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A Doll's Story

Verena Andermatt-Conley

OF THE ELEVEN TEXTS binding this number of *New Literary History*, Christine Brooke-Rose's tepidly titled "Self-Confrontation and the Writer" fissures and explodes issues of specularly to which every other article speaks. Although in every instance the texts address themselves to autobiography as a mode and genre of self-confrontation, each falls into one of four categories. In the first, John Sturrock, Elizabeth Bruss, and Stanislaw Eile categorize self-study through definition of binary aspects in the self-critical gesture among novels comprising a modern tradition. Then, Michaël Głowiński and Philippe Lejeune dismantle ideological and stylistic characteristics of self-study from Rousseau to Barthes, while Patrick Gardiner and Louis Renza determine how a writing persona, in the wake of Heidegger, must become in order not to be. They generalize what Głowiński and Lejeune had sighted, in deference to Benveniste, in the *discursive instances* of autobiography. In the last group of texts Guy Davenport and Ms. Brooke-Rose work within the flux of fiction to overdetermine by the violence of verbal shifts what we see before our eyes. And nearly anomalously, David Simpson's vigorous study of the inaugural paragraph crowning the *Discourse on Method* arrives, inversely, at reproducing the same problems.

All texts suggest that on the one hand autobiography permeates modern discourse and, on the other, that the mode has been the only area where the paradox of inscription and eradication can be practiced in a space not marginal to fiction. In all, insistence on erosion of verisimilitude harks back to truisms used to classify the modern novel: those of a "postmodern" flux, an acentric continuity, an act of writing on the border of madness, and the need to disclose narcissism behind mimesis. Emphasis on such concepts beneath and beyond the texts would amount to reproduction of summaries familiar to every reader of this review.

More problematic than any of the conclusions is the ease of argumentation leading to them, especially in several of the texts. Binaries of self versus other, monologue versus dialogue, or individual versus group pervade the discourse, and only in exceptional instances is the status of such oppositions ever questioned, either as mode of

argument that generated the articles or as screen masking less articulate forces erupting in the very texture of autobiography. John Sturrock's "New Model" is in this respect ordinary coin in the currency. He notes that autobiography is a parasite of biography, an indirect, apologetic mode veering away from the orthogonality of historical writing. Sturrock implicitly offers a moral critique of the writer who fails to communicate. The autobiographer's "text should be a compromise between intention and improvisation," a crease between public and private, civic and phantasmatic. From his review there emerges a limited view of "obligation" as a social contract rather than, as Montaigne had indicated, a forgetful, erasive discourse where "mes fantaisies se suyvent . . . et se regardent, mais d'une veuë oblique" (*Essais*, in *Oeuvres complètes* [Paris, 1962], p. 973), where the presence of a public self can only be entertained if it is to be dissolved in oblivion, not reified in *useful obligation*. So the moral stigma of alienation—which this critic feels finally was buried under postwar writing—resurges in the seeming problem of a civic language pre-determining and delimiting any self-confrontation, and in a way that cannot help recusing the work of writers like Leiris or Proust.

The constraints in Sturrock's classifications recur in the chiasma of Elizabeth Bruss's title. A "literature of game and game of literature" contends that dialogic rules are established by which exchange depends on a sort of phenomenological barter, in her words a "strategic texture" drawn among reader, characters, and text. Hence the insulation of beauty in a bookish crypt whose loveliness is a joy forever: "To see the game in literary works is to appreciate new aesthetic dimensions, particularly the 'beauty' of strategy." A ritualized exchange, however, presupposes a violent syncopation, a devastating loss of body and language. As Marcell Mauss observed in his almost autobiographical *Essai sur le don*, archaic ritual is sometimes punctuated by periodic breakage of rules.¹ Consequently the writer must play dirty, like the figure of the horse trader to whom Bruss refers, or like the late-medieval *maquignon* who becomes a *maquereau*, a pimp snatching and trafficking mackerel-words (*makeln*) beyond the borders of a polite literary game. Bruss never appeals to the smelly residue from which an exchange must begin.

Stanislaw Eile's text pinpoints the movement of writing which Bruss would have located at the axis of her chiasma. He insists on a division between two acts of cognition, one in the novel and the other in the reader. In defining an *auctorial novel* as one in which the narrator is a "cognitive authority who does not require verification," he returns to the classical issues of omniscient and unreliable narration that have catalyzed moral response in mixed terms. Like many historians of the

modern novel, Eile finds that irony turns novelistic play into an “open” poetics where detachment and errant cognition are progressively extravagant. It would seem that by insisting on a post-eighteenth century etiquette of a “vision of the world,” he falls victim to standardized discourse inevitably, in the wake of Lukács, welding alienation and ethics² to a Christian scheme that had been much more profanely treated in earlier times, specifically when the death of the Middle Ages made its loss more painfully evident. That the androgynous picaro arising from the plague and Inquisition had been a center of the novel for hundreds of years is a point missing from the treatment of autobiography which repeatedly speculates on the first-person narrator—often in terms of an outsider, misfit, woman, or lame jester.

The limits of this perspective also mark Lejeune's and Głowiński's texts. They exploit Benveniste's discursive instance of intersubjectivity in which a first person can only be posited in terms of a third (and vice versa). The linguist was careful to generalize his concept in a strategy shading areas between persons and loci, not of mimetic contact but of untruth, indeed, of *dissimulation*, and perhaps of a healthy mendacity.³ Lejeune insists on the need for gaps between narrator and event in the flight from the imaginary that is nothing but a return to it and that marks differences between enunciation and convention which writing must exploit. Subtle as it is, Lejeune's analysis looks to the least—should a neologism be permitted—syncopative of texts, one of the more narcissistic of modern autobiographies, Barthes's *Roland Barthes par roland barthes*, where the conventions of the genre are most conventionally reproduced—except in a slight distortion of the writer's simulated body through a loose alphabetization of fragments. Lejeune might have faced a greater challenge had he appealed to autobiographies in the first and third person like Lucette Finas' *Meurtrion* (of a histrionowomanslaughterer), for example, or *Donne* where genders of a neither-nor in the name of the speaker, *Hell*, are murdered by the sexless name embodying its voice. Texts like these crack the narcissistic drive permeating Barthes's text. The only visible American analogue to Finas may be the majestic, labored self-portraits by Chuck Close: his carefully blown-up photographs of an originary identity reach their nonrepresentative conclusion in airbrush strokes depicting the artist's follicles, pores, blemishes, and wrinkles with such grandiose distortion that any question of the self is subordinated to the technical features of acrylic translation. Narcissism is bypassed.⁴

Głowiński, using a diachronic model that Lejeune avoids, shows how at given times the conative *I* was able to communicate forms

of experience which remained alien to the *he* or *she*. Simply by accounting for the absence of the first-person novel in the nineteenth century, in contrast to its ubiquity in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, he attaches the concept of self-confrontation in fiction to ideological issues which directly affect the body. Political conditions determine the choice of words and their delivery from the glottis.

He looks to a sort of historical instance of novelistic discourse that David Simpson extracts from an inductive reading of Descartes; copresence of the two articles indicates how the theme of this issue of *New Literary History* interrogates the forms of autobiography which locate themselves in a relatively recent span of tradition, a tradition generally underplaying the complex ideological issues masked by a theocentric view of the novel.⁵ Simpson corrects the popular notion of a unitary *cogito* by his emphasis on irony *within* the *Discourse on Method* insofar as it opens onto a perspective of social predicament that we also sense in Głowiński's view of the nineteenth century. Simpson determines how a rhetorical insubordination, "whereby the syntactic connections, either within the paragraph or between the different stages of the argument, operate to upset the ordered hierarchy which any sequential demonstration, any strictly 'synthetic' method, must assume." He confirms Benveniste once again, showing that no authorial "presence" can be found at any area of enunciation and that even the seemingly originary categories of clearness and distinctness are supple cords in the webbing of Descartes' argument. The text breaches the post-Romantic (or even the boundaries of a "postmodern") notion of "personal identity," since the flux of events to which the first person responds does not allow either room or leisure for speculation about self-metamorphosis. The stress, he repeats, is on survival: the *cogito*, a body, exists only when it produces. His appeal, via Nathan Edelman, to the figures of the philosopher-autobiographer as an architect and traveler confirms Descartes' proximity to the very "Vanity" of self-portraiture Montaigne had parodied, in which civic ruin finds its future product in the garbage covering a once-glorious Rome, an architecture which the voyager sees mired under heaps of waste. The texts suggest how self-confrontation must detach itself from any originary privilege.

The article recovers the body of the writer which, at times, is in a homeopathic rapport with the world, giving and losing words in a manner that assures survival. Patrick Gardiner rejects this dimension in a reading of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. "Human conduct is endowed with meaning and intention and therefore cannot . . . be identified with mere bodily movements." His abstraction of desire—and he never intends desire to be specific as: to mime, to

write, to dance, to become—into philosophical categories keeps the corporal violence of words out of philosophy.⁶

The same artifice becomes for Louis Renza the hermeneutic field of autobiography. Without designation as such, autoportraiture transpires as a fetish, as an “ersatz, imaginative ‘design,’” as “imitations, copies,” “mask,” “dumb ‘manikin,’” “discrete pockets of verbal irrelevancies,” “supreme fixation of solipsism.” Using metaphors reminiscent of Freud’s painted dolls and frightening doubles of the celebrated essay on *The Uncanny*, the text draws attention to a public loss issuing from the insular activity of autobiography and its dubious product that has—at least in modern times, as the psychoanalyst suggested in his reflections on mimesis, language, and experience—no pragmatic value.

At stake, and not quite in line with Renza’s conclusions, may be the need to destroy the self by indifference to the self, to break a theo-phallogocentric privilege by means of a travesty. This is to say, that it may be necessary to replace the spiritual dialectic of a Hegelian *Geistesgeschichte* with prostheses, fetishes of an already redeified totality. Autobiographers from Saint Augustine to Freud have indeed projected such totalities.⁷ Such radical reconsideration of this mode of writing, as Renza sometimes suggests, would take the genre out of the humanist impasse of a romanticized “search” or “journey to the interior” that heretofore blinded the eye from recognition of its given functions in political networks whose goals of production are to defer passion and to keep in motion a degraded exchange for the accumulation of monetary figures—precisely those objects which the eye fervently wants to behold. At its best moments the text reflects the history of the self as part of a thoroughly Western economy.

The contributions of Davenport and Brooke-Rose seem the most performatively successful in the number. The chiasma of phantasm and science in Max Ernst and Ernst Machs remains an undecidable, less historical, less useful, less categorical ploy than those reviewed so far. His attention to agglomerations of plastic figures of flight—the airplane, a *pteros*, the ornithopter, the American flag on the moon “starched into semblance of flying,” and the like—amounts to a meditation on the prosthesis, which in the context is an autobiography writing itself by stripping its articulation from seemingly natural or negotiable values. By displacing self-portraiture in favor of synopes of word and image, this “compound subject of literature and painting,” he sidesteps the theological center into which the authors of the more conceptual texts could not avoid falling. The very indeterminacy of the discourse—its uselessness—situates its force, between, in a region of agnosis. The dynamism of a writing beyond a

center—and self-confrontation metaphorically cannot be without a public arena to which eyes are directed—is the process to which the purely technical discussion points, and in doing so obviates the binaries riddling the other essays.

Where Davenport stays on the margin, Christine Brooke-Rose goes to the center of issues that we must reinflect with questions of composition and the body until now handled only obliquely. She operates a double obliteration of the self in a confrontation of two artificial essences, a *John* and *John*₁, two dolls who perform with and against a writer whose identity is the tracing of an elegantly bizarre rebus, and whose festoons are the folds of discourse executed less in instance than movement: “John and I are writing this paper himself.” The text, somewhere between Joyce and her fellow, Hélène Cixous, at Vincennes, resolves the sexual polarity of the other critics by conflating masterpieces and mistresspieces, pieces of masters and piecemeal attempts to master a totality of mystery. The “artist in his own rite” who feels the biological urge to write and mimic, inflate and explode language across its phantasms and etimologies, resembles a figure who surpasses oedipal limits which define “self-confrontation.” And this is a “mastress of the misters” of whom Cixous spoke in a text of the *missexual*.⁸ “A *cleo/patrician in her own right she at one . . . complicates the position while BC* [Burrous and Casseous of *Finnegans Wake*] *are contending for her mistery . . .*

miss
mastery
mystery
mastérisque” (p. 248),

says Cixous, discoursing from the vantage point of a feminine mistery that removes the self-arena, whether in signifier or signified, from an “absent center,” “dark continent,” or “originary loss” of feminine gender which might be given in the eyes of the male a theocentric value. All this is at the expense of the writing body in current terminologies of difference to which neither Brooke-Rose nor Cixous subscribes.

The otherness from which they speak is the neo-Joycean spot marked by *Finnegans Wake*. In most direct terms, either woman might have spoken of the problem in this way:

A la limite, le scripteur ne pourrait désirer, pour n'être pas toujours doublé—que sa propre confusion avec l'inscription: c'est bien le chemin que prendra Joyce jusqu'en *Finnegans Wake*, où le désir et le désiré mélangent leurs signes, et où l'épouse peut être un moment, un nom, un fragment, ou le

tout de l'époux. Alors, là où le sans-limite 'commence' multiplement, il n'y a ni don ni perte, mais une sorte de grâce errante; et c'est seulement là, mais à peine amorcé dans le mélange des singularités, qu'enfin le phallogocentrisme décroche, et s'emporte dans une dérive de l'un à l'autre bord.⁹

Both writers appeal to various splits in an autobiography begun "once upon a time," but the impression is that these are disposable prostheses of sorts, *poupées* of the real which cede, as the reader translates them, to a fluid, indeed amniotic, passage of language which breaks the conceptual matrix giving it form. Both are *mères-nées*, born from a difference they have already surpassed in the act of writing. The discourse of women is here in no way a facile opacity of language screening its intensity of self-confrontation. Brooke-Rose's fabled John is a tormenting figure—like the *Je* of Cixous' *Angst* ("Je me suis laissée conduire par la grue dans l'angoisse"),¹⁰ or the first-person *Little Hell* of Lucette Finas' *Donne*—because the text unfolds the economy of anguish in its articulation, but never for simple reasons of a literary style mediating life; rather, they intensify the issue of discourse "as" life and advance, project, fissure the languages of a somnambulant, narcotic, denatured self preceding that of anguished exchange of word and body.

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NOTES

1 "In a certain number of cases, it is not a question of giving or paying back, but of destroying in order to wish not having the likely desire that goods be rendered to you. Whole containers of oil are burned, houses and thousands of blankets are burned; the most expensive coppers are broken, they are thrown to the ocean to crush, to 'flatten' one's rival. Not only does one advance himself, but still one advances his family on the social ladder. . . . One can, if he wishes, call these transfers in the name of exchange or even of business, or sale; but this commerce is noble, with ceremony and generosity" (in *Sociologie et anthropologie* [Paris, 1973], p. 202).

2 Recently Geoffrey Hartman has tried to disentangle the skeins of issues in reconsideration of Lukács next to Derrida in "Crossing Over," *Comparative Literature*, 28 (Summer 1976), 257-76. We might add that the vigorously amoral view of *Glas*, where a first-person narrator, an "Ich," is a shitful remain (or beginning), an immaculate conception (IC), and a glottal cry suppressing the *Ecch* or *Ecce* of an *ex-ces-sive* voice who puts in question the authority of any theory of the novel in neo-Hegelian time. Needless to say, Derrida pushes further the problem of narrative voice, via Genet and Blanchot, than most of his Anglo-American adepts might probably like to admit.

3 Condition of communication, he noted, resides "dans une propriété du langage, peu visible sous l'évidence qui la *dissimule* et que nous ne pouvons encore caractériser que sommairement" (*Problèmes de linguistique générale* [Paris, 1966], p. 259). That Benveniste finds evidence in an invisible area within discourse and that he tends to

defer his argument unveil an “absent center” necessary for a textual theology and a strategy of difference which are the stuff of autobiography. Exemplary, too, is his effraction of the privilege of truth as visibility that self-confrontation destroys. Our remarks do not, however, entertain castration. This will be evident below.

4 How to obviate narcissism—or how to use it effectively—in modern art is the subject of Rosalind Krauss’s compelling “Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism,” *October*, 1 (Spring 1976), 51-64.

5 We think, for instance, of the authority which critics of modern writing accord to Curtius’ and Auerbach’s analyses of self-confrontation in Latin and vernacular literature of the Middle Ages. The generally unquestioned authority of these texts—despite the strategies within the discourse, is evidence of a pronounced nostalgia for order so patent in criticism of the novel. The view can be easily countermanded by lucid socioeconomic treatments of discourse like that of Jacques Le Goff, “Clerical Culture and the Traditions of Folklore in Merovingian Civilization,” in *Social Historians in Contemporary France* (New York, 1972), pp. 100-112.

6 Jacques Derrida had already severely critiqued this view four years ago in “La Question du style” (appearing in the collection of essays entitled *Nietzsche aujourd’hui? I* [Paris, 1973], 235-87). So has Luce Irigaray in *Speculum de l’autre femme* (Paris, 1974).

7 On the notion of a mendacious substitute elongating the writer from self-scrutiny, see Paul de Man, “The Purloined Ribbon,” *Glyph*, I (Baltimore, 1977), 28-49.

8 *Poétique*, No. 26 (Spring 1976), pp. 240-49.

9 “At the limits, the scriptor can desire, in order not to be passed—only his own confession with inscription: that is the road Joyce will take until *Finnegans Wake*, where desire and the desired mix their signs, and where spouse (f.) can be a moment, a name, a fragment, or the whole of ‘spouse’ (m.). Then, there where the limitless ‘begins’ multiply, there is neither gift nor loss, but a sort of vagabond grace; and it is only there, but hardly begun in the mixture of singularities, that finally phallogocentrism disbands and floats away in a drift from one to the other shore” (in *Prénoms de personne* [Paris, 1974], p. 310).

10 Hélène Cixous, *Angst* (Paris, 1977), p. 62. We must indicate how on the title page Cixous incorporates the name of the editor with her own title, permitting an equivocal reading as either *Angst* or *Angst des femmes* where the women *are* the text. The anguish is also one of transsexual dynamism in both language and body, a movement so expansive as to vitalize a feminist ideology of writing and living where the so-called horrors of incest and castration are economized in an act surpassing the narrowly sexual-political limits of collective literature on the part of either male or female or both.