

Reading Autobiography

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Near the end of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Hume addresses the question of whether or not there is such a thing as personal identity. Claiming to speak for most of mankind, he observes that "when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other . . . I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception."¹ These perceptions gather, mingle and pass away in a constant procession through the mind such that there "is properly no *simplicity* in it at one time, nor identity in different" (253). Hume then poses the question his remarks beg: "What then gives us so great a propension to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose ourselves possest of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro' the whole course of our lives?" (253). Because perceptions resemble each other, are contiguous, or appear to generate one another along a line of cause and effect, the individual is disposed to leap over the real differences between them and posit identity where there is at best relationship. Furthermore, because such relations between ideas and the continuity they imply "may diminish by insensible degrees, we have no just standard, by which we can decide any dispute concerning the time, when they acquire or lose a title to the name of identity" (162). The individual, of course, is free to constitute an identity for himself at will, but there is no philosophical, that is to say necessary and sufficient standard for judging the adequacy of his arbitrary act. As Hume puts it: "all the nice and subtile questions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided, and are to be regarded rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficulties" (262). In other words, personal identity is a linguistic phenomenon, a matter of form, not substance.

It is important to observe, however, that while Hume denies the philosophical reality of personal identity, he openly acknowledges its power as a psychological reality. Though we may catch ourselves assuming identity where there is only relationship, "and return to a more accurate method of thinking, yet we cannot long sustain our philosophy, or take off this bias from the imagination" (254). The human mind seems to have a need to construe itself even though the constructed identity, a formalization, is something other, something fundamentally at odds with the heterogeneous activity at the center of mental life. The authentic self, if the concept even makes sense within the framework of Hume's analysis, is diffused in the heterogeneity of perception, but the human mind, in a denial of subjective experience, instead finds itself in the image, the fiction of identity. The mind, as it were, bears false witness against itself, and the power of the falsehood is such that it often masks entirely the true nature of subjective life. The individual knows himself as something he is not.

The implications of Hume's discussion recur in later investigations into the nature of identity. The power of Saturn's lost "strong identity" in Keats's *Hyperion*, is manifest in his former capacity to harmonize and to contain:

But it is so; and I am smother'd up,
And buried from all godlike exercise
Of influence benign on planets pale,
Of admonitions to the winds and seas,
Of peaceful sway above man's harvesting,
And all those acts which Deity supreme
Doth ease its heart of love in. (I, 106-12)²

As god/king, Saturn's mental life is acted out in the life of the world. His image of himself, his identity, masks the heterogeneity of his mental and physical kingdom until the repressed truth of subjectivity, the chaos from which Saturn fashioned forth his world, is "nurtur'd to such bursting forth" (I, 104). Saturn's identity, as much a formality as the "great diadem" he wears on his brow, supplants chaos with an image of order but only until the rebel truth amasses its strength. Deposed, stripped of identity, Saturn sits unconscious as subjectivity has free play, but the return to consciousness brings on again the bias toward identity Hume describes:

O tender spouse of gold Hyperion,
Thea, I feel thee ere I see thy face;

Look up, and let me see our doom in it;
Look up, and tell me if this feeble shape
Is Saturn's; tell me, if thou hear'st the voice
Of Saturn; tell me, if this wrinkling brow,
Naked and bare of its great diadem,
Peers like the front of Saturn. (I, 95-102)

Finding the way to himself in the apparently unified image of another, Saturn constitutes himself as an "I," a psychological reflection of Thea's coherence and identity as a purely physical presence.³ He regains his name and some lines later energetically determines to construct for himself a new world, the order and strength of which reflect his sense of himself:

But cannot I create?
Cannot I form? Cannot I fashion forth
Another world, another universe,
To overbear and crumble this to nought?
Where is another Chaos? Where? (I, 141-45)

Saturn claims, of course, that the identity reflected in this fashioning is his "real self," but insofar as it originates in the image of another (Thea), one must suspect that he is really closest to the subjective source when sitting silent and still, before the return to consciousness.

Writing two years earlier than Keats, Byron describes at the beginning of *Childe Harold*, III, the mind's ability to construct a life for itself:

'Tis to create, and in creating live
A being more intense, that we endow
With form our fancy, gaining as we give
The life we image, even as I do now.
What am I? Nothing: but not so art thou,
Soul of my thought! with whom I traverse earth,
Invisible but gazing, as I glow
Mix'd with thy spirit, blended with thy birth,
And feeling still with thee in my crush'd feelings' dearth.

(III, 64)⁴

The stanza explicitly acknowledges the formal nature of the created identity that masks the capricious heterogeneity of subjective experience implied by the word "fancy." "Nothing," in much the same way that the silent and unconscious Saturn is nothing, Byron fashions and becomes

the image of himself, the "Soul of my thought." In adopting this identity, Byron gains two things. First, he regains consciousness and thus continues to be capable of feeling ("blended with thy birth, / And feeling still with thee . . ."). That is to say, he escapes the dearth of feeling that goes hand in hand with unconsciousness, with the "Nothing" of the personality-denying absorption in subjectivity. But the word "still" in the final line also carries the sense of "peaceful" or "calm." Byron also seems to gain the "influence benign on planets pale" that Saturn lost with his identity as god/king. Broken into a heterogeneous play of fragments that makes him "Nothing," Byron masks his "crush'd feelings" with the coherent identity he makes himself.

If this stanza from *Childe Harold* suggests the denial of subjectivity's chaotic truth (a desirable and therapeutic denial) involved in identity-formation, another poem, written at about the same time, describes the deposition of identity by repressed subjectivity. The youth and the maiden in "The Dream," a short narrative poem inspired by Byron's youthful love affair with Mary Chaworth, are oddly attracted to each other, as if each were the unconscious subjective truth of the other. The two part, however, seeking to make lives for themselves that do not include the other, constructing, as it were, harmonious identities (figured here in marriage) that mask the continuing subjective presence of the other. But eventually, like Jupiter under Saturn, the other amasses sufficient strength to rebel, shatters the coherent identity, and leaves both the man and the woman awash in the unfocused play of subjectivity. The woman becomes "the queen of a fantastic realm; her thoughts / Were combinations of disjointed things" (173-74), though her madness, as Byron points out, is "the telescope of truth"; and the man becomes a Wanderer through a world at war.

This poem is complicated, however, by the fact that Byron purports in his story to convey the essential nature of the man and woman's lives. His dream of their existence, he writes: "curdles a long life into one hour" (26). The narrator, at one remove, comprehends the lives of the man and woman, as they cannot, and implicitly supplies them with coherent identities as representative human beings. In his account of his subjects' lives, the narrator reflects the advantages of perspective, but he seems to ignore the implications of their experience when he claims to trace out "the doom / Of these two creatures" (203-04). While the narrator acknowledges that life brought "near in utter nakedness," unfocused by the fiction of identity, is frenzied and at war, he turns the acknowledge-

ment against itself by incorporating it into a theory of identity-formation:

The mind can make

Substance, and people planets of its own
With beings brighter than have been, and give
A breath to forms which can outlive all flesh.
I would recall a vision which I dream'd
Perchance in sleep—for in itself a thought,
A slumbering thought, is capable of years,
And curdles a long life into one hour. (19-26)

Whether this vision of a long life comprehended is to be taken as more or less than truth for being a dream remains ambiguous, but it does claim to contain the undirected subjectivity of the man and woman. The narrative frame thus absorbs and reverses the implications of the narrative—a maneuver that suggests again the bias of the human mind toward identity.

Jacques Lacan's essay, "Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je," is a more recent discussion of the divergence of subjectivity and identity. Seeking to explain the joy the child derives from seeing himself reflected in a mirror, Lacan writes:

This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursing dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject. . . . But the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (*le devenir*) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality.⁵

By reference to the exterior image of the unitary form of the body, the child figures the ground of his conscious mental life as a unitary "I." Identity is thus constituted in the image of an image, and marks the individual's alienation from his own reality. Identity, in short, is generated from a purely formal structure mechanically adopted from the external world.

The recurrent distinction between identity and subjective reality suggests that virtually all the individual's self-contemplation amounts to acts of biographizing or more properly autobiographizing.⁶ He understands his life, that is, according to various formal choices, and what we are prone to call his philosophy of life is, more accurately, his philosophy of biography. Keats's view of the world as a vale of soul-making, or Byron's theory of mobility, is a formalism that makes it possible to constitute and verify (rhetorically) an identity, to tell a life story, but it bears no substantive relation to the inner life of the individual, something about which he is incapable of philosophizing. The point to be made here is that one begins to autobiographize at a very early age (the mirror stage, Lacan points out, can come as early as the age of six months) and never again gets behind the formalization to the sources of subjective experience, at least insofar as one preserves one's sanity in the conventional sense of the word.

Autobiography, therefore, as a psychological writing, is a universal human phenomenon, though as such, perhaps, more obviously the province of the psychoanalyst than of the student of literature.⁷ The formalization that is autobiography, however, is repeated in forms more accessible to the reader at large, as texts. These manifest autobiographies, it should be stressed, are not copies of the psychological writing, but rather repetitions in kind. The manifest autobiography, in other words, may formulate a different identity from the interior one that most immediately displaces the individual's subjective life, but both are versions of the same activity and both are formalizations. Although we may read indirectly the interior text by watching an individual behave or asking him about his dreams, it is in autobiography as a literary text that the activity of psychological writing is most explicitly repeated in the external world, raising for others to explore the complex of problems, intellectual and moral, involved in observing another man making sense of himself.

Before touching on one such problem, I should stress that in describing both psychological and manifest autobiography as instances of "writing" and as "formalizations," I assume their essential linguistic nature. They are figurations on a field of play. The heterogeneity of subjectivity—so impersonal as to be utterly interpersonal—accommodates any imaginable figuration, any unique personal identity, once repression, sublimation, and the like begin their troping. But identity is open at

various points to disruption by the play it strives to stabilize or to displacement by another figuration. Similarly, the literary autobiographer tropes the heterogeneity of his language into an apparently stable and persuasive structure that is always open to disruption or displacement because figurative language is imperfectly exclusive. To the extent that the literary autobiographer seeks to fashion himself out of the heterogeneity of his language, the disruption of that fashioning repeats the disruption of the psychological writing, an interior disruption of identity that is always occurring implicitly even if it does not occur explicitly as it does in the case of Keats's *Saturn* or Byron's unnamed man and woman. Such disruptions, of course, expose identity, the aim of autobiographizing, as a fiction.

Even a brief survey of the existing literature will show that perhaps the most persistent "problem" in autobiography is what Francis Hart calls "the mimetic question of the interplay of history and fiction."⁸ Does a given autobiography represent the truth about the autobiographer? The problem is, in part, the creation of autobiographers themselves, who like Rousseau declare, "My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself."⁹ Readers too, however, help to create the problem, doubting, as they do, the autobiographer's willingness to expose to the world potentially unpopular aspects of himself. From a theoretical point of view, as my discussion of the Hume, Keats, Byron and Lacan texts implies, the question of autobiographical truth is in some sense no question at all, since the identity that the text seeks to represent is originally constituted as a fiction. Autobiography originally exists as a psychological writing coextensive with the individual's identity, and, like identity, it comes into being by way of a formalization rather than a barefaced confrontation with subjective reality.

Few autobiographers, of course, are willing to acknowledge openly the fictionality of their constructed identities and the falsity of their writing simply because they share with every other human being the bias toward identity. But in this unwillingness, the autobiographer is guilty of a second degree of falsehood. Claiming to represent the truth about himself while at best capable only of offering the formalization that is identity, the autobiographer makes false overtures to his readers. He is, as it were, guilty of a representational falsehood in portraying the fiction of identity as truth. The truth problem in autobiography, then, or what I should more properly call the falsehood problem, is twofold. In the first

place, the subject of autobiography, "I," marks, as Lacan points out, the individual's discordance with his own reality, and secondly, the autobiographer engages in a representational fiction when he attempts to authorize his autobiographical writing, to prove that it is, recalling Hume's distinction, not merely "grammatical" but rather philosophic-al.¹⁰ Such proof is impossible since autobiography originates with identity as a representation lacking a referent in the individual's subjective reality. Still, by way of an assertion or a more devious formal ploy, the autobiographer may give his representation the illusion of truth. Byron, I've suggested, seeks to create just such an illusion in "The Dream" by subsuming the experience of the man and woman into his own apparently more comprehensive understanding of their lives with what is little more than a rhetorical expropriation.¹¹ Such maneuvering, however, amounts to mere wheel-spinning and speaks again to the inability of autobiography to get behind its own formality.

These remarks on two degrees of falsehood in autobiography suggest what one might call a philosophical way of reading a given autobiographical text, a way of reading designed to touch the premises of the text's existence by exposing the fictions upon which it depends. Essentially deconstructive, this method of reading involves in the first phase, a close analysis of the text in an effort to discover those passages where the autobiographer's homogeneous mask of identity is shaken by an eruption of heterogeneity, whether acknowledged by the writer or not. Moments of contradiction or of multiplicity, such aporias in the text may mark less radical versions of the unmasking Saturn experiences in Keats's *Hyperion*. The goal, at any rate, in this phase of the reading, is to show the fictionality of autobiography by focusing on those passages where a given text clearly vacillates in its effort to fashion identity out of language. In the second phase, the philosophical reader examines the representational falsehoods of the given text, the rhetorical strategies by which the autobiographer attempts to authorize his writing, to give his fiction the illusion of truth.

An example will best elaborate this bald procedural outline—and I want in a moment to look at one of the six brief autobiographies Edward Gibbon wrote between 1788 and 1794—but first a qualification about the proposed method of reading needs to be registered. While it is true that what I have called a philosophical way of reading asks the most fundamental questions about autobiography—the ontological questions—it should not exclude less skeptical readings of the autobiog-

raphical text. In fact, one might go so far as to say that the philosophical reading I propose is objectionable in its very skepticism, for it does imply that from the very beginning autobiography is in some sense an exercise in bad faith. Most autobiographers who, like Gibbon, claim to write sincerely would no doubt be surprised, even angered, by the philosophical reader's charges, and with, I suspect, at least some good reason. I will return to this question later, but I do think that for autobiography, more perhaps than for most other genres, it is possible to speak of ethical as well as intellectual standards when proposing a way of reading. It may well be that the best reader of a given autobiography is the one whose skepticism is tempered by a strong sympathetic faculty and a respect for otherness that allows him to appreciate the autobiographer's heavy investment in the identity represented.¹² None of this is to deny the importance of reading autobiography philosophically, but only to place that reading in perspective, and to remember that the reader shares the autobiographer's bias toward identity; indeed, at least at the psychological level, he is himself an autobiographer. Equally vulnerable to the philosophical reading he performs on the autobiographer's text, the reader learns at once something of truth and of tact in the process of reading.

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Several pages into the second of Gibbon's attempts at autobiography, *Memoir B*, the historian suggests the plot of his life as he conceives it:

It is on the tender and vacant mind that the first characters of science and language are most deeply engraved; and I am often conscious that the defects of my first education have not been perfectly supplied by the voluntary labour of my riper years. Yet in my progress from infancy to the age of puberty, the faculties of memory and reason were insensibly fortified, my stock of ideas was increased, and I soon discovered the spirit of enquiry and the love of books to which I owe the happiness of my life.¹³ (117)

A number of terms stand off against each other in this passage. The "tender and vacant mind" opposes his present consciousness; the involuntary exposure to the "first characters of science and language" contrasts with the "voluntary labours of my riper years"; infancy, a state Gibbon elsewhere equates with animal life (113), stands against the life of spirit and ideas. Gibbon understands his life as a temporal movement away from the first term in each of these cases and toward the second. Moreover, he defines this movement as progress yielding happiness—the