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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF FRANCIS PLACE

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Note: Place composed separate chapter summaries for most chapters of the manuscript. The present list is an editorial compilation from these half-title pages which Place inserted before each chapter.

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INTRODUCTION[1]

Whether the following narrative may or may not be of any Importance must be left to the decision of others. It has been began in consequence of the repeatedly expressed wishes of several of my friends who have been more or less acquainted with me for years; and particularly by two among my most esteemed friends Mr Jeremy Bentham and Mr James Mill. Many circumstances of our lives have occasionally been subjects of conversation, and many have been the importunities of these especial friends that I would write out at length my own account of myself. Thus urged I have commenced and it is my present intention to continue, thus; write some portion every day, and devote as much time as I can spare to it every day for the purpose of enabling me to write correctly. Benjamin Franklin says, "I have come to the resolution to proceed in that work." (his own memoirs) "tomorrow and to continue it daily 'till finished" My Old friend Thomas Holcroft also put off the writing of his memoirs 'till tomorrow, unfortunately tomorrow never came to either Franklin or Holcroft, and the world has been deprived of much valuable information and some amusement.

I intend, not, to wait 'till tomorrow but to go on steadily, to give the best account I can of my parentage, for ancestors so far as my knowledge extends I have none. To relate many particulars of my early life, and especially those which appear to me to have influenced me in after life; I shall put down from memory such circumstances as may appear to me worth notice and shall carefully inquire respecting them of every person I can discover who may be able to give me correct information, to remove doubts or supply facts. This portion of my work will have especial reference to my youthful days, since from the time I became a man, the incidents of my life are too strongly marked to admit of much mistake, and the means of verification and correction can be much more easily

[1] In the upper right-hand corner of this page (numbered f. 23 in Place's original manuscript) Place put the following note, obviously not intended for publication: 'Written in August. 1823. Re-written in August. 1833. The first MS – being only a rough draft.'

Two folios previously, Place had pasted an unidentified newspaper clipping of about eight hundred words, titled 'Trusting to Ourselves.' It starts, 'There is a duty of an important nature which we have to perform towards society; and that is, we must trust to ourselves. We have each been endowed with reason to guide us, and hands to work; why, then, unless prostrated with bodily disease, or some other infirmity, should we think of leaning upon others for support or assistance?' The article ends with the recommendation to let a person 'begin at the bottom, and he will be all the better fitted for his place when he reaches it, by having fought his way up through the lower stages.'

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made[.] I shall carefully avail myself of all the living information I can procure, and shall be able to be precise in many dates from written and printed papers.

Whether my story in *all* its particulars be one which ought to be plainly told, or whether some parts be improper to be laid before the public I leave to my sucessors to determine, You (, some of my most intimate and well informed friends have said,) "you seem to have been brought up in a school whence no good could seem to have resulted, no good predicated, No benevolent feelings could have been expected, No wisdom, no virtue, no large views of any subject no advancement of understanding, none in life, seem to follow from such a condition as yours, and we should very much like to see, as it appears to be your duty to let us see in writing, all the incidents relating to yourself as they occurred from your earliest infancy to the present time, that we and others may know how it happened that you succeeded in the many ways you have succeeded; how you obtained the command you have of yourself and hence the command you have over so many others in such varied circumstances as we have witnessed. The causes of these effects if fairly and honestly and fully stated will be both amusing and instructive." Such are the arguments my most esteemed friends have used, and these with my own have induced me to commence this work, which I trust I shall carry on with equal diligence and honesty until I have fully and faithfully written all that seems to me to deserve even such notice as my own egotism may induce me to think will be read without the merited reproof of trifling with the readers time, or wearing out his patience.

My friend James Mill is no flatterer, For the correctness of this assertion I can safely appeal to all who know him; wrote thus to my second daughter in october 1817. She had been on a visit to me at Ford Abbey in Devonshire then rented by Mr Bentham; where I had been two months, and where Mr Mill and his family resided during the summer and autumnal months. My daughter was governess to a young lady the daughter of Mr Greatheed of Langford Lodge about half way between Southampton and Salisbury. A correspondence had taken place between her and Mr Mill, and in a letter from Mr Mill to her on several subjects and especially in reply to some questions respecting intellectual attainments, Mr Mill says, "there is however the less for me or for any one to do, in the way of instruction, that you have had an instructor of no ordinary excellence, I mean your father, who is one of the most extraordinary men I have ever known. When I think of the unfavourable circumstances in which for the first twenty or rather thirty years of his life he was placed for acquiring knowledge or any good habits whatever, and now find his mind stored with knowledge to an extent few possess,

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full of acuteness ingenuity and force, a good husband a good father, a good friend, a good patriot, benefitting hundreds, and exerting himself to benefit all, I cannot easily tell you how much I admire him, and how happy I account you in being his daughter."

If this be correct, if indeed it be correct to a very limited extent, I ought to have no hesitation in complying with the desires of my friends and telling the true story of myself.

To the charge which will be made against me of Egotism, I at once, and before hand plead guilty. No man ever wrote about himself without being an egotist, in the common acceptation of the word. I am indeed no enemy to egotism in any man in whom it does not amount to insolence, when it is not obtrusive, annoying or mischievous. No man ever wrote about himself who did not think well of himself, and that too whether or not the actions he narrated were such as a good man ought to be pleased with, or such as are frivolous or contemptible or wicked. Be they either good or wicked,[1] still the writer however erroneously must have a good opinion of himself, must applaud his own conduct, must be pleased with his own notion of his own wisdom or cunning and must suppose that other men will be disposed to judge as favourably him, upon the whole nearly as favourably as he has judged himself. It would however be a prodigy were any man to lay himself fully open in all respects, and no good could arise from such an exposure if truly and fully made, even by the most virtuous man that ever lived. Such an account would be about equally, monotonous tiresome and loathsome, of this any man who has acquired the faculty of tracing back his own thoughts and impartially reviewing them may convince himself, a daily reckoning for one week, accurately kept and made up, could scarcly be comtemplated with *pleasure** by any man. If it be admitted that a man really understands the motives which govern him; which very few men do, it may still be reasonably doubted that he has examined himself so closely and so carefully as to be able to make a full statement of his own thoughts and actions correctly, add to which that this kind of knowledge comes to no man early in life. None need therefore be surprised at the errors which even the most honest and best qualified to judge of themselves are sure to commit when writing their own memoirs. This is not said by way of apology for any thing this memoir may contain. It is simply a statement of the circumstances in which they who write about themselves are

[1] Place wrote the word 'evil' over this word.

* I doubt much, and that too, after much pains taking as well in observing myself and others, and comparing my own with the experience of some clever men, that any man is *conscious* of all he thinks at any interval after he has been thinking, and scarcly any one who is conscious of his own thoughts in the order in which they occur. That is, has the power of recognizing them to their full extent.

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placed, and no one who chuses to write his own memoirs has or can have any claim for indulgence, should he at any time put his M.S.S. in the form of a book before the public – He knows the conditions under which his book must appear and as he is not obliged to make the book but may abstain from it if he pleases, he can have no reasonable ground of complaint, if men as wise or wiser than himself condemn it, or treat both the book and the author with contumely.

In many instances I shall insert the names and other designations of persons alluded to, that whoever may have the care of this M.S. may see the situation and rank in life of these persons, and may thus be the better able to make accurate comparisons with persons of the same description at the time when it may be published In some cases as using names might be mischievous, and disagreeable to the descendants of some of the persons named, so the witholding of the names may be advisable, the editor stating in notes why he has witheld the names.*

[1]Two writers have recently characterized Self written Biography one favourably the other unfavourably, one has treated the subject philosophically and generally, the other practically, popularly and sarcastically.

The first is Jeremy Bentham, in his work entitled – *Not Paul but Jesus.* s. 8. p 110.[2] The section is headed thus.

"Self Written Biography.

Its superior value and claim to credence.

On the occasion of this portion of history, it seems particularly material to bring to view an observation, which on the occasion of every[3] portion of history, it will, it is believed be of no small use to have in remembrance.

* It is said and I believe truly that in the life of Gibbon – (Lord Sheffield told it to Mr Wakefield) and also in the memoirs of others as well women as men, letters have been witheld and passages omitted which would not only have strongly marked the character of the party but also that of the times. This is a fraud which ought to be discountenanced as much as possible, the reader has a false impression put upon him, which nothing can justify. The letters suppressed in the life of Gibbon relate to his infidelity, which is notwithstanding darkly hinted at in some places and made manifest in others. In the life and correspondance of more than one lady similar frauds have been committed because the manners of what is called good society, would be shocked by the *disclosures*, which would mark the spirit of the age the more clearly.

1 Before this sentence Place parenthetically added: '28 November. 1826[.] The following passages have been interpolated'

2 1823. Place had a hand in the production of this book (Wallas, p. 84n).
This quotation, like the others in the autobiography, contains errors, most of them minor changes in punctuation and capitalization. These errors are noted only if they distort the meaning of the original work.

3 Place originally wrote in the word 'any.'

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In comparison with self written Biography, scarcly does any other Biography deserve the name.

Faint, indeterminate, uninstructive, deceptive, is the information furnished by any other hand, of whatsoever concerns the state of the mental frame, in comparison with what is furnished by a mans own. – Even of those particulars which make against himself, – even of those motives and intentions which he would most anxiously conceal, – more clear and correct, as far as it goes, if not more complete, – is the information given by him, than that which is commonly offered even by an impartial hand. By a mans own hand not unfrequently is information afforded, of a sort which makes against itself himself, and which would not,[1] have been afforded by any other hand, though ever so hostile. He states the self condemnatory mental facts, the blindness of self partiality concealing from his eyes the condemnatory inference, or even if his eyes be open, he lays himself under the imputation: of bartering merit in this or that inferior shape, for the merit of candour, or the hope of augmenting the probative force of his own self serving evidence, in favour of every other merit for which it is his ambition to gain credence."

N.B. This is the whole section.

The second is a writer in the *Quarterly Review*. vol 35 published on the 28 Dec. 1826 in page 148 commences an article on Autobiography. Ten works are named in the title of the article, and a severe censure is passed on most of them provoked by the disclosures of some of them of the private conduct of families to which the writers have been admitted, It observes that,

"the only legitimate object of the private autobiographer is to give the public the cream of his personal experience, and a fair enough test by which to try the merits of any work of this class is afforded, if we extract from it, in the form of simple propositions the moral and intellectual lessons it contains, and compare their importance, when thus distinctly presented to the minds eye, with the quality of the matter[2] from which they have been sifted. The tree is known by its fruit. (p. 157.)

"Few good men[3] – none of the very highest order, have chosen to paint themselves otherwise than indirectly, and through the shadows of imaginary forms, the secret workings of their own minds, nor is it likely that genius will ever be found altogether divested of this proud modesty, unless in the melancholy case of its being tinged as in Rousseau with insanity. There was therefore little danger of our having too much autobiography, as long as no book had much chance of popularity which was not written with some considerable portion of talent, or at least by a person of some considerable celebrity in one way or another. But the circle of readers has widened strangely in these times, and while an overwhelming preponderance among them[4] tempts one class of

[1] The original text of Bentham reads, 'which would not, because it could not, have been afforded . . .'
[2] The original reads, 'quantity of matter.'
[3] Original: 'Few great men.'
[4] Original: 'preponderance of vulgarity among them.'

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writers to the use of materials which, in older times they would have held themselves far above, a still more disgusting effect is, that it emboldens beings who, at any period, would have been mean and base in all their objects and desires to demand with hardihood the attention and the sympathy of mankind, for thoughts and deeds,[1] in any other period than the present, must have been as obscure as dirty. The mania for this garbage of Confessions and Recollections, and Reminiscenses, and Aniliana, is indeed a vile symptom. It seems as if the ear of the grand impersonation the reading public,[2] had become as filthily prurient as that of an eves dropping laquey.

"If this voluntary degradation be persisted in, the effects of it will, ere long be visible elsewhere than in literature. An universal spirit of suspicion will overspread the intercourse of society, and no class of persons will suffer more that [i.e. than] that which found easy access in former days to circles much above their station, in virtue of their beleif[3] that their garrulity was not at the least the veil of a calculating curiosity, and that however poor their wit might be, they were capable of receiving kindness and condescension, without any notions of turning a penny by the systematic record of privacies too generously exposed."

They who treacherously note and publish the conversations of private life, the facts and circumstances which they themselves have noticed or have taken on trust from the relations of others. They who thus purposely to increase the desire for slander which always depraves those who receive gratification from such anecdotes and narratives as cannot fail to cause uneasiness, mortification and unhappiness in families deserve even something more than the censure of the reviewer. He has however exceeded this just condemnation, he has exhibited his own ill humour, and want of the philosophy he condemns in others, as is but too common in even the best informed and best disposed of the practised reviewers. He is an exclusive, and an advocate for exclusives. Some few persons have betrayed the hospitable, or friendly, or patronizing notice of others, and he would therefore have *all* who are rich and proud become more misanthropic than *some* of them are. His purpose is the exclusion of all but equals in wealth, rank, and circumstance, from all association with those who possess these requisites of power. If men, and especially they who deserve the reputation of being literary men, were as independent in disposition as they ought to be there could be no such exclusions as he recommends, If men who have particular acquirements, had the independence which all admire and few possess, they would neither wish to have, nor would they accept invitations which necessarily fail to put them on an equality with those who receive them as humble friends. They who become associates as humble friends, to whom an

[1] Original: 'for thoughts and deeds, that . . .'
[2] Original: 'the ear of that grand impersonation, "the Reading Public."'
[3] Original: 'of the general belief.'

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invitation is a favour, and a degradation, have little cause of complaint of any treatment which may result from their meanness, but they who make a bad use of what they receive and consider a favour, and then betray the small portion of confidence reposed in them, deserve something more of castigation than the censure of the reviewer.

It is hardly necessary except to prevent disappointment to say, that he who expects to receive gratification from any thing in these memoirs approximating to the conduct which has been reprobated will not be gratified with any such details. The principal source of attraction is therefore cut off, and all such persons may close the volume here.

OBJECTIONS ANTICIPATED AND EXAMINED[1]

Should these memoirs be published, many will object to parts of them, and that too on various grounds. Some will think that I ought to have concealed the frailties and vices of my father. Some that I ought to have suppressed many particulars relating to myself and especially those of my youth. Others will condemn my speculative opinions, and some will be offended at my political opinions. To these I reply in anticipation, that if there be really any use in writing these memoirs, if the knowledge they may perchance convey of the change of manners and the increase of intellect be worth knowing, they can alone be made so by telling the truth however agreeable or disagreeable it may be. I have risen by my own efforts to a comparative state of affluence and importance, have obtained, and secured the respect and confidence of a considerable number of persons of whom any one may justly be proud, have among my friends some of the best and wisest men in the world, and could if I chose increase the number, among men of rank, literature and science to a great extent. This I do not however think advisable, as it would compel me to incur expenses incompatible with my habits and inimical to the welfare of my large family. I should also lose more information in the time it would destroy, than I should gain in other ways. I may say that I have attained my present position *solely*, by my own exertions, excepting the wholesome operation of one mans intellect upon another mans intellect. My boyhood was like that of most boys in my rank of life, very different indeed from what it is now among boys of the same class, but from the moment I resolved to be married and that it will be seen was at a very early age, I left off every thing which could in any way tend to impede my future progress in the world, or was in any way calculated to bring deserved reproach upon me or was likely to compel

[1] This section is dated 'Nov. 8. 1823.'

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