

“Do You Remember Laura?” or, The Limits of Autobiography · Michael G. Cooke

TO SPEAK ABOUT the ‘limits’ of anything is perhaps to conjure up images of border guards and customs and arbitrary papers before there can be any hope of getting *into* the reality rather than the limits of the subject. That sort of possessive, sublimely self-involved approach may have a certain charm, if one decides it is ineluctable and treats it as a form of the art of intricate dogmatism; visitors to India testify to the gauntlet charm of its border bureaucracy. But that is not in store here. Rather than prescribing or administering the immigration laws of autobiography, I’d like to reflect on some of the phenomena of presence that lead us to say, ‘this is (or this is not) an autobiography,’ just as we might, after some familiarity with India, say on a particular occasion: ‘this is (or this is not) India.’ In other words, I take up the unassuming task of discussing recognizable, pragmatic limits of autobiography, and not absolute or essential ones. This entails treating ‘limits’ as a bi-directional concept, in terms of what comes into autobiography from other states of organizing and articulating experience, as well as what may, by virtue of one modulation or another, break out of the orbit of the form.

Some of the best things said on the matter of autobiography don’t particularly have this genre in mind. A writer records a gesture some person makes, or offers a reflection on the human state, and *viola*, like releasing a handkerchief and retrieving a dove, he seems to have thrown off something with real vitality and substance for autobiography.

Take, for example, the case of Lu Hsun, in a small book of essays called *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*. Lu Hsun, coming into prominence between the two World Wars, was a Chinese academic and social critic (he called Freud an “eccentric Austrian scholar”); he is getting more and more recognition for the importance of his thought in early republican China. This is no place to touch on the trouble he experienced in scholastic circles on account of his progressivist views, or on the quality of his writing—suffice it to say that he reminds one of Charles Lamb, with a mordant turn of mind. Two of his remarks in *Dawn Blossoms* ring, for me, with rich resonances across the field of autobiography. Lu Hsun writes:

When a man reaches the stage when all that remains to him
is memories, his life should probably count as futile
enough. . . .

Here is a sudden heavy charge against any autobiographer, who in that capacity must seem preoccupied with memory. Even if we think of mem-

ory as an act, and not just a faculty, it is an act without efficacy, a contrary act of resting with completed acts and conditions. It tacitly treats life as over. But Piaget in analyzing memory indicates that it is not only “figurative” in this way. It is also often “operative” consisting of action “schemes” or representative “schemes” that promote competence and comprehension in situations yet to arise in actuality (*On the Development of Memory and Identity*, Clark U. Press, Barre Publishers, 1968). Here the act of memory pivots off itself into some enterprise, aspiration, or hope for the future. This, however, would seem to make memory not so much an independent subject as a handy object, a sewing basket out of which one decides how to thread a way into the future. The situation pivots away from autobiography to prophecy. One immediately recognizes a difference between the two, and will countenance their borrowing from but not becoming one another. On account of Lu Hsun, then, one comes to focus on a certain limit for autobiography—it must not verge over into programmatics and prophecy.

There is yet another angle from which Lu Hsun’s remark repays scrutiny. He seems unkind to the man of memories: “His life should probably count as futile enough.” Does Lu Hsun mean “his life” in that condition, or altogether? Is the futility localized or does it spread backward to blight more fruitful days? This may prove an important debate for eschatology, but for autobiography it is immaterial. In either case, the act of memory ends up thin, and slack, and somehow, in character if not in detail, monotonous. If prophecy marks off where autobiography cannot go, memory warns of where it may not stay—autobiography cannot be limited to memory.

Lu Hsun again gives a glimpse of what else is required. He recalls the treats of his childhood and comments:

Tasting [the vegetables and fruits I ate as a child in my old home] . . . after a protracted absence, I found them nothing special. It was only in retrospect that they retained their old flavour. They may keep on deceiving me my whole life long, making my thoughts turn constantly to the past.

Obviously the memory in play in this instance is not “all that remains” to the character. He has a multiple perspective, a present that comments on the past and a past that impinges on the present, in a sort of tacit psychomachia. He also can judge the merits of both states, and speculate on the future of their relationship in a way that falls, however, in the realm of confession rather than prophecy. He has the same taste for the memory of “vegetables and fruits” that he used to have for the actual provisions; he is “deceived” by the memory, but lucidly, voluntarily. The memory takes on an immediate presence, without presentness. It can whet but never again satisfy an appetite. His judgment upon and his desire for what has been, and its force upon him in spite of his judgment: all enter into the standing of memory. Lu Hsun does not offer any overt statement about “his life,” but con-

tures it up, its stages and states in an unsettled and still intelligible, even clear relation to one another. The thread of memory falls within the limits of autobiography when it is woven thus inextricably into a unitary line because the memory, though indispensable, avoids arrogance and “remains,” along with analytical and comparative and evaluative perspective, along with susceptibility and purpose, to express the personality that is paramount for the form.

What about this personality, though? Is it a product of experience in time, or of words? Obviously it becomes available through words, but arises out of many other structures and features, and expresses itself as well outside of words. The very fact that memory enters into the case points to experience and time as crucial to the personality in autobiography. But does it not follow at once that the self is prevented from being authoritative, or authorial, in regard to itself? If it tries to settle on the grounds of what it has in time, memory is all that remains, but if it treats the situation as still intrinsically open, it must wait indefinitely to speak. Only the dead have an unassailable position, since it seems that autobiography ought to be the posthumous form. But the living have an unassailable choice, and that is the choice of not dying, or rather of *not having died*. For autobiography from Gibbon and Rousseau to Eiseley and Yeats appears to be a confrontation not merely of mortality but of a radical feeling of something “next to death.” In this respect the form is not obeying but testing a limit, going to a limit so that the *bios* will not be marred by incompleteness in the *graphein* and will truly emerge as *auto*.

It has been said that everybody has a life, while not everybody can have an autobiography. In relation to the question of death it appears though that every autobiography may come from a radical life-impulse. Here again useful light comes from a source outside of the genre. In a recent story called “Who Is Who, and When Will We Be Real?” Jack Matthews presents a character who contrives to write her autobiography, or at least to produce an original and self-determined version of her life, after her death. Modern technology helps; Beanie’s “autobiographical” statement is, like Krapp’s, on tape. But it is conceived of as posthumous, and embodies what must be the ultimate autobiographical impulse, to offset and defeat all other versions of one’s being or one’s meaning. This is the impulse that Hamlet retains at the point of death, when he no longer is moved by jealousy or justice, and he does his best to fulfill it by calling on Horatio to “tell my tale aright.” What Horatio would have said then would have been autobiography by alter ego.

In Matthews’ story, Beanie resorts to the tape recorder as a response to “her imminent death,” as a way of saying from a comprehensive and detached vantage point what the dynamic and emergent processes, really the demands of life have not allowed her to say. She means it to be “the *completion* of life,” having “always had this almost neurotic passion to *finish*

things, and thereby leave nothing undone.” No life in the ordinary ongoing sense remains to her on her deathbed. The tapes, to be heard after she has passed away, enable her *consciously* to escape the autobiographer’s disability in time.

Another escape from disability, another tacit motive for autobiography also emerges on a tape Beanie secretly makes for *her* alter ego, the cleaning woman, Whittaca Bass, but not without awareness that Whittaca, who is mentally unstable, might well divulge it. This tape amounts to Beanie’s way of telling her own tale aright, and breaking the authority of the world, in the form of husband or friends or social customs and political values, over her. Sociologists like Peter Berger argue for the social construction of reality; autobiography implies the personal construction of reality. And Beanie is pitting her autobiographical against her social definition, so as to be something in and by herself, and not just a product of external forces. Those forces have clearly taken her over, dictating certain responses she may once have spontaneously made, dictating them by the very act of appreciating them. These responses, repeated to captivate others, eventually capture her, and so become, as her husband blithely remarks, “the ‘real Beanie’—the Beanie everyone knew and sort of marveled at.”

The clearest and simplest sign that Beanie is declaring the self that amounts to what *she* would call ‘real’ comes from the matter of her name. ‘Beanie’ has been imposed on her, as a result of a single incident of sartorial eccentricity—again, the gesture canonized by others and confining to the self. She comes out for, and as Clarissa, the name which, though actually given her at birth, is free of the distortions and encumbrances of social norms. She is in a sense born again after her death, with the singular advantage of being in a position to choose her name for herself (it is, incidentally, a critical distinction between fiction and autobiography that in fiction a first-person protagonist may be with good effect anonymous, but in autobiography the central figure cannot do without a name).

The intrinsic importance of naming to being reveals itself at once in the Adamic myth. The five prior days of creation are really a divine prolepsis, where things that have been brought into existence remain to be called into that existence; they exist to be named, in order to exist as themselves. Certain corollaries also attach to the radical function of naming. One’s name influences and can subsume one’s sense of worth and other people’s opinion: “who steals my purse steals trash . . . But he that filches from me my good name. . . .” Or we can look at the matter negatively and see that namelessness means a form of annihilation. The crafty Ulysses, disguising himself as Nemo, is less an exception than an illustration of the rule. His assumption of namelessness gets him clear physically, but it also cancels him out. He survives as Nemo, no one. The suspension of himself before Polyphemus has a revealing analog in his re-entry as a negligible old man

into his home. He has to come forth, declare himself, to be himself with any effect.

It is well to observe the congruence that exists between the autobiographical need to create his own name, to create himself in his image, and the need to speak consummately in spite of the silencing effect of death's *consummatum est*. Both namelessness and death obviate the possibility of autobiography. And autobiographers continually occupy themselves with two correlative principles: the freedom and power of naming and a certain freedom from and power over death. This is perhaps the principle that if the autobiography can begin before life (as with parents), it may symmetrically continue after death. The documentation comes readily to mind. Rousseau is trying to get us to accept a peculiar, ingratiatingly scandalous Jean-Jacques. Newman in the *Apologia* is writing about the justice and honor of naming himself Father, and Malcolm X in the Autobiography is emerging, through a veritable maze of imposed sobriquets (from the ominous "Little" to the scandalous "Satan"), into the chosen El-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz. By the same token, Gibbon and Goethe, Coleridge and Newman, Yeats and Eiseley, all have extreme experiences of illness and vulnerability akin to death. We may recall also Cellini's scorpion that miraculously fails to bite, and Bunyan's bell that is miraculously expected to fall. The death threatened or felt is not only physical but also spiritual. In Newman's case, as Michael Ryan has pointed out, the very title of the *Apologia* implies a warding off of the death that is explicit in Newman's fear of being taken for a "scarecrow" ("The Question of Autobiography in Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*," *The Georgia Review*, 31(1977), p. 698). Whether they dwell on the presence of death with gloomy and loving obsession, like Eiseley, or touch it with a brief and poignant dignity, like Goethe, it is clear that they regard themselves as survivors of death. They speak as it were apocalyptically, through the veil of felt if not actual passage from life. They speak, as the dead cannot, but they speak with a retrospective finality that the *vita media* cannot know. This is what makes autobiography more than a true record or brute sum of a life; it comes as a personal *summa*, and when this *summa* is avoided, as in Vico and Freud, a certain coldness and astigmatism of vision result; and correspondingly where this *summa* eludes the writer, as it does Gibbon and Bertrand Russell, a certain wateriness and incoherence appear.

To speak from a position of summing up, with a sense of the end, may seem to imply something Nestorian, or at least Hamletic. But it is crucial to recognize that little of the "ghost come back from the dead" appears in autobiography. The nature of the genre works against that. Though writing to others, the autobiographer writes of, by, and for himself. Henry Adams catches the singular spirit involved when he says that "even dead men allow themselves a few narrow prejudices." But perhaps the proper emphasis would fall not on the epithet, "prejudices" but on the act, "allow," on the

freedom of the case. Albert Camus has recognized the freedom conferred by the immediate assurance of death, citing “that unbelievable disinterestedness with regard to everything except for the pure flame of life,” and declaring that “death and the absurd are . . . the principles of the only reasonable freedom: that which a human heart can experience and live” (“An Absurd Reasoning,” in *The Myth of Sisyphus*). Among the personal literary forms, autobiography is the most explicit, constant, and intense in its emphasis on this freedom. What might be called the will of the autobiographer is neatly captured by J.M.W. Turner in his description of being lashed to a ship’s mast in a storm for the sake of pursuing his art:

I did not paint to be understood, but I wished to show what such a scene was like. . . I was lashed for four hours and I did not expect to escape, but I felt bound to record it if I did. But no one had any business to like the picture.

Two phrases warrant special attention here. First, Turner “felt *bound* to record it if” he escaped death, and though he *chooses* the risk of death whereas that risk befalls Newman, he seems motivated as much to record the fact of his coming through as the terms of his experience. This is what gives special resonance to his other declaration, that “no one had any business to like the picture.” He is not working to be “liked” or even, as he has earlier pointed out, “to be understood.” He is showing “what such a scene was like,” or in the autobiographical analog, what such a life was like. The work is for the record, and the record is for being. As Hegel says in *The Phenomenology of Mind*:

it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; only thus is it tried and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is not bare existence, is not the merely immediate form in which it at first makes its appearance The individual, who has not staked his life, may, no doubt, be recognized as a Person; but he has not attained the truth of his recognition as an independent self-consciousness

This trial by death, however, cancels both the truth which was to result from it, and therewith the certainty of self altogether.

(Baillie trans., Harper Torchbooks, p. 23)

In effect, the autobiographer, in going over his life, is overgoing death and giving not only the reader but himself a vital confirmation of being.

This postulate fails to accord with some powerful analyses of autobiography in recent years. Jerome Mazzaro, for example, says that “Regardless of whether [the autobiographer] chooses to view his life as celebratory (sharing experience with others), confessional (unburdening guilt), apologetic (defending an action or course), or explanatory (revealing hidden motives or meaning), he turns his past into an *illustration of something*” (“The Fact of Beatrice,” in *The Literature of Fact*, ed. Angus Fletcher, New York:

Columbia U. Press, 1976, pp. 94-95). But the confessional and apologetic autobiographies by which one would most wish to test this thesis will not bear it out. Rousseau and DeQuincey proclaim more than they excuse themselves, and defy our standards and conception of guilt more than they submit and sue for atonement. Similarly Newman is not just defending his course of life, but pressing for acknowledgement of *himself* within his formal position—he wishes “to be known as a living man” and not as a “scarecrow. . .dressed” in his clothes (an obvious reference to his black clerical garb). The autobiography is provoked by his role as Roman cleric, but is produced for his being as individual man.

Mazzaro, being concerned with the approach of an autobiography, lets the apparent objective of a particular work obscure its intrinsic subjective import. Robert Sayre’s analysis of the form comfortably embraces the subjective figure and the objective environment, and brings subtle historical judgment to bear. In earlier autobiography, Sayre observes, the self is “defined . . . by nature or religion or specific events or achievements; while later autobiography shows the self defined by “family, history, and civilization” (“The Proper Study. . .Autobiographies in American Studies,” *American Quarterly*, 29 (1977), p. 253). This is at once decisive and suggestive criticism, setting a dependable frame and affording a necessary freedom for others in the field. An arresting sidelight of Sayre’s position has to do with the extent to which its vocabulary reflects our own times, when authorities as different as Skinner and Norman Brown and Peter Berger alike give society priority over the individual and power to determine his reality. Is the autobiographer “defined” by religion or by civilization? I would suggest that the autobiographer is rather *defined by himself*, in relation to religion or civilization, etc.

Here again, Newman may help us to draw a distinction that seems vital to the genre of autobiography, which cannot exist if the self insists on a genuine isolation, and which yet does not subsist if the self succumbs to its history or environment or institutions. As Schiller observes in the 11th Letter *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, “We exist because we exist; we feel, think and will because there is something other besides ourselves.” Certainly Newman seems the most bound to time and place (he is an Englishman in the mid-nineteenth century) and to institutions and specific events (he is a convert to and cleric in the Roman Catholic Church). This proves far from meaning that he immolates himself to Church or State. Instead he assumes them into himself, and they depend on him for justification and representation. He writes as “a living man,” whose nation and faith are secure, but whose life has been impugned. He writes about nation and faith, but distinctly for himself. The final image of his religious colleagues surrounding him is preeminently personal. The early pages on his disposition to religion are likewise personal. And everything in between springs from and returns to that personality.

The problem for autobiography is how far its matter can spring from the self, and not lose personal connection and value. What limits arise as regards the self and the other? I would begin by saying that the self is confronted or tested, instead of defined, by the other, and go on to make two observations: 1) because Dr. Johnson looms so large and so obsessively in Boswell's eyes, Boswell is a biographer, not an autobiographer; and 2) though Rousseau talks intensely, even endlessly about others, he manages to make them somehow static, while he is dynamic, and the eye follows the moving object. Of course, the other can be a historical event, a pressing question of politics or society or philosophy, and need not be a person. In whatever form it gets too weighty and swings toward the center, the limit for the autobiographer has been passed, and he is essayist or polemicist or what-have-you. By and large we can tell whether the autobiographer contains the essayist, or vice versa.

Such a determination results from analysis of style, just as it would in the case of fiction. We see dialogue and description and argument in a novel and know that these elements are in line and in proportion, so that we hold aside any thought of drama or travelogue or essay. But there is also in autobiography a matter of intent. All writing may be called auto-indicative, down to a Linnaean classification system; some writing must be called auto-expressive, such as a piece of libel; and then there is autobiographical writing, which may include a classification of one's possessions or a statement of one's aversions. But writing becomes autobiography when, to the data of one's actions and thoughts and relations and associations, in space and time, there is added a specific consciousness and conception of what it all means to the self and who the self is in relation to it all.

At the same time, the use of the term "self" is laden with problems and assumptions that we would do well to bring out of the hold and into the light. For if autobiography must peculiarly convey the intent of the writer, it must also tacitly satisfy the expectations of the reader, and those expectations center around the obscure idea of the self. It is time that we acknowledged that the self is more inclusive, more complexly established, and more licentiously distributed than any autobiography could hope to encompass. Simply put, the self is more than it knows, and autobiography affords not even this, the self as known, but only the self as chosen and shown. It is that form which proves that the "I" lives, and as it says it has. Much would be gained, no doubt, if we analyzed the term auto-bio-graphy not as life-writing-by-the-self, but as ego-life-writing.

This is in keeping with the fact that autobiography gives articulation to a will to identity or subjective particularity. It is Henry Adams, the shy autobiographer, who forthrightly declares that the form is not concerned with "a type but a will." In some quarters the form comes under suspicion the moment such a statement appears, on the ground that ego-biases will invade the material and force it to serve private prejudices and needs, rather

than The Truth. In fact, autobiography is supposed to enunciate the private personality, and it seems odd to suppose that one is more disinterested about the other than about the self. Hegel makes a telling comment in this regard, when he calls self-awareness "Das einheimliche Reich der Wahrheit."

The availability, the decisive availability of ego-choice helps us to set two complementary limits for autobiography, which as a mere faithful record of actuality would fall into incoherence, and as a mere illustration of a principle would fall into fatalism. The faithful record amounts to a random bunch of beads, and brings to mind Kierkegaard's plangent question in *Either/Or*: ". . . Can you think of anything more frightful than that it might end with your nature being resolved into a multiplicity, that you really might become many, become, like those unhappy demoniacs, a legion and you thus would have lost the holiest and inmost thing of all in a man, the unifying power of personality?" In dealing with the past, autobiography is not exhibiting any weakness for neurotic repetition in the Freudian vein. Autobiography does not repeat actions and situations in the past, but rather uses them to ground the individual in the present against their possible domineering or lethal shocks. The act of autobiography thus resembles, if anything, a Kierkegaardian repetition, a selection and election of actions and situations in one's life to clarify and establish one's self as a decisive subject/agent.

And yet it holds good that one cannot get away with making one's life a mere illustration of a principle, even if that principle is one's moral position. The mere illustration amounts to a stranger's necklace, when it is the privilege and the obligation of the autobiographer to design his own gem. As Merleau-Ponty points out, though "it is the whole symbolic consciousness [of a culture] which . . . elaborates what the child lives or does not live, suffers or does not suffer, feels or does not feel," and though the child perceives "according to his culture's imagery," his "personal significance" arises when "he finally comes to the point of reversing the relationship and slipping into the meanings of his speech and behavior, converting even the most secret aspects of his experience into culture" ("The Philosopher and Sociology," in *Essential Writings*, ed. Alden L. Fisher, N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969, p.97).

If we consider the circumstances under which autobiography first comes into its own in modern culture—the time limit or *terminus a quo* of the form—the freedom of the individual to establish his "personal significance" over against the formal prescriptions of the society seems paramount. Three developments, between the late seventeenth century and the mid-eighteenth century, lead directly toward autobiography. The first is the change from universal history to contemporary, concrete historiography, as exemplified in the work of Clarendon and Burnet. The second is the amplification of biography to include ordinary men as subjects (Roger North went further

than Dr. Johnson and suggested that more good would come from the “history of private lives adapted to the perusal of common men” than from state history). The third is the emergence of the novel as a sustained, major form. The new historiography suggests the importance of current affairs divorced from divine ordination; the novel suggests the interest of images and patterns of individual experience not sanctioned by political or social elevation; and the new biography suggests that actual individuals of no public glamor could fit the bill for significance and value. The obvious next step was for the individual of no canonized status, about whom life stories by others might materialize, to take hold of his own story, or autobiography. The stimulus then was not only historical, in that the background of events virtually demanded the form, but also psychological. To have a Horatio or a Boswell would be well, but to have the person who had always been there, feeling and thinking and doing everything, was the right thing to have.

As far as the environment for the origin of autobiography goes, one further factor must be considered momentous. That is a revision of the role or standing of the individual in society. As late as Pope and Johnson, it was tacitly held that the individual would fulfill the expectations and realize the values of society, or *he* would be at fault. But with Rousseau, as it were abruptly, the postulate is raised that the society must fulfill the dreams and help to realize the potentialities of the individual or *it* is at fault. Rousseau signalized a kind of uncrystallization of norms, or dissolving of definitions, wherein it becomes possible and indeed urgent for the individual to see a peculiar shape to his life and to establish a guardedly general validity for that shape. Of course Augustine and Bunyan appear to achieve autobiography within a strongly crystallized system, but they also exhibit the tendency of such a system to digest the individual or in corollary the tendency of such an individual to sacrifice the self-as-experienced to the self-as-interpreted and conformable in terms of something independent outside. In short, autobiography may occur anywhere, but has sustained itself only where the socio-cultural environment tolerates a critical degree of self-definition and ego-construction. Augustine, who set out to write confessions, is really an apologist, while Newman, who sets himself up as apologist, is more truly an egotist. We may find it instructive to recall here Blake’s opinion that “The Book written by Rousseau call’d his Confessions, is an apology & cloke for his sin & not a confession” (*Jerusalem*, III, “To the Deist”).

The truth that autobiography espouses, on this reading, is only incidentally the truth of exact occurrences and recoverable postures. This would amount to a truth about the self, without the self. A brief story may be offered in illustration. My five-year-old niece is exceedingly shy, and very fussy about the people she will so much as say hello to. But she got along famously with my younger daughter, whose coat-tails my twelve-year-old son was prepared to ride into his little cousin’s good graces. “Do you remember Laura?” he asked on a visit to the family. “Laura?” The question

was a bit disconcerting, but at least she had spoken. "Yes. Do you remember Laura?" "You mean the girl with the long hair?" "Yes." "The one that used to play with me?" "Yes?" "The one that used to bathe me?" "Yes." "And put me to bed at night?" "Yes. Do you remember her?" "No." The point is right up front: the details are there, but the person as such is denied.

The truth of autobiography is most properly the truth of the ego's relationships and evaluations and constructions. The truth of history and biography is that Gibbon and Yeats were eminent persons and consummate successes, but the truth for them in autobiography is that they were haunted, constrained, unconsummated men. We should not oppose *Dichtung*, personal sentiments and values, to *Wahrheit*, objective matter; rather we should see them as aspects of one another. This sort of duplex condition may not be notable in itself, but it acquires some significance when we recognize that some sort of low-grade paradox surrounds autobiography: it is a genre without conventions; it demands a fusion of narrative and conceptual modes, the self as action and as thought; and it involves a singular statement of representative values, founded on the peculiarity of the first person singular pronoun, that it belongs no less to the auditor than to the speaker, and works best when *an impulse* of identification occurs. In this respect, autobiography must observe the boundary that would take it over into intimate allegory—the self in autobiography must be first and foremost representative of itself, to the other, and not representative of the other in the self. In this form the representative man must be Emersonian, rather than Johnsonian.

The limits of autobiography operate in significant ways to concentrate its powers. Or perhaps it is truer to say that the limits of the form effectively concentrate the powers of the figure in the form, the informing figure of the autobiography. That figure can be seen invariably in three conditions: as the chosen one and private hero; as a peculiar entity vis-à-vis others who, while necessary for confirmation, may also pose a threat of usurpation; and as related to the intractable order (and orders) of the world. These three conditions interpenetrate one another, but it is not hard to see that the self as hero predominates in Rousseau, the self vis-à-vis the other in Yeats, and the self withstanding the discipline of the world in Henry Adams. The arresting thing about such conclusions, which seem banal on the face of things, is that evidence for them is so various and pervasive. Rousseau is a hero in planting his willow tree and creating the makeshift aqueduct to keep it alive, a hero in breaking a record for degeneracy ("never did a precocious Caesar," as he comments, "so promptly become a Laridon"), a hero if gifts, having "divine" arias in his head, a hero in suffering, in uniqueness. The term he uses to sum up one aspect of his behavior is "sublime heroism" (Cohen trans., p. 46), and the effect of its obverse, namely his falling to depths of villainy (p.

47), is to set him apart for special honesty and is offset by his excellent motives:

my innate goodwill towards my fellow men; my burning love for the great, the true, the beautiful, and the just; my horror of evil in every form, my inability to hate, to hurt, or even to wish to; that softening, that sharp and sweet emotion I feel at the sight of all that is virtuous, generous, and lovable. . . .(p.333).

It is not a matter that heroism befell Rousseau everywhere, but rather that he solicited it everywhere. The autobiographer's sense of himself as hero, his ego-sense is the record of his intimate experience of the possibility of annihilation. And Rousseau in particular, pressing his uniqueness and his taste for solitude, is expressing his almost unbearable sense of the presence of other people. He has an eristic reaction to the other, and in self-proclaimed heroism and contrived solitude seeks necessary relief.

The discipline that Henry Adams undergoes in the world is likewise apparent in many guises. At one level it is his grandfather simply laying hands on him and haling him off to school. At another level it is Thurlow Weed's "irresistibly conquering confidence" (146) and at yet another it is the "mortifying failure" of his "confirmed dislike, distrust, and detraction of Lord Palmerston," and his finding himself "obliged. . .to admit himself in error, and. . .to beg his pardon" (164). Much may be made of the presence of older men, authority figures, in all these cases. Boy and man, Adams is encountering something unyielding and undeniable outside. He comes under domination. This domination finally attains abstract and ubiquitous quality when it occurs as a symbol in the dynamo, which appears as impenetrable as indispensable with its "infinite costly energy." Here is a kind of god-as-machine before which Adams finds himself "helpless."

It is immediately obvious, and troublesome, that Rousseau more than holds his own vis-à-vis the other-as-personality, whereas Adams goes down to defeat at the hands of the other-as-the-order-of-the-world. Rousseau defines heroism for himself and proclaims himself its exemplar. With Adams, the hero posited for autobiography seems to have fallen upon evil days and suffered extinction. But Adams also sets the terms of value so as to put himself in a most favorable, a heroic light. In fact, even as he makes the first full announcement of the demise of any traditional heroism, he makes himself the first modern hero, helpless, bandied about by circumstances, but very knowing and capable of the most minute dissection of his case and of the most exquisite transplanting of his case into the body of his culture. Adams is the hero of hapless knowledge, par excellence. He is the quintessence of "sensitive and timid" man. In the entire history of heroism, one may observe a continual diminuendo in social involvement, from Homer who rests this trait on prowess that the entire society recognizes and thrives

on, to Virgil, who features devotion that the entire society profits from, to Milton, who concentrates on a rectitude that must multiply itself among individuals for the society to get its full benefit, to Wordsworth or Byron who alike put the individual into an oblique and problematic relation to society, proffering personality before service. Adams reduces the individual yet further; he treats the intellect as hero, and his intellect is detached, inert, stamped with the knowledge that personality, rectitude, devotion, and prowess are soap bubbles in the wind tunnel of time.

It is not by accident that he comes as close as can bearably be done to writing an autobiography with no name. Adams exploits the third person reference to himself and the adoption of the nomenclature of his functions—"the private secretary" (p. 148) in one situation, "the mind" (p. 498) in another—to bring home how far the old relations and definitions and assurances and presences have been reduced, and how far he has been brought into exiguousness. But that thin remnant is enough to offer as a pioneer, a unique figure in the ground of deprivation: "The private secretary alone sought education." Or listen to Adams when he feels an original "sense of possible purpose working itself out in history"; some people would recall Hegel or Augustine, but Adams declares: "Probably no one else on this earthly planet. . . could have come out on precisely such personal satisfaction. . ." (363). In the long run Adams carries himself, delicately but unmistakably, into universal proportions. He is projecting a formula that takes in "all history, terrestrial or cosmic, mechanical or intellectual." It all seems as remote as possible from individual experience, but there remains a virtual point at which Adams differs from Hegel and even Augustine. His projection avoids the discursive and the analytical, which would seem proper, and is kept within the domain of personality and emotion by the use of metaphor.

For convenience [Adams writes, and the very word 'convenience' warns us of intimacy to come], the most familiar image should come first; and this is probably that of the comet, or meteoric streams, like the Leonids and Perseids; a complex of minute mechanical agencies, reacting with and without, and guided by the sum of forces attracting and deflecting it. Nothing forbids one to assume that the man-meteorite might grow, as an acorn does, absorbing light, heat, electricity—or thought; for, in recent times, such transference of energy has become a familiar idea; but the simplest figure, at first, is that of a perfect comet—say that of 1843—which drops from space, in a straight line, at the regular acceleration of speed, directly into the sun, and after wheeling sharply about it, in heat that ought to dissipate any known substance, turns back unharmed, in defiance of law, by the path on which it came. The mind, by analogy, may figure as such a comet, the better because it also defies law.

Here is the nub of Adams' individuality and heroism. "The mind" not only works as his chosen instrument, it becomes his surrogate, the synecdoche for his self. And its veritably Byronic defiance (the comet is the equivalent of Byron's "tannen" in *Childe Harold IV*) represents Adams' withstanding as well as understanding the forces, from his grandfather to the dynamo, that could seem to dominate him. The play of withstanding-cum-understanding makes him precisely a hero of intellect. His education, ostensibly in agnosticism and ineffectuality, proves to be an education in this brand of heroism.

The metaphor of withstanding may have a general validity for autobiography as such, and not just special moment for Henry Adams. Involving the possibility of annihilation for the man-meteorite (the ego is either mechanical, i.e. not an ego, or it is nothing), this metaphor takes us back to the problem of death and the form of autobiography. Adams differs from most autobiographers in that he comes right out with his desire to live spiritually beyond his life, and to talk, or at least see, from beyond the grave. He adopts the idiom of resurrection ("the new man") and, though he says "Nature has educated herself to a singular sympathy for death," he envisions himself as a revenant, as a kind of cross between self-indulgence and indomitability, in a later world in which he can live with more than a shudder. The title of the concluding section, "Nunc Age," implies a consummation of the heroism of intellect, for the thing Adams is *now doing* amounts to a rank act of imagination, of imposing the mind on all-insistent matter; and this heroism comes through undoing, or better outdoing death. Autobiography becomes for Adams the apotropaic of death.

In this, as already suggested, Adams is not alone. Autobiographers seem to reach for certain apocalyptic possibilities, and to move toward breaking the limits of personal time, whether manifested in death or in other forms of absolute grounding of the ego. Everyone will readily recall the way Gibbon imagines that "this day may *possibly* be [his] last," then statistically gives himself another "fifteen years," then in a crucial aside shows his mind filled with versions of eschatology: "parents. . . commence a new life in their children; . . . enthusiasts. . . sing Hallelujahs above the clouds; and [vain] authors. . . presume the immortality of their name and writings." In like manner Rousseau, at the very end of his *Confessions*, seems concerned with the problem of how to defend himself after death, in a kind of proleptic paranoia. In actuality he curses those who refuse "to investigate and inquire into" any version of his life contrary to his own "*during [his] lifetime*," but in essence his curse ("anything contrary. . . is a lie and an imposture," and anyone believing it "is no lover of justice or of truth") rings through the ages. His "lifetime" becomes perpetual, to the extent that his fleshly will to protect his name by "stifling" detractors is transferred onto the eschatology of language.

It will hardly be necessary here to do more than cite Thoreau's great

Sabaoth prophecy: "The sun is but a morning star"; or again DeQuincey's far more complex declaration, in his capacity as a "transcendental philosopher," of hatred and contempt for his body, and of indifference to the eight and a half years still available to him (versus Gibbon's fifteen), and of eagerness for a "posthumous revenge" that is not only against his own body but also, as the context makes clear, against the body of science and received opinion. But then DeQuincey had already been living a posthumous existence, as one returned from the apocalyptic heaven and hell of opium.

The ultimate paradox of autobiography, we may now recognize, is that the more it is beset with limits, the more it enables its subject to survive and define (i.e., limn and delimit) himself. No other literary form known to me has such limits or such tight-rope precariousness *as form*; no other form has such personal freedom. Thus, if it is poignant to think of Petrarch asking, "do you remember Laura?" it is more so to realize that under that question another is lurking (as it was lurking for my twelve-year-old son in the face of a reticent environment); and that question is, "Do you remember me?" Autobiography, depicting ego-life over against death, and attaining for that ego the only presentation it can recognize as anything but a lie and imposture worthy to be stifled (to adopt Rousseau's words), changes that interrogative to an imperative. It says, remember me, and as I am to myself: singular, for all that others cogently exist or the insistent world encompasses me, and singularly immortal.