Finally, by allowing repetition, memory abolishes the distance, the difference mandating the repetition. Not solely the explanation of past events but any explanation, any understanding at all, is basically a replay of the process by which the subject

initially shut himself off from the explanation. This primary lesson about how and where it all began, which in the epics mentioned above occupies just one sequence among many, marks the central stage not only in the autobiographical process but in any critical enterprise. Only autobiography properly illustrates the beginning and the end, the intrinsic circularity of the process which makes any criticism possible. It is no wonder that so many critics have now joined in asking themselves where their points of view came from.

*University of California, Davis*