

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS NARRATIVE\*

BY ALFRED KAZIN

BEFORE he died, Ernest Hemingway left a memoir of Paris in the 1920's, *A Moveable Feast*, that is just now published. Anyone who grew up with Hemingway's writing, as I did, and who has always valued his early short stories in particular for the breathtaking clarity and beauty with which he could develop his effects in this miniature and subtle form, cannot help reading Hemingway's memoir with amazement. For line by line and stroke by stroke, in the color of the prose and the shaping of the episodes, Hemingway's autobiography is as beautiful in composition as Hemingway's best stories, it is in subject and tone indistinguishable from much of Hemingway's fiction, and it is full of dialogue as maliciously clever as Hemingway's fiction.

He begins here, as his stories so often do, with the weather, the color of the weather, the tone and weight of the weather in Paris. There was the bad weather that would come in one day when the fall was over—"We would have to shut the windows in the night against the rain and the cold wind would strip the leaves from the trees in the Place Contrescarpe. The leaves lay sodden in the rain and the wind drove the rain against the

big green autobus at the terminal and the Cafe des Amateurs was crowded and the windows misted over from the heat and the smoke inside." Anyone who knows his Hemingway will recognize in these artful repetitions, these simple flat words shaped like the design in a painting by Braque and gray as a Paris street by Utrillo, Hemingway's most familiar touch. And most astonishing, in what is after all presented as a memoir, there are conversations with Gertrude Stein, Ford Madox Ford, Scott Fitzgerald, that are as witty and destructive as those dialogues in *Men Without Women* or *The Sun Also Rises* that Hemingway used, in exactly the same way, to get the better of the other speaker in a dialogue with the hero who in Hemingway's fiction is called Nick Adams or Jake Barnes or Frederic Henry. Ford Madox Ford comes on the young Hemingway quietly sitting in a cafe, sagely observing life in Paris, but Ford is described as "breathing heavily through a heavy, stained mustache and holding himself as upright as an ambulatory, well clothed, up-ended hogshead." Ford is shown as a heavy, wheezing, distrustful, and confused presence; he scolds waiters for his own mistakes and, as if he were a fat actor playing Colonel Blimp and not the almost over-subtle writer that Ford Madox Ford actually was, he pronounces that "a gentleman will always cut a cad." Hemingway plays it cool. "I took a quick drink of brandy. 'Would he cut a bounder?' I asked. 'It would be impossible for a gentleman to know a bounder.' 'Then you can only cut someone you have known on terms of equality?' I pursued. 'Naturally.' 'How would one ever meet a cad?' 'You might not know it, or the fellow could have become a cad.' 'What is a cad?' I asked. 'Isn't he someone that one has to thrash within an inch of his

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life?" "Not necessarily," Ford said. "Is Ezra a gentleman?" I asked. "Of course not," said Ford. "He's an American."

This is of course standard Hemingway dialogue—it is literary in itself, and it is a burlesque of the pretentious or false civilization that Hemingway always portrayed as the enemy. Yet this artful mixture is presented as autobiography, and it must be taken in some measure as a truthful account of Hemingway's relations with Ford. To suppose—and who can help it—that Hemingway was reshaping the facts many years after the encounter in that cafe, is to miss the point of what makes Hemingway's book so remarkable a piece of writing. For Hemingway uses the convention of autobiography—real names, dates, places—entirely for his imaginative purpose as a creative artist exactly as a statesman will use autobiography in the interest of his historic reputation. General Eisenhower's memoirs of his first term, *Mandate For Change*, probably contain as many retouchings of the original facts, whatever these may have been (and Eisenhower was probably the last to know), as do Hemingway's. But Eisenhower's intention in writing autobiography is to present a public image of himself for the history books. And while Hemingway's aim is psychologically no doubt the same, Hemingway cannot think of Paris in 1921 without making a picture of the city and a narrative about his friends; Eisenhower, by contrast, stuffs his memoirs with documents of the period in order to persuade the reader that his decisions were made on the basis of the information recorded in these documents. The artfulness of this does not make Eisenhower's autobiography a work of art.

Autobiography, like other literary forms, is what a gifted writer makes of it. There is great autobiography that is also intellectual history, like *The Education Of Henry Adams*; great autobiography that is equally theology, like the *Confessions* of St. Augustine; autobiography that is desperately intended for understanding of self, like Rousseau's *Confessions*; autobiography that is actually a program for living, like Thoreau's *Walden*. These are all classics of autobiography, and the stories they tell are among

the greatest narratives in world literature. But the kind of autobiography I am discussing here is autobiography as fiction—that is, as narrative which has no purpose other than to tell a story, to create the effect of a story, which above all asks (as the books by St. Augustine, Rousseau, Thoreau, and Henry Adams do not) to be read for its value as narrative. Of course it is ironic to find that some of the greatest narratives in autobiography have actually been written by people like Benjamin Franklin, who thought that he was setting himself up as a model for emulation. James Baldwin, in his powerful book of essays, *Notes Of A Native Son*, writes as if his only aim were to shame the white middle class and to arouse it to the plight of the Negroes. But his book is most felt as autobiography, and succeeds as a kind that only a practiced fiction writer could have created.

There is in fact a kind of autobiography, very characteristic of our period and usually written by novelists or poets, that has no other aim, whatever the writer may think he is doing, than to be enjoyed as narrative. And books like Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, Edward Dahlberg's *Because I Was Flesh*, Colette's *My Mother's House* and *The Blue Lantern*, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, Denton Welch's *Maiden Voyage*, are so characteristic of the use that an imaginative writer can make of the *appearance* of fact in autobiography that they make us think of how cleverly the imaginative writer exploits "real facts" in novels like *Sons And Lovers*, *A Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man*, *Ulysses*, *Remembrance Of Things Past*, *Journey To The End Of The Night*, *Good-bye To Berlin*, *Tropic Of Cancer*. Even to mention Henry Miller among such novelists and storytellers is to recognize that there is a kind of narrative in our day which is fiction that uses facts, that deliberately retains the facts behind the story in order to show the imaginative possibilities inherent in fact, and yet which is designed, even when the author does not say so, to make a fable of his life, to tell a story, to create a pattern of incident, to make a dramatic point.

Hemingway begins with the weather;

Dahlberg opens the naturalistic poem that he makes of his life by intoning that "Kansas City is a vast inland city, and its marvelous river, the Missouri, heats the senses; the maple, alder, elm and cherry trees with which the town abounds are songs of desire, and only the almonds of ancient Palestine can awaken the hungry pores more deeply." Robert Lowell says that "in 1924 people still lived in cities," Colette in *My Mother's House* invokes her mother's cry, "Where Are The Children?" Edmund Wilson begins his memoir of Talcottville, in upper New York state, with a sentence that more immediately recalls the spirit of fiction in our day than does the flat account of the hero's beginnings in eighteenth-century novels like *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe*. Here is Wilson—"As I go north for the first time in years, in the slow, the constantly stopping, milk train—which carries passengers only in the back part of the hind car and has an old stove to heat it in winter—I look out through the dirt-yellowed double pane and remember how once, as a child, I used to feel thwarted in summer till I had got the windows open and there was nothing between me and the widening pastures, the great boulders, the black and white cattle, the rivers, stony and thin, the lone elms like feather-dusters, the high air which sharpens all outlines, makes all colors so breathtakingly vivid, in the clear light of late afternoon." Robinson Crusoe is more prosaic: "I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family, though not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull." Obviously the creation of mood in Wilson's opening is more in accordance with what we think of as the concentration of effect essential to fiction, and Defoe's opening is in the leisurely chronicle style suitable to a time when novelists wrote masterpieces without being self-conscious artists in the style of Flaubert. This self-consciousness is by no means a proof of talent or the style of genius; Defoe and Fielding did not have to try so hard as Flaubert to create masterpieces, and they were actually more successful. But art is no longer easy, in the sense of being comfortable, and autobiography as narrative is as artful as the contemporary short story

or short novel, which usually obeys canons of poetic form rather than of the realistic novel. There is a correct and self-limited kind of fiction that Eliot and Pound have made an esthetic standard in our time, and the kind of art in autobiography that I am discussing usually has the tension and manipulated tone that we associate with such modish fiction as Salinger's stories.

Autobiography as narrative obviously seeks the effect of fiction, and cannot use basic resources of fiction, like dialogue, without becoming fiction. Yet if Hemingway had wanted to write the story of *A Moveable Feast* as fiction he would have done so; indeed, several incidents and characters in this memoir were used by him as fiction. And Dahlberg's *Because I Was Flesh* actually relates as autobiography material that he had presented in his novels *Bottom Dogs* and *From Flushing To Calvary*. When a good novelist relates as fact what he has already used as fiction, it is obvious that he turns to autobiography out of some creative longing that fiction has not satisfied. One can hardly reproach Hemingway, Nabokov, Colette with lacking imagination. On the contrary, it would seem that far from being stuck with their own raw material and lacking the invention to disguise or use it, they have found in the form of autobiography some particular closeness and intensity of effect that they value. The "creative" stamp, the distinguishing imaginative organization of experience, is in autobiography supplied not by intention, but by the felt relation to the life data themselves. The esthetic effect that gifted autobiographers instinctively if not always consciously seek would seem to be the poetry of remembered happenings, the intensity of the individual's strivings, the feel of life in its materiality. Henry James expressed it perfectly when he said in tribute to Whitman's letters to his friend Peter Doyle that "the absolute natural," when the writer is interesting, is "the supreme merit of letters." In Whitman's material, James recognized "the beauty of the natural is, here, the beauty of the particular nature, the man's own overflow in the deadly dry setting, the personal passion, the love of life plucked like a flower in a desert of innocent,

unconscious ugliness. . . . A thousand images of patient, homely American life, else undistinguishable, are what its queerness—however startling—happened to express.”

Of course, autobiographical writing, even when it assumes the mask of sincerity and pretends to be the absolute truth, can be as fictional as the wildest fantasy. Obviously, autobiography does not appeal to us as readers because it is more true to the facts than is fiction; it is just another way of telling a story, it tells another kind of story, and it uses fact as a strategy. When Nabokov in *Lolita* writes a formal fiction, with made-up incidents and farcical episodes that dip into surrealism, what he is in effect saying to the reader is: This *could* have happened, and my effort is to persuade you, through the concentrated illusion of my fiction, that it is happening. But when Nabokov describes his younger self hunting butterflies in the Crimea, in that other Russia that vanished after 1917, his whole effort is to communicate to the reader the passion and tone of the young man's happiness in nature. That young man alone is the story, and a summer day long ago is all the setting and all the plot. “On a summer morning, in the legendary Russia of my boyhood, my first glance upon awakening was for the chink between the shutters. If it disclosed a watery pallor, one had better not open the shutters at all, and so be spared the sight of a sullen day sitting for its picture in a puddle. From the age of six, everything I felt in connection with a rectangle of framed sunlight was dominated by a single passion. If my first glance of the morning was for the sun, my first thought was for the butterflies it would engender. . . .”

The difference between formal fiction and autobiography-as-narrative is not the difference between invention and truth, between the imaginative and the factual; the imagination is in everything that is well conceived and written. But autobiography is centered on a single person, who may be related to the world of nature more profoundly than he is to other human beings—which is the story of Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, as it is of Thoreau's *Walden*. Fiction cannot limit itself to one individual's sensations, feelings, and hopes, except for reasons of satire, or as

an experiment in surrealism. And it can be shown, I think, that the creative indecisiveness that is so marked in fiction today can be traced to the fact that power is now felt to lie everywhere but in the individual's own judgment. He gets to feeling smaller, more self-conscious, more uncertain of what he thinks and believes; it is then that the novel turns into a document of the thwarted individual will. But this is not a natural subject for the novel, which takes its very energy from the life of society.

Autobiography is properly a history of a self, and it is this concern with a self as a character, as an organism, that makes autobiography the queerly moving, tangible, vibratory kind of narrative that it can be. Everyone knows that the emergence of the self as a central subject in modern thinking and modern art is no proof of individual power or freedom. Shakespeare, of whom we know so little as a person, left a fuller record of the effect of human experience on a single mind than we get from the most tenderly self-cherishing passages in Proust or Nabokov or Hemingway; we know very little about Shakespeare's *self*, and Keats's statement sums up profoundly the creative inferiority of all modern writing that turns on the self as hero when he compares Wordsworth with Shakespeare's bewildering lack of self. Keats says that as distinguished from the Wordsworthian, or “egotistical sublime, which is a thing per se, and stands alone,” the “poetical character is not itself—it has no self—It is everything and nothing—It has no character. . . . A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no Identity—he is continually in for and filling some other body. . . . It is a wretched thing to confess; but it is a very fact, that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical Nature—how can I, when I have no Nature?”

This is magnificent in its truth about Shakespeare. But it is less true of Keats than it is of Shakespeare, and it does not easily apply to such self-haunted writers of narrative as Proust, Celine, Joyce, Nabokov, and Hemingway. We cannot reflect on such key talents of our time without recognizing the

immense role that the self now plays in fiction. The "egotistical sublime," Keats's keen phrase, suggests the sublimity that the ego finds in itself, in its own strivings, as well as the sublimity that it confers upon the world as the object of the self's consciousness. And we all understandably disparage the egotistical, whether sublime or not, especially when we compare it with Shakespeare's ability to enter into so many characters.

But remember that Keats, who understood this lack of egotism in Shakespeare, could not himself write a good play, and that neither could any of the English romantic poets. In our day the contemporary theater, at least in English, does not use poets well, does not depend on poetry for dramatic expression though it may occasionally exploit and impersonate poetic rhythms in its rhetoric. Shakespeare's lack of personal identity is now a mystery, and first-rate dramatic narrative is found only in prose fiction, and prose fiction of the kind, as one can see in Joyce, Faulkner, Lawrence, Hemingway, that has grown out of the egotism of romantic poetry. Faulkner once told an interviewer—"I'm a failed poet. Maybe every novelist wants to write poetry first, finds he can't, and then tries the short story, which is the most demanding form after poetry. And, failing at that, only then does he take up novel writing." Hemingway, whose first book was called *Three Stories And Ten Poems*, learned to write prose in rhythms learned from poetry. From Melville to Joyce and Faulkner, the novelists in English who have come to mean most to us have been those associated with just the kind of self-insisting and self-exploring romanticism that Keats deprecated. And in the most interesting novelists who have come up since the Second World War, like Malcolm Lowry and Saul Bellow, one feels that the egotistical sublime has been their key to the chaos of the contemporary world. Perhaps it is when the world becomes a screen for the self's own discoveries and imaginings, when the self becomes a passage to some mysterious collective truth that waits upon the self to be revealed, that gifted writers turn to autobiography as artistic strategy. And of course the ideal subject for such purposes is childhood—a subject

that has become successively more interesting from age to age, and that has never interested any age so much as it does ours.

One reason for this is of course the solicitousness for one's self that is a mark of our culture; but the main literary reason is the belief, which the Romantics first propounded, that knowledge is attached to ourselves as children which later we lose. And it is only when a subject or interest or form is associated with an advance in his creative thinking—which is his power—that it is valued by a writer. No good writer chooses a form for psychological needs alone, since it is not *himself* he is interested in as an artist; he chooses a mask, an imagined self, for the control it gives him over disconnected, sterile, often meaningless facts. There is an artistic shrewdness to the exploitation of autobiographical devices that derives from the fact that since the writer tends to be more engaged with his self than he used to be, he is also more demanding of what the self can make of the world, and that he finds a power in this engagement and demand. There is an imaginative space that every true writer seeks to enlarge by means of his consciousness. The writer seeks to press his consciousness into being—to convert his material openly and dramatically into a new human experience.

The fascination with childhood as a subject in contemporary narrative derives, I think, from the esthetic pleasure that the writer finds in substituting the language of mature consciousness for the unformulated consciousness of the child. Joyce in the beginning of *A Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man* tries to express the smells, sounds, textures, and pleasures of the cradle. Lawrence in *Sons And Lovers* tries to recreate Oedipal experiences with his mother. Proust, in the "Overture" to *Remembrance Of Things Past*—and this opening section is the classic expression of this use of childhood in modern fiction—describes his earliest impressions in sentences that affect us as if no one before him had ever found the words for these intense experiences. The creative rapture of Proust's own slowly discovering genius becomes the theme of the salvation through art; language can shape and re-

create the dead memories that weigh us down, language can raise us from our bondage to self and to the past.

In this power over his past is the writer's key to such immortality as we can ever achieve. Proust's rapture has little to do with psychology itself, for it is not a condition that Proust is writing about but the *recapture* of life and of true meaning. The rapture celebrates the artist's present consciousness, his creative power. In all these great autobiographical narratives of modern literature, from Wordsworth's *Prelude* through Whitman's great songs of himself to the implanting of the romantic consciousness as a metaphor and technique of twentieth-century fiction, the only hero is the writer; the epic he writes is the growth of the writer's mind, his rejoicing in his conscious gift. Of such classic modern books as *A Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man*, *Remembrance Of Things Past*, *Journey To The End Of The Night*, *Sons And Lovers*, as of *Moby Dick*, *Walden*, and *Song Of Myself*, one can say that the subject is the triumph of the creative consciousness in the hero. Creativity has indeed become a prime virtue in our culture—and it is this pride in consciousness for itself and of itself that has marked the literature we most admire.

Consciousness, in this literary sense, is not so much consciousness that powerfully dramatizes an object as it is an awareness of oneself being conscious. One sees on every hand today an idea of consciousness that is self-representative. One art critic has admirably said of action painting that the painter deliberately engages in a struggle with the painting in order to release the fullest possible consciousness in himself, that the painting is the occasion of his self-discovery as an imagination. And perhaps this trait, this growing celebration of one's own powers, can be found among pure scientists as well; Heisenberg has said that to the farthest limits of outer space man carries only the image of himself. The more one studies the mind of contemporary literature, the more one sees what Poe, who fancied himself a universal savant, meant when he said that this is emphatically the thinking age; that it may be doubted whether anyone can properly be

said to have thought before. What interests the contemporary critic is usually not literature as a guide to belief, or conduct, or action, but the forms or myths or rituals that he can uncover in works of literature as universally recurring traits of the imagination itself. No one turns now to novels for a key to the society in which we live; we expect that of the sociologists. The only novelists who seem truly creative to us now are those who command the language to interest us; more and more in the last few years the stimulating new novelists have been those, like J. P. Donleavy and William Burroughs, who start from the stream of consciousness and stay inside this world. Such writers protest that the outside world is simply insane, but what they really mean is that it is boring compared with the farce that is played inside the mind. A book like *Naked Lunch* is an experiment in consciousness, like taking drugs.

It is to this pride in consciousness as creativity that I attribute much of the idolatry of art in our time—the idea of art now means more than the concrete works of art. The self is inevitably the prime guest at this party of celebration. And in the high value that we put now on artistic consciousness I see a key to the character of literature in our day. When we look back at Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*, we can see why Hemingway, for all the radiant and unforgettable pages he created out of his struggles to become an original artist, never became a mature novelist or a novelist of mature life—we can see why fascination with the tone and color of his own growth actually replaced many other interests for him. When we look back at Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, we can see why this writer, who is so gifted as a fantasist and inventor, nevertheless makes us feel that his is the only active voice in his novels. Nabokov has even written a book on this theme called *The Gift*; whenever I read even his best work, I seem to hear Nabokov saying to the reader—"How talented I am!" Proust is the only writer of his time I can think of who used autobiography to create a classic novel. Proust was a child of the great French literary tradition, deeply rooted in and concerned with French

aristocracy, French politics, French manners; Proust wrote his novel out of a profound intellectual faith that the past is not merely recovered but to be redeemed as a key to immortality. The imagination, thought Proust, makes all things immortal in the kingdom of time—and it was this immortality that Proust celebrated, not himself. When the writer affirms that his resources of consciousness alone save him from the abyss of non-being, which is what writers mean when they say that the outside world now is crazy, autobiography reduces the world to ourselves and the form has reached the limit of its usefulness.

Still, autobiography as narrative is usually of intense interest—intensity is indeed its mode, for nothing is more intense to a person than his own experience. This is also its esthetic dilemma, on which contemporary fiction is often hung up; for autobiography deals with a case history, not with plot; with portraits, not with characters; it fixes the relation between the artist and the world, and so fixes our idea of the world instead of representing it to us as a moving, transforming power. It may be that the great social epics of the past are impossible to duplicate today because the plot in such books really hung on an argument about how society functions; today the novelist has no such argument of his own, or is not convinced that such argument is the final truth. But it is also clear that the exploration and celebration of individual consciousness represented an effort to find a new intellectual faith through psychology, and this faith has not been forthcoming. The stream-of-consciousness novel is as outmoded as the old realistic novel of society, for it has become a way of performing and repeating the discoveries that Proust

and Joyce made half a century ago.

The story of the artist as a young man has become tiresome, for all such artists tend to be the same. But this is by no means the only story that autobiography has to tell. Sartre said that during the occupation of France, Proust made him think of a lady on a chaise longue putting one bonbon after another into her mouth. One can easily sympathize with this impatient radical feeling that Proust is not for an age in which we all feel that we are being overrun by politics. Society is no longer a backdrop to anybody's sensitivity. It is ferocious in its claim on our attention, and so complex as at times to seem a bad dream. We have all suffered too much from society, we are now too aware of what it may do to us, to be able to dispose of it as literature. But correspondingly, the new novels of society may come from those who can demonstrate just how much the individual is under fire everywhere in today's world. Autobiography as narrative can serve to create the effect of a world that in the city jungle, in the concentration camps, in the barracks, is the form that we must learn to express even when we have no hope of mastering it. We are all, as Camus showed with such exemplary clarity in his first and best novel, strangers in our present-day world—and as strangers, we have things to say about our experience that no one else can say for us. In a society where so many values have been overturned without our admitting it, where there is an obvious gap between the culture we profess and the dangers among which we really live, the autobiographical mode can be an authentic way of establishing the truth of our experience. The individual is real even when the culture around him is not.

Writing an autobiography template isn't an easy undertaking. When written, there will be as many life stories as there are people. What will make an autobiographical essay stand out are the essential topics. Those which will make it unique among the rest, sorting out the most significant events in one's life and writing about them are difficult. There is an abundance of experiences to choose from. Contents. 1 Autobiography Examples. 2 Formats for autobiography examples. 3 Autobiography Samples.