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Excerpt

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Introduction

But in order to make
you understand, to give
you my life, I must
tell you a story.

Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*.

Autobiographers give their lives to be understood by others in a dangerously elaborate form. They gather us around them to hear their story confidentially out, yet tell it by a means so strikingly formal as to produce in us a critical reserve complicating if not downright destructive of the intimacy they are inviting. Consider the pathetic instance of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the manuscript of *Rousseau juge de Jean Jacques*, the three tormented dialogues in which he set out to defend his character against the calumnies of those whom he believed were plotting his ruin. The manuscript complete, its author attempted to deposit a fair copy of it on the high altar of Notre Dame, with an appeal to Providence to keep it safe from his enemies so that it might one day be read and taken to heart by a 'better generation' than his own. But the way in to the choir of the cathedral was locked, and Rousseau confided his manuscript instead to the *abbé* de Condillac, someone whom he thought sufficiently uncorrupt to act as its trustee. Two weeks later Rousseau returned, hoping to find that Condillac had read the Dialogues and been won over by them to the side of their author and of the Truth concerning him. But Condillac was not the ideal reader whom Rousseau had been desperate to find:

Nothing of what I had foreseen occurred. He spoke to me of what I had written as he would have spoken to me about a work of literature which I had asked him to examine so as to tell me his opinion of it. He spoke of the transpositions to be made which would improve the order of the subject-

matter; but he said nothing to me about the effect my work had had on him nor of what he thought about its author.¹

The experience is one which Rousseau had suffered once before, when giving public readings from his *Confessions*: the audience that should have been moved by them, in harmony with his own feelings as their author, had failed lamentably to respond, the literary medium having interposed itself as a fatal barrier to the emotional togetherness he had been craving. And so with Condillac also, the ill-chosen trustee, who receives indifferently as literature what had been offered to him as the anguished justification of a life. It is Rousseau himself who tells the story of his manuscript, and not ironically, in recognition that his actions had been perhaps unreasonable, but self-pityingly, as further evidence that he is the man of virtue and sincerity exiled in a vicious and unfeeling world.

The theorist of autobiography must take on the inhumane role of a Condillac: the autobiographers parade their lives before him one after another, as individuals asking to be understood, but instead of yielding to them passively and in sympathy, the theoretically minded reader counters self-assertion with self-assertion, and conscripts them as illustrations in a rhetorical exposé of his own. A leading question then, appropriate to this liminal moment of my own removal as an author from a social to a textual setting: should we feel bad when we theorize about autobiography? Or, supposing all literary theory to have something unsociable about it, should we feel particularly bad when theorizing about autobiography? My answer, briefly, is yes, we should, we should sense in ourselves a discomfort that is specific to theorizing about autobiography, and is brought on by responding with the wariness of the theorist to a kind of writing which, more than any other, dreams of suppressing the distance between writer and reader.

But this sense of discomfort is not a reason for giving up the theoretical study of autobiography; quite the reverse, it is a feeling around which we might one day make a successful theory of autobiography to turn. For if autobiography does not lend itself comfortably to theorization, this means that it may have something

¹ See the 'Histoire du précédent écrit', an addendum to the three Dialogues in which the increasingly paranoid Rousseau describes the need he had felt to preserve them for posterity, so that one day the truth about him might be known. It can be found in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, Tome 1, edited by Bernard Gagnebin, Marcel Raymond and Robert Osmond (Paris, 1959), pp. 977–89.

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precious to tell us about the wider question of whether literary theory in general derives its present energy from the theorist's sense of himself as a defaulter from certain ideals of sociability. An autobiography is a text that seeks to draw us into itself without reservations and one which we are invited to read as being sanctioned by a 'metaphysics of presence', its formal nature being belied by the intimacy and truthfulness with which it seems to address us. In autobiography, if anywhere in literature, we are expected to sense that these are texts inhabited by a living person, that an author who was peculiarly present to himself while he was writing is now present to us as we read. Autobiography is the certificate of a unique human passage through time and the theorist who comes to it full of sceptical questions about its rhetorical nature knows that he is playing an unkind game; he is not as other, more charitable readers of autobiography.

Who but a theorist after all would read one autobiography after another, read, it may be, nothing but autobiographies for months on end, in the furtherance of his specialism? In the Preface to his attractive study of *Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood*, Richard N. Coe records having read 'some six hundred' primary sources during the eight years he was working on it.² That is a punishing programme, unthinkable for anyone but a theorist, who must proceed towards his general conclusions about the genre by induction from individual cases. The theorist's hypothetical Other, the Common Reader, does no such thing, because his interest in autobiography is exactly opposite. The term autobiography does not for him function as a count-noun. For the Common Reader an autobiography is not just one more contribution to a genre or to a future typology of autobiographical writing, but the unique self-presentation of Author X or Author Y, some public figure already known to him in part and about whom he wants to know more. The Common Reader does not normally read the autobiographies of authors of whom previously he has never heard. The theorist on the other hand may read them indiscriminately, in search of formal or textual variety, and thus of comprehensiveness.

The theoretical need is to locate generic sameness in a kind of writing which aims at imposing difference. Autobiographical theory

² Richard N. Coe, *When the Grass was Greener: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (New Haven and London, 1984), p. xiv.

has in fact to confront what the profoundly theoretical Paul de Man once declared to be the ‘disreputability’ of the genre, or ‘its incompatibility with the monumental dignity of aesthetic values’.³ In common with others who have reflected on the specific nature of autobiography, de Man doubts whether it constitutes a literary genre at all, given the apparent miscellaneousness and ‘self-indulgence’ of the forms in which the autobiographical project may be realized. But that is an issue on whose outcome rather little, practically, appears to hang; whether or not the autobiographies I have taken for my examples in the present book prove strictly congenerous, they are undeniably works of literature and sufficiently distinctive as such to be classed together. No one will deny that they are autobiographical. To a deconstructionist critic such as de Man, autobiography is an especially inviting literary kind because it purports to be so straightforwardly mimetic of life: it is charged with turning life into a Life. But the way from life to a Life lies through language and de Man argues that far from being restorative of the past as its practitioners and Common Readers would like it to be, autobiography can but mummify the past, the effects of language being necessarily ‘privative’ in putting rhetoric in place of reality. De Man’s is a frigid (and insufficiently explicit) argument, and one which few even among theorists could feel happy with, so far does it go in asserting the constitutional inability of autobiography to deliver genuine self-knowledge; but his essay is not to be ignored, since in warning us against any facile assumptions of the transparency of autobiographical writing as a record of the past, it redirects our attention to its troublingly rhetorical nature.

Autobiography represents an effort made by those who write it at the integration of their past lives and present selves: the autobiographer wishes to stand forth in print in the form of a *whole*. According to de Man the rhetorical figure which presides over autobiography is that of *prosopopeia*, a Greek term translatable literally as a ‘face-making’ – the autobiographer attempts to create in words a ‘face’ by which we can tell him apart from others, and thus to pass from a merely verbal to a conclusively pictorial representation of himself. There is some truth in de Man’s assertion, but also much tendentious-

³ Paul de Man, ‘Autobiography as De-Facement’, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), p. 67.

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ness. It is true in so far as autobiography does indeed aspire to delineate the ‘features’ of his personal history and character which its author believes are his claim to distinction, so that his text can finally take the place of his person, as the tangible evidence of his identity. The argument is tendentious in that prosopopoeia is a rhetorical figure which endows abstractions with the power of ‘speech’ – as Dante employs it in his autobiographical *Vita nuova*, to enable Love to address him as if Love were a person. But the autobiographer qua human being is not an abstraction, he is someone who in life has had a *real* face; so to argue without qualification that autobiography is simply an extended exercise in prosopopoeia is to banish the living and suffering author from the scene too radically, as nothing more substantial than a projection of his rhetorical endeavours. We can agree that, in writing, an autobiographer does not so much put his name to his life-story as put his life-story to his name; or, should he be more drawn to self-portraiture than to narrative, that he provides for that name a psychological identity. Whether it be story or portrait – and all autobiographical stories are in practice part portrait, just as all self-portraits are in part story – autobiography wills the unity of its subject.

In demonstration of this simple thesis, I take an autobiography which is on the face of things more self-portrait than narrative, the *Ecce Homo* of Nietzsche, which has relatively little to say about the outward events of the philosopher’s life and much to say concerning the formation of his ideas and of the wholly singular, not to say superhuman being he believes himself to have become.⁴ But for all Nietzsche’s vatic flights and lyrical sermonizing, the narrative impulsion of his autobiography is paramount. *Ecce Homo* has the subtitle, ‘How one becomes what one is’, and the story which the autobiographer tells is of his own philosophical Becoming. Such a story ought logically to end in the stasis of Being, with the autobiographer shamming dead, as if any further change in himself were not to be thought of. That so many autobiographies have been written and then put aside, to be published only posthumously, suggests that autobiographers want the time that has intervened between the completion of their life-story and the completion of their life to be overlooked, it having led to no revision of the written record. Some autobiographers – of those I shall be concerned with here,

⁴ Nietzsche did not as a philosopher believe in ‘events’, looking on them as constructs of discourse, artificially isolated from out of the pure continuity of the life-process.

Charles Darwin most notably – preface their text with an assurance that writing as they are in old age their course is all but run and their character is fixed; they can honestly write as if they were dead – Darwin’s impersonation of a revenant perhaps conforms the closest to de Man’s model of autobiography as an extended prosopopoeia.

But no such funereal anticipation would be tolerated by Nietzsche, who writes as a vitalist, with a Dionysian moral to proclaim. He has not ceased from becoming because there is nothing for him to become, no substantial self that might be assumed as the product of the narrative process. As an autobiographical subject, he seeks to merge with his text, on the ground, given elsewhere in his writings, that ‘There is no “being” behind doing, effecting, becoming; “the doer” is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything ... our entire science still lies under the misleading influence of language and has not disposed of that little changeling, the “subject”’.⁵ *Ecce Homo* is none the less the tale of an unfolding. Its premiss is that in the early part of the narrator’s life his doings were without focus or point, his defining ‘life-task’ having not as yet revealed itself. There may be no fictitious ‘subject’ to be added a posteriori to his deeds, but these may now be seen as constitutive of the subject who writes, the ‘little changeling’ whose perspective on the past alters with every passing moment and who glories in accepting everything that has happened to him. The *amor fati* which Nietzsche takes for the creed of a manly, unrepining soul might at a less exalted level be taken also as the creed befitting an autobiographer, whose virtue lies in embracing in retrospect accidents that may have seemed painful and unmeaning at the time.

A precondition of autobiography is that there *is* something of the nature of a ‘life-task’ waiting to be revealed in the fullness of time and in the clear light of retrospection. Autobiography raises into consciousness whatever unconscious process the autobiographer accepts has brought him to his present condition. For the atheist Nietzsche, as for the Christian Augustine, confident that his conversion has been gradually effected by the secret operation of God’s grace, autobiography tells a tale of suspense, as it moves presciently closer to its appointed end:

⁵ *The Genealogy of Morals*, 1,13; but it is quoted here from Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge and London, 1985), p. 127. This superlative commentary on Nietzsche should be read by anyone with a theoretical interest in autobiography: my own debt to it is enormous.

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In the meantime the organizing ‘idea’ destined to rule grows and grows in the depths – it begins to command, it slowly leads *back* from sidepaths and wrong turnings, it prepares *individual* qualities and abilities which will one day prove themselves indispensable as means to achieving the whole – it constructs the *ancillary* capacities one after the other before it gives any hint of the dominating task, of the ‘goal’, ‘objective’, ‘meaning’. (65)⁶

The ‘dominating task’ which Nietzsche now knows had been allotted to him is nothing less than the ‘transvaluation of all values’. The bizarrely presumptuous title he found for his autobiography is explained by his bizarrely presumptuous ambition to be recognized as the Antichrist, or as the godless prophet whose teachings and example would cleanse the world of a decadent Christian morality. This is a ‘life-task’ of a size to exceed the capacities of any one individual to carry it out. But Nietzsche is not any one individual; like autobiographers in general, he is as a subject boldly expansive and contemptuous of the limitations of individuality. In *Ecce Homo* he dons at will the prophetic garb of his own literary creation, Zarathustra, the proud and vehement aphorist whose ample vision transcends all moral and philosophical contradictions – the desire to be seen to dwell alone in a grand independency, above all local allegiances, is one to be found expressed even in such gentlemanly and unNietzschean autobiographers as David Hume and Edward Gibbon. And like the volatile Rousseau of the *Confessions*, whose moods and actions are so erratic that he finds it hard to suppose he possesses anything as constricting as an identity, so Nietzsche celebrates the far-ranging fluctuations of his mental state, the sheer variety of which is a part of his Dionysian entitlement: ‘It is my sagacity to have been many things and in many places so as to be able to become *one person* – so as to be able to attain *one thing*’ (88).

Nietzsche is like Rousseau in another, and this time more vulnerable aspect also. Rousseau turned to autobiography in self-defence, and in the paranoid fancy that he was the subject of innumerable false reports; he wrote the hundreds of pages of the *Confessions*, the *Dialogues* and the *Réveries d’un promeneur solitaire* meaning to swamp all these false reports by a crazy profusion of truthful ones. Autobiographers need an excuse for indulging to the extent that they do in self-advertisement and Rousseau’s excuse was not new, his predecessors in the genre having all been more or less

⁶ Quotations are from the Penguin Classics edition, *Ecce Homo*, translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, 1979).

aware that they were writing in their own justification. A Nietzsche might seem not quite to fit in this tradition, no question of his right to be heard ever crossing his mind. But if his right to be heard is not in question, the readiness of the world to hear him is. In order to write *Ecce Homo* Zarathustra has had to swallow some of his pride, for the fact is that his teachings have so far gone unheeded. Despite his great vigour and productivity as an author, the despicable values of Christianity are still in place, they have not been transvalued; and his neglect by the world has naturally served to confirm him in his sense of solitude and of his uniqueness: 'But the disparity between the greatness of my task and the *smallness* of my contemporaries has found expression in the fact that I have been neither heard nor even so much as seen' (33). Yet this is as good as an admission that a book such as *Ecce Homo* should not have been needed, in order to mediate between his oeuvre and a public which is patently unfitted to have been offered it. As a corrective to the indifference with which his writings have been met, a volume of autobiography can but strike us as a desperate, even a sad expedient, for far from correcting it can only reinforce the deadly aestheticization of his redemptive message. The proud Nietzsche is in danger of descending into pathos.

Ecce Homo is autobiography with a purpose, even if the most that it might achieve would be to persuade those who read it to read others of the books that Nietzsche has written. These are themselves autobiographical 'events' whose continuity one with the next he establishes by the brief glosses he provides for them in his long third chapter, on 'Why I write such excellent books'. His books have been the principal 'deeds' of his life and Nietzsche represents his published oeuvre in narrative form, each successive volume now being given its place as a contribution to the whole, and the apparent diversity of their contents shown to be an illusion that has had to wait upon the retrospective moment to be revealed as such. (The autobiographical precedent for *Ecce Homo* in this respect is Goethe's *Poetry and Truth*, specifically written according to Goethe in answer to a friendly request to show how his bafflingly various oeuvre had come to be written.) Thus the unification of the oeuvre reflects and supports the unification of its author, in their joint coming to be what they presently are. But there unification must stop: the oneness of the author, supposing he has proved able to persuade us of it, does not entail the oneness of the person of whom the author is the agent. The textual Nietzsche is, like any other autobiographical subject, pre-

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sented as a 'character', constructed with a partly conscious and partly unconscious will to consistency, and a 'character' whose inconsistencies we shall ourselves be happy to recuperate, so desirous are we of finding our own integrity as persons reflected back at us by the autobiographical text.

The theorist, however, must bring that text out from under a too close tutelage of the life of which it is the representation. His loyalty is to the genre of which he is a connoisseur and he reads autobiographies not as gratifying evidence of how it is possible – or not – textually to establish one's coherence as a living entity, but in order to integrate them successively in whatever theoretical model of the genre he has been able to build, either as confirmation of its soundness, or else as proving the need to overhaul and complicate it. If we accept that the property rights of autobiography lie inalienably with the author, then what the theorist is set upon is an act of expropriation, or of dismemberment. He assumes that we can, with profit, distinguish the dance from the dancer, or the self as impersonal performance from the self as unique and transcendent originator of the text.

The theoretical task is to relate one autobiographical performance to others and to reclassify particular examples of autobiography radically as members one of another. Autobiographers themselves have learnt how to write from their own writing and reading, of history, or fiction, or (auto)biography; they have had to acquire the rules by which alone any narrative, or essay in self-presentation, can be sustained. But if they are themselves already generically adept when they set out to write, they do not write hoping to be read generically, as unexceptional new entrants on to an already crowded stage, to be used in illustration of some literary theoretical argument. Rather, they hope that by making us intent on the story which they have to tell, we shall accept as 'natural' the conventions they have adopted in order to tell it, so that it will strike us a failure of readerly decorum and fellow-feeling if we decide to switch our attention from the tale to the technique. There has never yet been an autobiography addressed to a readership of literary theorists, though who is to say that there never will be? Writing has become so self-conscious a business at this far end of the twentieth century that there may soon be autobiographers who see their role in terms of parody, or of the humorous exploitation of a literary genre practised over the centuries with what they adjudge to be too high a solemnity. Autobiography's

jaded theorist may well reflect that he has chosen to specialize in a kind of writing that were it not to be practised seriously would probably not be practised at all.

His tunnel vision faces the theorist with a serious dilemma in fixing the direction and bounds of his research: how far should he pursue the historical context of the autobiographies he reads? Autobiography does not report only on the inner life of its author, but on the commerce with the outside world by which that inner life has been conditioned. In some cases, the exchange between self and the society in which it has been formed is the writer's guiding theme: the autobiographies of Goethe and of John Stuart Mill are so constructed as to make their subject appear as the rarely capacious representative of his intellectual epoch, in all its manifold developments. Should the theorist then not try to provide himself with knowledge of that background independently of what the autobiographer has chosen to give, the better to appreciate the perspectival nature of the writer's account? Were the theorist in question swayed by the arguments of the New Historicism, then he would indeed feel obliged to take the cultural and historical context of a work such as Goethe's *Poetry and Truth* into account, in order to determine how this particular example of self-presentation compares with others that were being written at the same time, in the form of diaries, memoirs or full autobiographies, and even with current examples of self-portraiture in art. That would be a sound and rewarding method by which to formulate at least a topical theory of autobiographical writing.

It is a method, however, whose findings, like its pleasures, are more likely to be historical than theoretical. A theory so context-dependent as this scarcely deserves to be called a theory, and a theory of autobiography, if we are ever to have one, must be broad enough to account for all known examples of the genre whenever and wherever they were written. The theorist who is anxious to locate if he can the constants of autobiography has no chance of doing so if he dallies too long over any one autobiographical work. Having resisted the temptation to compromise his theoretical virtue by enrolling among the New Historicists, he must resist a second distraction, which is to be so taken with a particular autobiography as to turn aside from that to study the literary or other oeuvre of its author, and relate the one to the other. There are perhaps instances in literary history of an autobiography being the one and only book that its author published;