

Discourse Study of Genre: Autobiography

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Abstract

What arouses our interest is curiosity to know about others. What is an autobiography? The dictionary says: “A personal account of one’s own life especially for publication”. Autobiographies offer insight into the mode of consciousness of others especially in the case of men of notable achievement to know the personal story of well-known events, of motives and intentions that are hidden behind them. This type of knowledge is interesting and instructive.

Unlike novel we are won over by the hero, in the case of the real hero of the autobiography he is won over by his achievements. We admire him by knowing him intimately and by peeping into his privacy. Autobiographies are works of art that keep us spellbound and fascinating. Autobiography is a form in which a writer speaks of himself and events of his personal life which he had experienced.

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1. An Autobiography, a Diary, Memoirs and Personal Letters

An autobiography is quite distinct and distinguished from a diary or memoirs or personal letters. The founder of Mughal Empire in India, Babur wrote his memoirs under the title of *Tuzak-e-Babri* similarly his grandson wrote his famous memoirs entitled as *Tuzak-e-Jahangiri* but they don’t come under autobiography. For both the books are like chronicles and not autobiographies in the strict sense of the word.

The English diarist Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) is remembered for his diary (1660-1669). Though it is a very important document of contemporary events such as the Great Plague (1665-66), the Fire of London (1666) and the sailing of the Dutch fleet up the Thames (1665-67) but it doesn’t come under the genre of an autobiography.

An autobiography has a distinctive attitude on the part of the author, a distinctive mode of presentation. George Gusdorf of the University of Strasbourg established a basic definition of autobiography as narrative of life as story. In Gusdorf’s view, the autobiographical impulse in its modern form emerged at a certain moment in Western culture with the Industrial Revolution. The individual then disencumbered could look within himself (or herself) as an isolated self directed who could assume command of his life (Olney, 1988).

A diarist notes down what at the moment seems of importance to him but the autobiographer’s description has an ultimate, long range significance. If an autobiography uses the diary material in it, it strengthens its authenticity. A diary-entry provides material for a clear picture which otherwise might have escaped memory. Roy Pascal in “Design and Truth in Autobiography” says Ruskin notes that the despondent account of his aesthetic obtuseness on an early trip along the Riviera which he gives in *Practerita* does not conform with his diary—“I see, indeed, in turning the leaves of my journal, that I have been a little too morose in my record of impressions” and he corrects any possible misapprehensions by inserting a page of the journal (Note 1).

Similar is the case with letters as Pascal says: “When it was suggested to Goethe that he should embody letters in his autobiography, he refused on the ground that incoherent *realia* strewn about must necessarily disturb the good effect”.

It is difficult to make a watertight compartment between a memoir and an autobiography. But this much can be said with no fear of being contradicted that the attention in an autobiography is centered on the self whereas in memoirs on others.

The autobiography of a statesman is nearer to his memoirs. Bismark wrote his “Thoughts and Reflections” with a view to justifying himself. Naturally he was not modest. However he limited his account to the inside story—the particular events, correcting and supplementing which was publicly known. This book is not in an autobiographical form.

Gandhi was creative in its truest sense, as he concludes: “To describe truth as it has appeared to me, and in the exact manner in which I have arrived at it has been my ceaseless effort”. W. B. Yeats, the great English poet and Henry James both have written autobiographical notes with an intention to write their autobiographies which are reduced to recollections and remembrances. Cases in point are Yeats’s “Reveries over childhood and Youth” which consists largely of recollections of relatives and friends; Henry James intended to write his autobiography as a memorial to his brother, his father and friends. Despite their recollections and reminiscences their works are nearer to the form of autobiography.

So we can define autobiography as a work that “involves the reconstruction of the movement of a life, or part of a life, in the actual circumstances in which it was lived”. Its center of interest is the self, not the outside world, though necessarily the outside world must appear so that, in give and take with it, the personality finds its peculiar shape. But “reconstruction of a life” is an impossible task (Pascal, 1960).

But only record of events of a man’s life is not autobiography as A.M. Clark said: “Autobiography is not the annals of a man’s life, but its ‘philosophical history’”.

2. Great Autobiographies

We can say that autobiography is a shaping of the past. It records various stages in an individual’s life, establishing coherence between the stages. It defines consistency of relationship between individual and the milieu or the outside world. Achievement in life is the hallmark of an autobiography. All great autobiographies are written by the people of outstanding name and fame.

The literary figure like a public figure writes under the impression that the posterity, the coming generation would be raring to know about him so to satisfy their curiosity he would be writing his life history—the autobiography. Under the self-same urge Petrarch began his “Letter to Posterity” with a legitimate pride:

“Perchance you will want to know what manner of man I was, and how my writings fared.” Most of the autobiographies of writers are written with this end in view.

The West has produced some of the great autobiographies. For example Logan Pearsall Smith’s “Unforgotten Years” is a loose form of autobiography that is why it reminisces.

St. Augustine’s “Confessions” is a great autobiography which deals with a series of spiritual crises in his early life. He was for a time *Manichaeian* (Note 2) but was converted after hearing sermons of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, where Augustine was a teacher of rhetoric. The scene of his conversion is vividly described in his autobiography “Confessions”. It deals with the description of manners of his times. Such autobiographies which are too engrossed in the self to take note of the outer world—rather the outward world are totally blurred fail to fulfill the purpose and dictates of an autobiography.

Chateaubriand (Note 3) was not particular or scrupulous in his method of recalling the past. His Memoirs were written and revised over three decades, often under startlingly changed conditions both public and private (Pascal, 1960).

He writes: “The varied events and changing forms of my life thus enter one into the other. It occurs that, in prosperous moments, I have to speak of the time of my misfortunes and that, in my days of tribulation, I retrace my days of happiness. The various sentiments of my different ages, my youth penetrating my old age, the gravity of my years of experience saddening the light-hearted years; the beams of my sun, from its dawn to its setting, crossing and mingling like the scattered reflections of my life: all this gives a sort of indefinable unity to my work: my cradle has something of my grave, my grave has something of my cradle; my sufferings become my pleasures, my pleasures become pains, and one does not know whether these Memoirs are the work of a brown or hoary head.” It is a strange collusion of past and present. It was the result of long duration, the revisions of judgment and of style which he was forced to make. Goethe’s Italian journey and Campaign in France are interesting autobiographical writings.

Russian author Aksakov Sergei Timofeyvich (Note 4) drew his inspiration from Gogol and depicted family life in a rural community, showing a passionate sympathy with nature. His chief works are *Chronicles of a Russian Family* (1856) *Recollections* (1856), *Years of childhood* (1858). They are autobiographical.

In the view of Roy Pascal, *Years of Childhood* is true autobiography. Stendhal's (Note 5) autobiography is entitled *Souvenirs d' Egotisme* and is a genuine autobiography. Pascal says "He asks himself a series of questions like: "What man am I?" and intends to try to see if he can discover something positive, something that will remain for a long time true" for himself. His method is to retrace all the incidents of the ten years he spent in Paris between 1821 and 1830. There is no need to say that the book is full of illuminating remarks about himself and his acquaintance, and tells us a great deal about his mode of life.

His autobiography about his childhood is depicted in his *Vi de Henry Brulard*. One can grasp his personality through peeping into his childhood. Pascal writes: "He makes us fully aware of the effect of the loveless home, the forced piety and the snobbery of his father and aunt, their admiration of his gifts and their well-meaning obstruction of his natural needs; We see how isolation intensifies the self assertion, conceit, and malice of the intelligent and imaginative child, we can trace the sources of his 'Spanish' pride, his horror of the bourgeois, his loathing of hypocrisy and rhetoric and so forth. Yet Henry Brulard is true autobiography..."

Rousseau said that he would give the past as it was in its utter truth. "The likeness of a man in all the truth of nature." Roy Pascal points out "The description of the boyish ruse of watering the willow, the idyllic day with Milles de Graffenried and Galley, the picture of the Abbe tightening Mme Warens' stay-laces, have the sharp stab and lingering aroma of remembered delights rather than the blurred naivety of actual experience."

Some autobiographies are published after death. A case in point is David Hume's. After Hume's (Note 6) death his friend Adam Smith published his autobiography "Life" in 1777.

If we compare Hume's "Life" with Croce's (Note 7) we will find the common factor that both were "equally terse, equally anxious to avoid dwelling on irrelevancies and equally determined to restrict their themes to the history of their calling or mission. But Croce includes in his account factors from outside literature and philosophy, his family and the society of Napoles, the impact of social events and personalities at Rome."

A good biographer carefully chooses from his life and connects past with present continuously and logically. He consciously rationalizes his life and memory operates unconsciously towards the same end.

Cardinal Newman's autobiography "*Apologia pro Vita Sua*" is a remarkable autobiography. "He wrote this in answer to Charles Kingsley, who in Macmillan's Magazine misrepresenting Newman, had remarked that Newman did not consider truth as a necessary virtue. 'The Apologia' came out serially and when it was published as a book much of the controversial matter was omitted. It is an exposition, written with the utmost simplicity and sincerity, and in a style of limpid clearness, of his spiritual history, and has obtained recognition as a literary masterpiece." (Harvey, 1967)

Commenting on "Apologia" Roy Pascal says: "It is clear that he does much less than justice to that part of his experience and thought that found its fulfilment within the Church of England though the complexity of this problem is illustrated by the fact that it was only his conversion to Rome that made him need to write his autobiography."

The central and most complicated problem of autobiography is not "relating facts but experiences" i.e. the interaction of a man and facts or events.

Great Russian novelist, of "The Mother" fame Maxim Gorky (Note 8), wrote his autobiography entitled "Childhood" (1913-14). This autobiography is his masterpiece which has been translated in many languages. Stressing on inside view Roy Pascal says: "The autobiography gives us the 'inside view' what Rousseau calls the 'chain of feeling' for which the autobiographer is often the only authority. But the author himself tends to remain, in Henry James' phrase a 'blurred image' in contrast to the bright images of the people and things he knows."

3. Difference between Autobiography and Biography

Showing the difference between autobiography and biography Roy Pascal says: "There is an essential difference between autobiography and biography. We are the only authority for the 'chain of feeling' in our lives and we establish this chain mainly through memory. The biographer depends on recorded data and as far as possible checks all subjective memories against records, often in fact rectifying faulty recollections." Inaccuracy is not a serious problem for the autobiographer and Stendhal writes for all when he says: "I do not at all claim to write a history but quite simply to note down my memories in order to guess what sort of man I have been." Commenting on Stendhal's aforesaid statement Pascal says: "But memory is not only inaccurate, it is treacherous and may profoundly mislead W. H. Hudson's comments on his autobiography 'Far Away & Long Ago' are interesting." He says "It is an illusion to think the few things... distinctly remembered and visualized are precisely those which were most important in our life."

The autobiographies are based on objective evidence. Some entirely rely on memory, for example most parts of Rousseau's (Note 9) autobiography are those for which he had no documentary sources.

Roy Pascal rightly observes: "Memory can be trusted because autobiography is not just reconstruction of the past but interpretation; the significant thing is what the man can remember of his past. It is a judgment on the past within the framework of the present..."

In an autobiography it is the spirit of the writer that counts. But triviality is the bane of an autobiography Trollope gives a moving account of his boyhood.

As is recorded by Paul Harvey in Oxford Companion to English literature: "He has described in his Autobiography the miserable conditions under which, owing to the poverty of his family induced by the misfortunes or mismanagement of his father, he went, first to Harrow, then to Winchester then again to Harrow; and how when his father's debts obliged the family to take refuge in Belgium his mother supported them by her writings." However there is no consistency in the high standard of Trollope's autobiography as Roy Pascal points out: "... but the remainder of his autobiography is mostly trivial... He tells us at the end: 'It will not, I trust, be supposed by any reader that I have intended in this so-called autobiography to give a record of my inner life.'"

4. Conclusion

An autobiography, if it is up to the mark, demands more than an account of personalities, events and circumstances. These must become the framework in some sense the embodiment of the personality of the writer as a man pledged to life and one must be set free from them as historical facts, and from the concern with their accuracy as historical documents, in order to savour the quality of the central personality.

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Notes

Note 1. Practerita quoted by Roy Pascal in Design and Truth in Autobiography Routledge and Kegan Paul London, 1960, p. 4.

Note 2. A dualistic religious system with Christian, Gnostic, and pagan elements, founded in Persia in the 3rd century by Manes (c.216-c.276). The system of Manichaeism was based on a supposed primeval conflict between light and darkness: matter was evil, but within each person's brain was imprisoned a particle of the divine "light" which could be released by the practice of religion; Christ, Buddha, the Prophets, and Manes had been sent to help in this task. A strict ascetic regime was practised within the sect, which, although persecuted, spread widely in the Roman Empire and in Asia, surviving in Chinese Turkestan until the 13th century. (The Oxford English Reference Dictionary, p. 877)

Note 3. Chateaubriand 1768-1848, French writer and diplomat was an important figure in early French romanticism. His book *le Genie du Christianisme* (1802), which contributed to the post-Revolution religious revival in France, won him the greatest fame. He is famous for his autobiography *Memoires d'Outre - Tombe* (1849-50) gives an eloquent account of life against a background of political upheaval. (The Oxford English Reference Dictionary, Oxford New York, (OUP) 1995, p. 248)

Note 4. Aksakov, Sergei Timofeyevich (1791-1859), Russian author, who drew his inspiration from Gogol and depicted family life in a rural community, showing a passionate sympathy with nature. His chief works are: 'Chronicles of a Russian Family' (1856), 'Recollections' (1856), 'Years of Childhood' (1858); they are autobiographical. (Paul Harvey, The Oxford Companion to English Literature, Oxford, 1967, p. 13)

Note 5. Stendhal (pseudonym of Marie Henri Beyle (1783-1842) French novelist. His two best known novels are *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830) and *La Chartreuse de Parme* (1839). Both are notable for their psychological realism and political analysis. (Judy Pearsall and Bill Trumble, The Oxford English Reference Dictionary, Oxford New York, 1995, p. 1417).

Note 6. David Hume (1711-1776) was Scottish philosopher economist and historian. Among his chief works are *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) and a five-volume *History of England* (1754-62). (The Oxford English Reference Dictionary, N.Y, pp. 689, 690)

Note 7. Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) was Italian Philosopher, historian and critic. His writings on aesthetic theory (the branch of philosophy which he most cultivated and his essays on contemporary literature published in his journal '*Lacritica*' from 1903 to 1944, profoundly influenced aesthetic thought and critical method in Italy during the first half of the 20th century. (Paul Harvey, Oxford Companion to English Literature, Oxford, 1967, p. 212)

Note 8. Maxim Gorky (1868-1936), Russian writer and revolutionary. He became famous for the short stories that he published between 1895-1900: He later turned to writing novels and plays. Among a best known works are the play *the lower depths* 1901 and his autobiographical trilogy (1915-23) (Oxford English Reference Dictionary, N.Y., p. 604)

Note 9. Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1712-78), French philosopher and writer born in Switzerland. From 1750 he came to fame with a series of works highly critical of existing social order; his philosophy is underpinned by a belief in the fundamental goodness of human nature, encapsulated in the concept of 'the noble savage' and the warping effects of civilization... His social contract 1762 anticipated much of the French Revolution... Rousseau is also noted for his *Confessions* (1782), one of the earliest autobiographies (Oxford English Reference Dictionary, N.Y., 1995, p. 1258)

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