Some Principles of Autobiography*

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Critics of autobiography still preside over an unfederated domain, so each feels compelled to begin with a new definition of the genre. We have an ample number of precedents, ranging from hostility to encomia, most of them centering on the relative value of history and art, fiction and fact. Others, tracing the growth of autobiography since the Middle Ages, call it a history of the human mind, reflecting man’s rise from dogma to greater individuality. But these views all pack the same evolutionary bias: that recent lives are necessarily more complex, and their stories more challenging; that the content of a life shapes the form of its story, and not the other way around. Of paramount importance to most critics is the autobiographer’s ideology or profession, which supposedly influenced the events and values of his book. So the critics customarily divide authors into separate categories and—working like so many vocational counselors—grade them according to religious denomination or social class. As a result, we learn that a “simple” faith produces a simple narrative, that a soldier writes as a soldier, a poet always as a poet.1

While this definition of autobiography may be useful for social historians, it is hardly a suitable basis for critical evaluation. Some readers have resisted the occupational mode of defining autobiography, preferring a broader and more inclusive scheme of classification. A partial disclaimer appears in Roy Pascal’s influential book Design and Truth in Autobiography, which argues convincingly that autobiography is a unique literary form, offering its close readers a complex set of interpretive problems. But Pascal’s sensitive analysis of the genre is marred by rather insistent value judgments. The “true” autobiography, in his opinion, tells us not merely of remembered deeds and thoughts, but

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is for both author and reader "a spiritual experiment, a voyage of discovery." After this declaration we might well expect a hierarchical ranking of autobiographers, grouped according to the range of their great-circle sailing. Instead, Pascal follows the conventional route of typing by profession, or calling: science (Darwin, Freud), politics (Hitler, Trotsky, Gandhi), while admitting that each story differs according to its author's "specific achievement." To date, only Francis Hart has disclaimed this evaluative view, charging that it imposes rigid and exclusive notions of propriety. More than one type of autobiography exists, Hart believes, and the task of critics is to help identify those variants. His "anatomy" of intentions is an admirable start in this direction, a trend I certainly hope to promote.2

As a contribution, I will propose a simple analogy: an autobiography is a self-portrait. Each of those italicized words suggests a double entity, expressed as a series of reciprocal transactions. The self thinks and acts; it knows that it exists alone and with others. A portrait is space and time, illusion and reality, painter and model—each element places a demand, yields a concession. A self-portrait is even more uniquely transactional. No longer distinctly separate, the artist-model must alternately pose and paint. He composes the composition, in both senses of that verb; his costume and setting form the picture and also depict its form. In a mirror he studies reversed images, familiar to himself but not to others. A single mirror restricts him to full or three-quarter faces; he may not paint his profile, because he cannot see it. The image resists visual analysis; as he moves to paint a hand, the hand must also move. The image is also complete, and entirely superficial; yet he must begin with the invisible, with lines more raw than bone or flesh, building volume and tone, sketch and underpaint, into a finished replica of himself. So he works from memory as well as sight, in two levels of time, on two planes of space, while reaching for those other dimensions, depth and the future. The process is alternately reductive and expansive; it imparts to a single picture the force of universal implications.

Autobiography is a literary version of this curious artifact. Language and paint are clearly dissimilar materials, requiring different forms of selection or arrangement, but in autobiography vision and memory remain the essential controls, time and space the central problems, reduction and expansion the desired goals. An autobiography is equally a work of art and life, for no one writes such a book until he has lived

out the requisite years. During his life he remains uncertain of cause and effect, rarely sensing the full shape or continuity of experiences. But in writing his story he artfully defines, restricts, or shapes that life into a self-portrait—one far different from his original model, resembling life but actually composed and framed as an artful invention. Autobiography is thus hardly “factual,” “unimaginative,” or even “non-fictional,” for it welcomes all the devices of skilled narration and observes few of the restrictions—accuracy, impartiality, inclusiveness—imposed upon other forms of historical literature. So a reader can legitimately study autobiography as he does other literary genres, by identifying its structural elements and observing their complex relations. As a first step in determining autobiographical principles, we need to identify those elements.

I. Elements of Autobiography

Coleridge tells us most writing begins with a prime decision, an “initiative” that affects the author’s entire process of composition, telling him what to write, when to edit, and how to unify the remainder. The decision to write one’s autobiography is at least a strategic beginning, whether part of a master plan or born of frustration and personal anxiety. Northrop Frye, working back from Coleridge to Aristotle, identifies three elements that subsequently guide a writer’s progress: mythos, ethos, and dianoia, or action, character, and theme. In a single narrative these elements form a sequence of contexts and relationships, passing through alternate phases of dominance or dormancy. For my present purposes, the terms require both translation and modification: character and theme replace ethos and dianoia, while technique represents mythos, the author’s action. In the case of autobiography, how he acts upon the narrative often overshadows how he acts in it.

Standing foremost in an autobiographer’s strategy is the element of character, the image or self-portrait his book presents. Various factors determine that character: his sense of self, of place, of history, of his motives for writing. We must carefully distinguish this character from the author himself, since it performs as a double persona: telling the story as a narrator, enacting it as a protagonist. Although these two figures are the same person, artist and model, we may still distinguish their essential points of separation. They share the same name, but not

the same time and space. A narrator always knows more than his protagonist, yet he remains faithful to the latter’s ignorance for the sake of credible suspense. Eventually the reverse images have to merge; as past approaches present, the protagonist’s deeds should begin to match his narrator’s thoughts.

A second factor in autobiographical strategy is the element of technique, which embraces those plastic devices—style, imagery, structure—that build a self-portrait from its inside out. These technical components have not received the attention they deserve, with the exception of some promising work on style. But Pascal’s assertion that style varies according to the autobiographical “personality” or “calling” (p. 79) has been challenged by Jean Starobinski, who holds that autobiographers determine style only in so far as it “satisfies the conditions of the genre.”4 Style, then, is not subservient to content, but is a formal device significant in its own right. Even the simplest stylistic choices, of tense or person, are directly meaningful, since they lead to larger effects, like those of metaphor and tone.

The final strategic element is theme, those ideas and beliefs that give an autobiography its meaning, or at least make it a consistent replica of the writer. Theme may arise from the author’s general philosophy, religious faith, or political and cultural attitudes. His theme is personal but also representative of an era, just as other literary works may illustrate the history of ideas. In fact, autobiography has an especially inclusive thematic base, since its writers constantly grapple with issues—love, memory, death—that appeal to a broad reading public. We might attribute these themes to historical causes, noting changes in the interplay of authors and readers across the centuries. But this path can lead to rather broad generalizations; a simpler practice is noting how each autobiographer orchestrates his theme—in various guises and contexts—to give himself, his story, and his reader a stronger sense of intellectual unity. In its broadest sense, the theme of autobiography is life, since the story cannot legitimately end in death—the hand must pose while forever in motion. An autobiographer needs some other form of narrative resolution, linking his personal ambitions with those of a reader. As we shall see, thematic conclusions are the clearest indication of differences in autobiographical strategy.

These three elements—character, technique, theme—operate as continuous complements in autobiography, but they are best examined in sequence. Each of them relates to an isolated aspect of composition:

the writer (character), the work (technique), and the reader (theme); yet all three form a single chain of relationships progressing from motive, to method, to meaning. By analyzing these elements in sequence we can trace an outline of the autobiographer’s strategy, distinguishing his achievement from other works while affirming his place in a literary tradition. This method of analysis should expand and diversify our notion of the genre; it also challenges the practice of ranking works according to “truth,” propriety, content, or aesthetic merit. For too long critics have held that autobiography is “unique,” that is, unprecedented but also monolithic in form. I hope to encourage a new response, one that finds more variety among the works and more similarity to established literary genres. If we can see that autobiographers do not always share the same principles, then we should no longer have to read them with a single set of values.

II. Autobiography as Oratory

One means of recognizing some different principles of autobiography is to examine its pictorial equivalent, the self-portrait. We can begin with two Renaissance paintings, both details from larger frescoes: the self-portraits of Raphael and Michaelangelo (figures 1 and 2). At first glance, these pictures seem quite dissimilar. Raphael is graceful and melancholy, his face blank except for two large and tranquil eyes. Michaelangelo appears as a flayed skin, grotesquely tortured, his face melting into virtual anonymity. Yet both artists portray an idealized self epitomizing a stage in their artistic careers: Raphael, dead at thirty-seven, paints the unblemished purity of Youth; while Michaelangelo, who reached eighty-nine, depicts the inevitable corruption of Age. Both also subordinate themselves to larger, martyred figures: Raphael to Sodoma, a painter ruined by his own notoriety; Michaelangelo to St. Bartholomew, resurrected but still the unknown Apostle. Raphael comments here on the destruction of Sodoma’s fresco, directly above his own; Michaelangelo wearily concludes his long struggle with the Sistine Chapel. Their portraits are sermons on a common theme.

5 For information on the paintings depicted here, I am indebted to two valuable studies: Ludwig Goldscheider, Five Hundred Self-Portraits from Antique Times to the Present Day . . . , tr. J. B. Shaw (Vienna, 1937); and Manuel Gasser, Self-Portraits from the Fifteenth Century to the Present Day, tr. A. Malcolm (New York, 1965). For photographic assistance, I thank Mr. Harold D. Connelly, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.
an artist’s fame and fortune, that has an appropriate place within their larger allegories of Athens and Purgatory.

The paintings typify a class of self-portraits, those that preach an ideology, and they also resemble a group of autobiographers who share analogous oratorical aims. St. Augustine is the primary exemplar of this type of autobiography. And Augustine has many followers through the centuries: my representative choices, in this essay, are John Bunyan, Edward Gibbon, Henry Adams, and Malcolm X—all men who share a common devotion to doctrine, whether in religion, history, or politics.

Previous critics have recognized an “Augustinian” mode of autobiography, but they identify its features and practitioners with rather limited criteria. Many assume that all religious lives are in this category, separated by doctrinal barriers, but essentially “success stories” that teach the lesson of grace. Others adopt more formal positions, alternately calling the mode “dogmatic,” “expository,” and “epic.” Frye suggests a different approach in his explanation of the “high mimetic” mode, whose hero defines his superiority through the power of preaching, or public oratory (pp. 58-59). Since its purpose is didactic, his story is allegorical, seeking to represent in a single life an idealized pattern of human behavior. The allegory often has messianic overtones, replete with suffering and martyrdom, as the orator leads his people to their rightful home. Doctrine alone does not give him this authority; to lead he must master oratory, the art of being heard.

Our five autobiographers represent this strategy, regardless of their beliefs or aims. The common manifestation of a strong and principled character determines the persona’s two didactic roles: as narrator, he teaches his prime lesson; as protagonist, he relives and learns from his days of sin or error. The narrator usually sympathizes with his protagonist, but only from a patronizing distance. Augustine certainly cannot relish his early acceptance of the Manichaean heresy, nor can Gibbon graciously acknowledge his youthful conversion to the Church of Rome:

And because this strange form of piety of mine led me to believe that a good God had never created any evil nature, I came to the conclusion

1. Raphael and Sodoma, detail from "The School of Athens" (1509-11). Rome, Vatican.

2. St. Bartholomew and his flayed skin (Michelangelo), detail from "The Last Judgment" (ca. 1540). Rome, Sistine Chapel.


5. Two views of the Perseus (1554):
   left, Cellini's self-portrait;
   right, the full group. Florence, Museo Nazionale.


Detroit, Institute of Arts.
that there were two masses in opposition to each other, both infinite, but
the evil one more contracted and the good one more expansive. And
from this pestilent beginning other sacrilegious notions followed naturally.

To my actual feelings it seems incredible that I could ever believe that
I believed in transubstantiation. But my conqueror oppressed me with
the sacramental words, "Hoc est corpus meum," and dashed against each
other the figurative half-meanings of the Protestant sects. Every objection
was resolved into omnipotence, and after repeating at St. Mary's the
Athanasian Creed, I humbly acquiesced in the mystery of the Real
Presence.

In both passages the past has surrendered to present exegesis: August-
tine finds his ideas "strange," "pestilent," "sacrilegious"; Gibbon mock-
ingly attributes his "incredible" behavior to the forces of oppression
and acquiescence. Both analyses clearly derive from a recent perspec-
tive where theologian and historian dominate the narrative voice.

Such a strong, positive sense of character in autobiographers arises
from a common motive: to carve public monuments out of their private
lives. This didactic purpose, which explains Adams' choice of "Educa-
tion" as a metaphor for his life, affects readers and authors alike. Each
man writes for his own sake, to confirm the validity of his thesis, and
also for the conversion of others. But he does not always respond to
a "calling": if Augustine and Bunyan exult in the triumph of God's
unity, Gibbon and Adams resignedly accept the victory of universal
decay. Malcolm X, caught between the forces of religion and history,
ponders their alternatives and never quite chooses either way: "And
if I can die having brought any light, having exposed any meaningful
truth that will help to destroy the racist cancer that is malignant in
the body of America—then, all of the credit is due to Allah. Only the
mistakes have been mine."

Inevitably, readers will ask if such a character is "true." Certainly,
he is not "true to life," since he tells a censored account, epitomizing
himself, like Raphael and Michaelangelo, admitting no facts that fail
to support his central thesis: Gibbon excludes his childhood, Bunyan
and Adams omit their marriages. This censorship may savor of in-
sincerity, but it also serves an orator's purposes as he converts the sur-
viving details into meaningful allegory. Malcolm X writes exhaustively
on the art of designing a perfect "conk"—a straightened hairdo that
represents his bankrupt racial pride. The details are not literal history
but figural narration. They give us selected aspects of a larger allegory,
representing the Afro-American "experience" through the manipulative
power of art.

Since art is his métier, the oratorical autobiographer closely attends
to matters of literary technique. He is a master rhetorician, thoroughly versed in the arts of persuasion or argument and capable of any logical maneuver that serves his purpose. His rhetoric may be traditional, like Augustine’s, proverbial, as is Bunyan’s, or ornamental, like Gibbon’s; in each case the style is the man, exactly reflecting his self-control. His most familiar devices are parallelism (especially in long series of subordinate clauses), amplification, and refrain; all convey his strength and coherence as an orator. An impressive example is in Adams’ opening pages, where rhetoric becomes a landscape of his own mind:

Winter and summer, cold and heat, town and country, force and freedom, marked the modes of life and thought, balanced like lobes of the brain. Town was winter confinement, school, rule, discipline; straight, gloomy streets, piled with six feet of snow in the middle; frosts that made the snow sing under wheels or runners; thaws when the streets became dangerous to cross; society of uncles, aunts, and cousins who expected children to behave themselves, and who were not always gratified; above all else, winter represented the desire to escape and go free. Town was restraint, law, unity. Country, only seven miles away, was liberty, diversity, outlawry, the endless delight of mere sense impressions given by nature for nothing, and breathed by boys without knowing it.

The style common to oratorical autobiography also affects its narrative mode and structure. Just as the painters subordinate themselves to others, so does each writer pose as an apologist, ready to defend his faith in a system, larger than himself, that explains earthly cause and effect. Gibbon and Adams, the two great skeptics, may seem unsuited to this description until we recognize their absolute faith in iconoclasm. As narrators, they all dismember their protagonists, who stand outside the unity of true belief: Adams calls his protagonist a “mannikin,” for whom his narrator, a “tailor,” makes suits of clothing; narrator Malcolm identifies his protagonist with a succession of nicknames—“Mascot,” “Homeboy,” “Detroit Red,” “Satan.” But the two figures have to merge as narrative time passes. When living and writing begin to overlap, the tailor must become his own mannikin, just as “Satan” becomes “El Haaj” (one who has seen Mecca). So the narrative structure joins text and preacher by simplifying time sequences, compressing some years and expanding others. Augustine’s first four books cover twenty-eight years, the time of pagan confusion, the next five books treat only four years, climaxing in his conversion, and the last four books abandon chronology for a celebration of the Christian life. Gibbon and Adams follow similar patterns, speeding hastily past early years, slowing down to focus on turning points (The Decline and Fall,
the Columbia Exposition), then lapsing into topical discussion of current views. The early years seem to be an introit, chanted while approaching a sanctuary; the final years are a doxology, sung in praise of self-certainty.

The character and technique of an oratorical autobiography make its theme obviously apparent. The theme is *vocation*, the special summons that guided an entire life's work, and now its story. Work made the story, story remakes the work: they justify each other by reducing all complexities to a single substance. Even Adams, who wanted to depict multiplicity, wrote instead a rigidly unified book. Unity is the orators' common theme, and it springs from a common source: their belief in a superior force—God, History, Nature—that controls their entire careers, from remembered beginning to anticipated end. At the close of their books, all speak openly of death—with peace or foreboding, but in the same mood of stoic resignation.

To readers like Pascal, Augustine and his fellow writers seem least successful as autobiographers, "too exactly continuous and logical" in their rationalized versions of life. For James Olney, this mode is "autobiography simplex," a narrative—whether by Fox, Darwin, or Mill—dominated by a single metaphor, which its author understands and depicts in only a partial manner.7 I cannot deny their strict narrative control or their limited preoccupations, but these qualities hardly seem defects, since I expect no more or less from other careful rhetoricians. Viewed more positively, each orator seems a pastoral figure, closely attentive to his listening flock, speaking aloud for the benefit of others. His own fame is important, but its object is to exemplify the ways of fortune. The reader is Augustine's principal auditor, despite his frequent invocations of God. What passes for private confession, for ideological harangue, may actually arise from deeper and far less selfish sources.

III. Autobiography as Drama

We encounter a second autobiographical strategy via two unusual self-portraits, by Parmegiano and Hogarth (figures 3 and 4). Parmegiano drew this peculiar image while observing himself in a convex mirror. Distorted to the normal eye, another convex lens, the picture has a natural appearance when viewed in a concave glass. Quite a

visual riddle—when absurdity meets absurdity, the result is perfect sense! We learn little about Parmegiano from this picture, except that he was a playful young man. Perhaps he comments here on our notion of reality, certainly a public question, or maybe that Sphynx-like pose and enigmatic smile mask a private riddle. At any rate, he suggests both possibilities without openly taking sides. Instead of preaching an obvious sermon, he vividly impersonates, or dramatizes, several irreverent notions. Hogarth moves in a similar direction, avoiding direct comment for mocking surrealism. In this whimsical self-portrait, also framed to suggest a mirror, he places himself beside his dog, whose face comically echoes its master’s coarse, plebeian countenance. A few props complete this theatrical tableau, English culture (Shakespeare, Milton, Swift) resting by a palette inscribed “Line of Beauty and Grace,” his droll title—and formal plan—for the entire composition.

The two painters resemble a class of autobiographers, equally original and devious, who share their dramatic principles. None of these writers has a thesis about his development; he assumes that he was and is essentially the same person, so his book depicts the past as a series of spontaneously ordered events. As an author he is unpretentious and impertinent, viewing life as a staged performance that he may attend, applaud, or attack, just as he pleases. Benvenuto Cellini exemplifies this strategy, in the company of James Boswell, Benjamin Franklin, Sean O’Casey, and William Carlos Williams. These are representative examples only; certainly Montaigne, Pepys, Casanova, and Mark Twain would also qualify. Regardless of background or interests, all share a common preference for histrionics over dialectics, for acting instead of exhorting.

Critics have long accepted Cellini’s importance as an autobiographical type, but mostly for historical reasons. To one he represents the triumph of “Renaissance individualism,” unmatched in English autobiography before 1700 (praise that neglects Lord Herbert of Cherbury), but most assume that only soldiers, diplomats, and vagabonds fit this category, regardless of their literary talent. On more aesthetic grounds, others have called this mode “picaresque,” “active,” and “mixed,”8 stressing that characters, scenes, and events dominate the narrative, not ideas. Again, Frye provides alternative criteria in his “low mimetic” mode, where characters entertain their readers with

sensational adventures and boastful exploits (pp. 34-38). These swaggering heroes aggressively seek audiences, since society offers them the surest means of self-fulfillment. They are concrete, conventional types from whom two "narratives of probability" arise: realistic fiction and comic drama.

Our representative autobiographers exhibit strong traces of this theatrical character. Instead of dogma, they cherish idiosyncracy—not merely as a lesson to others, but also as a performance of their innate skills. Yet performers are never self-sufficient; they must always obey the dictates of audiences, whose responses justify their craft. Each autobiographer thus functions in a double capacity, as artist and public servant: Cellini is a sculptor and soldier; Boswell, a writer and lawyer; Franklin, a satirist and statesman; O’Casey, a playwright and politician; Williams, a poet and doctor. Each balances the demands of self and society, moving easily between isolation and involvement, recalling his life for both private pleasure and public purpose. Apparently he understands the paradox of dramatic action, that an "actor" like Hamlet—or Parmegiano—can hold up the mirror to reality, faking a role to learn the truth. The dramatic autobiographer plays so many roles, from naif to schemer, that his exact identity is often a mystery. Franklin does speak smugly of his early success, but then ironically mocks his own fatuity: "In reality, there is, perhaps, no one of our natural passions so hard to subdue as pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself; you will see it, perhaps, often in this history; for even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my humility." Boswell also hides behind masks, most of them in the London Journal only confirming his buffoonish naiveté. But we know that he wrote the Journal carefully, inventing roles both for narrative appeal and as apprentice versions of his biographical personae, the simple toady and his Great Bear.

A puzzling mixture of fakery and truth, the dramatic autobiographer is equally divided between personal and cultural motives.

Cellini opens his book with a bold announcement:

It is true enough that men who have worked hard and shown a touch of genius have already proved their worth to the world. They have shown that they are capable men, and they are famous, and perhaps that should be sufficient. Still, I must do as I find others do, and so I intend to tell the story of my life with a certain amount of pride. There are many kinds
of conceit, but the chief one is concern to let people know what a very ancient and gifted family one descends from.

Yet for all his swagger, Cellini is no simple egotist—always his "ancient and gifted family" receives its proper due. He thanks those who helped him, admits his failures, and even praises superior artists, like Michelangelo. He also insists on analogies between himself and the century, noting that both arrived in 1500 and thereafter shared a mutual history, including plagues, wars, and popes. Even Cellini's personality—robust yet sensitive, violent and gifted—emulates that paradoxical era; in every respect he is The Renaissance Florentine, archetypal emissary of an entire culture. The other writers also have these historical dimensions: Franklin and Boswell represent "frontier" cultures, America and Scotland; O'Casey suggests that his unhappy childhood was also the tragedy of Ireland. Yet unlike the orators, this strategy derives its power from an apparent unconsciousness. The performers remain "in character" at all times; like Hogarth, they keep a stack of Great Books on hand but spare us any lame recitals—a concession to the audience that always wins applause.

This concoction of private and public motives certainly complicates the autobiographers' claims to "truth." They are all shameless liars and impersonators, slipping into disguises whenever, like Boswell, they need to walk some midnight Strand. But they dissemble obviously, with that disarming candor that is honest about its own deceit. The dramatic autobiographer also writes inclusively, compiling details to create a literal—not allegorical—version of life. At times these details help us to sense the truth, even when the writer cannot. In a famous passage, Cellini describes an allegedly supernatural event: "From the time I had my vision till now, a light—a brilliant splendor—has rested above my head, and has been clearly seen by those very few men I have wanted to show it to. It can be seen above my shadow, in the morning, for two hours after the sun has risen; it can be seen much better when the grass is wet with that soft dew; and it can also be seen in the evening, at sunset." As J. A. Symonds first observed, Cellini's account is so detailed—down to time, place, and atmosphere—that modern readers can recognize his halo to be an optical illusion. In effect, we correct his convexity with a concave glass, and so the uncensored story remains true to both Cellini's role and his audience's sensibilities—like a good piece of stage business, it is art and nature conjoined.

An easy balance between extremes also characterizes the dramatic autobiographer's literary technique. His style contrives not to prove, but to portray a colloquial, conversational, and apparently spontaneous
mind. This idiom is hardly accidental, since it accurately conveys a variety of effects. With a master like O'Casey, language produces whole characters, scenes, and cultures:

—Be God, said the man with the wide watery mouth and the moustache drooping over it like a weeping willow, as he turned his head to speak to all in general, be God, they haven't spared any expense to turn Dublin into a glittherin' an' a shinin' show!

—It's a shinin' sight to the eye that wants to see it so, said the conductor, with a bite in his voice; but to the Irish eye that sees thre, it's but a grand gatherin' o' candles, lit to look sthrong, an' make merry over the corpse of our country.

Of course, O'Casey wrote plays for a living, but the others also understand the principles of dramaturgy. They fabricate dialogue, shift scenery, arrange for lights and music—Boswell even writes scripts for his characters, complete with line tags and actor's cues. Their narrative devices are equally theatrical: Cellini modestly permits the Pope to marvel at his talent (choric response), Franklin highlights his wisdom by conversing with fools (analogous action). Boswell excels at recalling the significant conversation, O'Casey works entirely in that medium, and even Dr. Williams stages some effective scenes—in one, he delivers a three-hundred-pound woman of twins!

As in drama, the function of this narrative mode is to stress spectacle, the visible and pictorial aspects of life. Action, not exposition, becomes the author's principal tool, so his persona usually blurs its narrator and protagonist roles into one. Hogarth reminds us of this device, with a "Line of Beauty and Grace" abruptly linking him to his dog. That unity also support the autobiographer's narrative structure, which follows certain dramatic principles. One is that circumstances will change, but not characters. Boswell and Franklin both depict their personal growth, from naiveté to maturity, yet each life unfolds like a well-made play, according to the unities of time, place, and action. The important fact is each author's consistency—within those multiple impersonations, his irony, virtue, or artistry remain essentially intact, guiding him to an appropriate destiny. Thus Cellini tells his story as a succession of projects, from a tiny silver piece to the great bronze of Perseus, which consistently dramatize his growing talent.

On the back of his Perseus, Cellini wrought a secret self-image, which to most eyes seems only part of the statue's design (figure 5). Cellini's

9 The Life of Benvenuto Cellini, tr. J. A. Symonds (New York, 1889), pp. xxii-xxv.
exact purpose remains obscure; we know only that he and Perseus continue to avoid Medusa's enchanting gaze.\textsuperscript{10} We should take this emblem as a warning, and move cautiously while assessing the dramatic autobiographer's themes. His life lacks the vocational consistency of an orator's; with his multiple talents he is equally disposed to art or public life. So he does both, making jewels and defending forts, writing poems and removing tonsils.

If everything in life serves the artist, then he will value his native soil as highly as his personal talent. The dramatic autobiographer always pays special tribute to his earthly locale, whether Florence, Dublin, or Paterson. But he never bows to superior forces; for he is superior who acts his part well, at a given time and place upon the stage of life. His commitment is solely to life, so he never speaks of death at the close of his book. A play cannot end with its final curtain; in another performance it will always come to life again.

To many readers, Cellini and company only half succeed as autobiographers. Pascal acknowledges their charm and vigor, but characterizes their lack of reflection as "superficial." Lord Richard Butler admires the emphasis on action, yet notes that too much leads to simple memoirs, or "allobioGRAPHY." David Levin responds well to Franklin's subtle irony, but—fearing less careful readers—finds the book "limited in pedagogical method."\textsuperscript{11} But we must recognize that Franklin and the others are not teachers—they are actors, operating in the apparent reality of theatrical illusion. To understand their meaning, readers can turn only to these visible works, which hold the clues that may unlock their authors' intricate and often profound riddles.

IV. Autobiography as Poetry

Two famous artists, Rembrandt and Van Gogh, introduce us to a third autobiographical strategy. In his lifetime Rembrandt painted over a hundred self-portraits, seventy of them full studies. Viewed as a whole, they form a serial image, like frames in a strip of movie film. In these three examples (figures 6-8), Rembrandt's self-estimate alters as he ages, first vain (1631), then fanciful (1650), finally somber (1661), and viewers may share in the movement of his discoveries.

\textsuperscript{10} For discussion, see Tutta L'\textipa{O}pera del Cellini (Milan, 1955), p. 44 and plates 46-49.

Van Gogh also painted numerous self-portraits, many as a form of therapy. In these two symbolic studies of his psyche (figures 9 and 10), one oriental, the other rustic, every detail—pose, frame, color, line—is a clue to his shifting, troubled investigation. With both artists the important element is uncertainty—they ask themselves no consistent questions, find no clear answers, and so continue to revise their self-portraits. Unable to take an overview, they create a series of tentative pictures, each more inconclusive than the last. The artists have neither preached nor performed; theirs is the poetic act of continuing self-study.

Poetic autobiographers can also draw only tentative, experimental self-portraits. They share equally strong doubts, especially about their current state of mind. Uncertain of the present, they study the past for some explanation of their later difficulties. They are a moody, unpredictable lot, strongly critical of themselves and others, committed only to the right to change their ideas. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is the premier example of this strategy; his later followers include Henry Thoreau, Walt Whitman, William Butler Yeats, and James Agee. Again, these names are only representative—Goethe, Wordsworth, and Henry James could also be added. All are post-Romantic writers, tacitly sharing in that era’s symbolist definition of “poetry” (the expression of fleeting, ineffable sensations), and many are American—perhaps, as Sayre has suggested, because identity is an acutely puzzling problem on these shores.12

Critics have acknowledged Rousseau’s distinctive form of autobiography, but again for limited purposes. He is praised for his obsessive and contradictory self-consciousness, more bluntly labeled as “incredible paranoia.” Readers less interested in neurosis have called similar autobiographies “critical,” “narrative,” and “elegiac,”13 taking as respective models anthropology, fiction, and poetry. Frye enlarges the final option by defining an “ironic” mode (pp. 324-25), where the author, not fully understanding himself, turns from his audience, suppresses moral judgments, and refuses to say what he means—or mean what he says. From his concealment, a paradox emerges: he writes solely for himself, in the lyric genre, but the hero of his book is its reader, who alone can master its final form.

13 Peyre, pp. 86-97; Stephen Shapiro, “The Dark Continent of Literature: Autobiography,” Comparative Literature Studies, 5 (1968), 432; Gusdorf, La Decouverte de Soi, Ch. iii; Shumaker, pp. 185-213; Sayre, pp. 202-08.
Our poetic autobiographers all seem equally paradoxical: they are "difficult" men, given to intellectual brooding and sharp critical dissent, searching always for private discoveries, uncertain of the proper course to follow. Indeed, they alter course frequently, beginning with motives that fail to pan out: Rousseau and Yeats seek their "true" pasts, Thoreau explains everything in terms of money, Whitman and Agee doom their books to failure. Eventually, these motives change—a fact that strongly influences their autobiographical character. When a writer does not fully understand his purpose, he can only portray himself as a serial image; his reader has to provide the missing continuity. Keats tells us that the poetical character has no ego, only negative capability, the power to be "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." In poetic autobiography this power operates at cross purposes with the genre, denying its traditional function of self-esteem but supplying a new measure of anxiety and dislocation that, ironically, post-Romantic readers find especially gratifying.

Given their authorial uncertainty, we must puzzle over how well these accounts record "the truth." Certainly, they seem not very true to the conventional aims of poetry, pleasure and instruction. Yet for each man, "truth" is a major preoccupation: Rousseau searches obsessively for his own "true self," Thoreau wants to "drive life into a corner," Agee vainly hopes to capture "a portion of unimagined existence." Consequently, their stories are all-inclusive in scope, rich with profuse detail. A slender book like Yeats's *Reveries* actually seems larger than Augustine's *Confessions*, for Yeats discusses art, politics, science, and religion, while Augustine treats mostly religion. If a poetic autobiographer lacks conviction, he at least permits us to witness his continuing experiments, successful or no.

This de-emphasis on control creates problems as we consider matters of literary technique. Symbolist poetry is not an ideal model for prose narratives, but we can hardly deny that Whitman and Yeats narrate under the influence of their poetry. Their technical devices seem less artificial than Augustine's, because they work for seemingly uncontrived effects, appropriate to an immediate context. Thoreau's description of "the scenery of Walden," for example, gradually becomes a complex, carefully wrought analogy for the human personality, yet never once does he violate the pond's physical reality: "It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature." Meaning is not imposed upon facts, it emerges from them—slowly, organically, as the ideas and images seem to find each other.

Since each of these autobiographers actually wrote verse, we have
some justification for finding "poetic" devices in their prose. Sustained analysis of sample passages would undoubtedly reveal experiments with diction, rhythm, or imagery comparable to those in *Leaves of Grass* or *The Tower*. Certainly, their language fits Coleridge's definition of poetry, "the best words in the best order," and his injunction that the purpose of poetic language is primarily aesthetic, not didactic. If not metrical, the language is rhythmical; it abounds with figures of speech and suggests meanings without explaining them to death. Agee is the most "poetical" prose stylist of them all, as his passage on the retiring Gudger family may indicate:

... and George's groused, sleepy voice, and hers to him, no words audible; and the shuffling; and a twisting in beds, and grumbling of weak springs; and the whimpering sinking, and expired; and the sound of breathing, strong, not sleeping, now, slowed, now, long, long, drawn off as lightest thinnest edge of bow, thinner, thinner, a thread, a filament; nothing; and once more that silence wherein more deep than starlight this home is foundered.

Working here as a poetic neologist, Agee has found and shaped words that recapture his experiences and give them an entirely new significance, both to himself and to readers. His failure to control this sorcery eventually becomes Agee's tragic theme; but the style still fascinates readers and compels them to share in his agony.

These broad resources directly influence the narrative manner and form of a poetic autobiography. The narrators are less argumentative and entertaining than other types; one of their special passions is description—the ice at Walden, an Alabama cabin—arranged in long and intensely imagined catalogues. The persona remains fairly stable during these passages, separating into narrator-protagonist roles only in the story's final stages, as changes in attitude become more apparent. But finding structure in these stories remains a major difficulty, since even their authors usually cannot see any overall patterns. So the reader shares the journey and charts its direction, noting any changes of course that may suggest progress. Rousseau writes with power and conviction of his youth, then stumbles into frantic delusions about his public career. Whitman moves in the opposite direction, from a hasty "synopsis" of early life to "authentic glints, specimen days" of his life as America's outsetting bard.

Yeats offers the best example of unpremeditated structure. He begins his *Reveries* assuming that childhood was an unhappy time, largely because of his father—a curious man, half disciplinarian and half iconoclast. So Yeats admires most his grandfather, a mysterious and
seemingly all-powerful figure who dominated the entire family. But in the course of writing Reveries, Yeats comes to see his father anew, recognizing him as a source of ideas and tastes. Even the poet's aesthetic—freedom within order—mirrors his father's contradictory character. Exactly halfway through his narrative, Yeats pauses for a reestimate: “Looking backwards, it seems to me that I saw his mind in fragments, which had always hidden connections I only now begin to discover.” That discovery made, the grandfather gradually loses his magical powers until, in the book's final scene, he dies pathetically, amid servants quarreling over his personal effects. Youth and its fantasies die with him, or so the narrator believes. But Yeats gives his story a final puzzling twist:

For some months now I have lived with my own youth and childhood, not always writing indeed but thinking of it almost every day, and I am sorrowful and disturbed. It is not that I have accomplished too few of my plans, for I am not ambitious; but when I think of all the books I have read, and of the wise words I have heard spoken, and of the anxiety I have given to parents and grandparents, and of the hopes that I have had, all life weighed in the scales of my own life seems to me a preparation for something that never happens.

Yeats defines here, as best he can, an enigmatic theme that haunts all of the poetic autobiographers. He compares “all life” (a weight) with “my own life” (a scales) and finds a disparity between them. His figure implies the need for suspension and balance, but instead he finds an essential inequity, “a preparation for something that never happens.” The passage suggests an important paradox, that part and whole, self and others, must merge—even though diametrically opposed. The other writers repeat this discovery, beginning with selfish and partial motives, ending with a need for others in order to be whole. Most sense this need clearly; but Rousseau is confused by his changes since youth, and so insists that readers will misinterpret him: “If anyone knows anything contrary to what I have here recorded, though he prove it a thousand times, his knowledge is a lie and an imposture.” Forever bound to his own idea of a “true self,” Rousseau cannot see the pattern as it actually appears to readers.

An important difference among the three autobiographical strategies emerges from this discussion: Augustine and Cellini write books that either prove or depict a similar unity, but only Rousseau and his followers can reveal it currente. To them, vocation is more than a “calling” or public duty, but the creative act that autobiography itself demands. Writing a book becomes their means of fulfillment, for it
assures them that the controlling force in life is neither God nor man alone, but the imagination, where both of those powers are constantly potential. So each book remains as inconclusive as Rembrandt’s self-portraits, without a definite end, expressing more than simple thoughts of life and death. Only the process of becoming is essential; if the book reveals that process, it endures, like a poem, forever.

Most readers feel that the poetic strategy is autobiography’s finest effort, the “voyage of discovery” that Pascal values so highly. He finds in Rousseau the beginning of a new era in literary history, in which authors turn from genre traditions to themselves as centers of meaning and form. But that view exaggerates the extent to which autobiographical poets actually understand their meaning and form. Their principal virtue is freedom from traditional aesthetics, from the limits of argument and convention affecting most other autobiographers. The price of this liberty is a reader’s eternal vigilance, since he must assume certain authorial obligations—an exciting transaction, surely, but not a little presumptive and even self-indulgent. For no matter how closely we peer into their self-portraits, we can never see beyond the autobiographers’ mirrored reflections. As Yeats discovered, beneath their masks of benign serenity writers labor always in cold and despairing isolation: “I braved Taylor again and again as one might a savage animal as a test of courage, but always found him worse than my expectation. I would say, quoting Mill, ‘Oratory is heard, poetry is overheard.’ And he would answer, his voice full of contempt, that there was always an audience; and yet, in his moments of lofty speech, he himself was alone no matter what the crowd.”

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