

“Art Vs Identity: Between Authenticity and Elusive Representation”

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My present study puts under light the intrinsic tie that connects self, history and art. This triad enhances me to raise the following questions: How do we write? What do we write? Are we only containers within/through which thoughts think and express themselves? Or, are we conscious of what we write, and therefore, what is outlined and reproduced is no more than a presentation of history, and one’s history in art?

For the critic Paul John Eakin, one’s self-history, i.e. autobiography, is the raw material of one’s artistic expression. He writes: “*Autobiography is a man’s very sense of his own personal identity*” (1985: 132). In the same vein, Virginia Woolf maintains that it is otherness in one’s own identity, which writes and expresses itself beyond the realm of physicality. She states: “*It is a mistake to think that literature can be produced from the raw. One get out of life [...] One must become externalised; [...] When I write I’m merely a sensibility*” (1981: 193). The critic Mark Bevir extends further pointing out the importance of the mind in mining within the self and rendering the hidden regions that are, directly or indirectly, accumulated by the sediments of one’s past history. He extends: “*Because the content of a work is given by the mental activity of its author, the content of a text at any moment in time is defined by the mental activity of those individuals who have associated works with it. In a sense, therefore, to study the meaning of a text is always to study authorial intention.*” (2002: 508)

We understand by ‘authorial intention’, the presence of the author in his work. That is, the author keeps himself within his work. He is everywhere and seen nowhere. “*The autobiographer,*” Avrom Fleishman points out, “*keeps his life*

vividly present; otherwise the events become recoverable only by the act of resuscitation known as biography” (1983: 06). Autobiography makes life contemporaneous. Such contemporaneousness makes autobiography ever-unfinished and timeless. In the preface to his book, **Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography**, James Olney writes: “*It is in my opinion that, though it treats often specific places and times and individuals, and must do so to make its experience real autobiography is more universal than it is local, more timeless than historic, and more poetic in its significance than merely personal*” (1972: viii).

Autobiography universalizes the local, poeticizes the historical and gives personal significance to places and spaces, to events and movements. In other words, the artist produces his own reality on the basis of facts. Fleishman maintains that: “[It is] *the literalist or purist position, which maintains that an autobiography is a self-written biography designed and required to impart verifiable information about the historical subject*” (1983: 07). He extends further claiming that any act of writing is a project of writing where the author intentionally creates his world within this world. “*The intention to tell the truth about oneself, like other imaginative projects,*” Fleishman points out, “*is a fictional premise which may issue in highly rewarding constructions of the self*” (10).

Artistic manifestation is rooted within personal production. That is to say, it is the abstraction of the concrete—the object of the subject. Paul De Man compares art to lightning. He explains: “*Lightning cannot be said to be hidden before its manifestation, but rather it expresses itself (if the word still applies) fully in the instant of its illumination*” (1982: XX). Besides, he considers art as a representation: the manifestation of the within in the without. He states: “*It is the distinctive privilege of language to be able to hide meaning behind misleading sign, as when we hide rage or hatred behind a smile.*” (11)

The order of autobiography is in no way the order of history. History is beyond us: we experiment it, or we are driven by its events, whereas autobiography is frequently a conscious reconstruction of such events from within history. Thus, the events of history within a work of art are ‘transgressed’ fragments orchestrated in a special structure that better fits the artistic end, which could be that of the author or just become that of art itself. Fleishman maintains that: “*The auto- biographer gives an order to the facts of his history, an order not inherent in them but necessarily of his own devising*” (1983: 11).

Questing the meaning of life in art is dialogically based on the meaning of life within autobiography. It is neither the event, which is the aim, but the meaning of life within this event which is significant in autobiography. In the terms of Fleishman: “*The object represented in an autobiography would be neither entities nor events but the life itself. [It is] the creation of a new being, a life—not one to take up space and people the earth, perhaps, but one that exists as an aesthetic object*” (13).

And so, two dialogical elements emerge: fact and fiction. The former is the common; the latter is the uncommon. Furthermore, the writer assumes to tell the truth and nothing than the truth. That is, he does acknowledge his presence through signature. In Philippe Lejeune’s sense, he signs his name. The reader considers himself as a truth founder whatever the text is. He believes in what the artist tells. In other words, the reader trusts the artist. Lejeune’s ‘pacte’, which denotes the conventional understanding between writer and reader, is problematic! “*Whether or not,*” Bruss points out, “*what is reported can be discredited; then autobiographer purports to believe in what he asserts*” (1975: 11).

Aesthetic construction of a novel is based on manipulation. The latter makes the author recreate life out of life—out of the fragments of his own experience and blows some spiritual intensity within this creation. He makes, thus, his text autonomous: it is his, yet, not his own; it is from him, yet, not for

him; it is a new born creation, which holds its own self-referentiality. *“Any text is inevitably an emanation of its author so that it reveals uniqueness by a natural process even without his intended or executed design to do so”* (Fleishman 1983: 19).

Writers recycle their memories through art: they create what they do not have in reality. They recreate their own past in order to look at it with a different lens. Recreation makes autobiography a kind of arrangement of the author’s past through his own pure imagination. Thus, what is written is less realistic and more fictitious. *“Through the processes of mediation (by linguistic reality) and suspension (due to the text’s lack of finality of completion),”* Robert Elbaz assumes, *“autobiography can only be fiction: both are narrative arrangements of reality”* (1988: 01). Elbaz goes further claiming that the self is timeless and spaceless, and the self of the past is not the self of the present. He writes: *“Since I am not myself, I am not the same person I was yesterday or ten years ago, given my relational nature, I cannot be writing my autobiography but the story of a variety of old ‘personae’ seen from a distance”* (12). Elbaz’s position keeps pace with Jacques Lacan, who associates the matter of representation with whom he speaks: which self that writes; which self that thinks? He says: *“It is not a question of knowing whether I am speaking about myself in conformity with what I am, but rather that of knowing whether, when I speak of it, I am the same as that of which I speak...”* (Fleishman 1983: 33).

This point of ‘who speaks’ is also raised by Lejeune, who underlines the interference or clashes between the author/narrator/character. He writes: *“En effet, en faisant intervenir le problème de l’auteur, l’autobiographie met en lumière des phénomènes que la fiction laisse dans l’indécision : en particulier le fait qu’il faut très bien y avoir identité du narrateur et du personnage dans le cas du récit ‘à la troisième personne’”* (1975 : 16). Paul John Eakin claims that the reality you have in the novel is an artistic reality, whose bases are facts. He says: *“It is reasonable to assume that all autobiography has*

some fiction in it, as it is to recognize that all fiction is in some sense necessarily autobiographical” (1985: 10).

The linguist Emile Benveniste associates speech to identity and reality to discourse. For him, reality of discourse is a reality in its uniqueness. He writes:

What then is the reality to which ‘I’ or ‘You’ refers to? It is solely ‘reality of discourse’ and this is a very strange thing. ‘I’ cannot be defined except in terms of ‘locution’, not in terms of objects as a nominal sign is. ‘I’ signifies ‘the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse ‘I’. This instance is unique by definition and has validity only in its uniqueness. (1974: 218)

Identity is both extroversive and intraversive. It is similar to light spectrum: it is one, yet, fragmented. Light holds many colours, and so is identity: it holds many selves. At least four, according to Paul De Man: “*1-the self that judges; 2-the self that reads; 3-the self that writes; 4-the self that reads itself*” (1982: 32).

So, which self that writes autobiography? The critic Leigh Gilmore is intrigued by the problem of referentiality in autobiography. He states that: “*The autobiographical code of referentiality, in construct, deploys the illusion that there is a single ‘I’, sufficiently distinct from the ‘I’ it narrates to know it as well as to see it from the vantage of experience and still, more problematically, to be that ‘I’*” (1998: 60).

Both literary critics, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, give us a clear example of how women authenticate themselves within their autobiography. The ‘I’ used by them is no longer the real culturally defined ‘I’ but an ‘I’ of their own. They employ understatement to mask their intentions. “*Even as the autobiographical act gesture toward a desire for ‘the self’ and ‘self-image’ to ‘coincide’, the act, especially for women who ‘question’ the authority of the Law of the Father,*” points out Smith and Watson “*leads not to the inscription of a unitary self but to the self decentred or elided by ‘the fissures of female discontinuity’*” (1998: 20-1). In other words, women develop a

kind of dual consciousness between the culturally prescribed self and a self that comes from the deep insights of the within. “*In life,*” the critic Wayne C. Booth states, “*we never know anyone but ourselves by thoroughly reliable internal signs, and most of us achieve an all too partial view even of ourselves*” (1991: 03). And so is in fiction: we never know anyone but ourselves. We reconstruct a world out of the relics of words and expressions of the artist. Albert Einstein rightly claims that:

Man tries to make himself in the fashion that suits him best, a simplified and intelligible picture of the world; he then tries to some extent to substitute this cosmos of his for the world of experience, and thus to overcome it. This is what the painter, the poet, the speculative philosopher, and the natural scientist do, each in his own fashion. Each makes this cosmos and its construction the pivot of his emotional life, in order to find in the way the peace and security which he cannot find in the narrow whirlpool of personal experience. (1962: 225)

So, the author’s presence is always inside his creation, yet undetectable. “*We must not forget,*” Booth asserts, “*that though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear*” (1991: 20). Rhetorical illusions are only a kind of disguise and elusiveness of the artist.

Is this disguise a means to resist the reader and refuse to tell him the truth about one’s history, or whatever you say is devoid of truth? Commenting upon poets in his ideal city **Republic**, Aristotle considers “*utterances as devoid of sense*” (1975: 1404). The sense is ‘*What is*’, but the poet’s utterances (as *poiesis*, *epos* and *muthos*) are ‘*what is not.*’ In C. Jan Swearingen’s terms, “*The poets’ stories were made up, and thereby not true*” (1990: 182). So, poets are making of ‘*what is*’ ‘*what is not*’—a world of their own within the world of ours. In his book **Personality**, The philosopher and literary critic Tagore Rabindranath writes:

It is almost a truism to say that the world is what we perceive it to be. We imagine that our mind is a mirror, that it is more or

less accurately reflecting what is happening outside. On the contrary, our mind itself is the principal element of creation. The world, while I am perceiving (sic) it, is being incessantly created for myself—time and space. (1953: 47)

A change, a metamorphosis, is an act of aesthetic creation. I mean: to write is to become an ‘Other’. You become what you are not. M. M. Bakhtin maintains that: “*Metamorphosis serves as other basis for a method of portraying the whole of an individual’s life in its more important moments of crisis: for showing how an individual becomes other than what he was*” (1992: 115).

Language makes up the self; it recreates it. The self vibrates and manifests through and within language. Eakin points out that: “*It is through language and the development of imagination in language that man achieves the self-reflexive dimension of consciousness that distinguishes his mental life from the conscious experience of the other animals*” (1985: 193). On the other hand, language displays realities on the self and its diverse intentions. The critic Elizabeth W. Bruss states that: *The structure of autobiography, a story that is at once by and about the same individual, echoes and reinforces a structure already implicit in our language, a structure that is also (not accidentally) very like what we usually take to be the structure of self-consciousness itself: the capacity to know and simultaneously be that which one knows. [...] Indeed to be a ‘self’ at all seems to demand that one displays the reality to embrace, take in, one’s own attributes, and activities—which is just the art of display that language makes possible. (1980: 301)*

The self is held within speech. Thus, it controls the metaphors and the symbols with and within which it manifests. As the author writes, “*he creates not simply an ideal, impersonal ‘man in general’ but an implied version of ‘himself’ that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men’s works. To some novelists it has seemed, indeed, that they were discovering or creating themselves as they wrote*” (Booth 1991: 70-1). So, the

authorial manifestations are within the point of view. Whatever is its nature, this viewpoint is tinged and coloured with some touches of the author. In the words of Bakhtin: “*Behind the narrator’s story we read a second story, the author’s story; he is the one who tells us how the narrator tells stories, and also tells us about the narrator himself*” (1992: 313-14).

The author tailors, with his aesthetic stitches, the rags and fragments of his own past experiences. He harmonizes and orders them in the way he wants. Yet, he remains within his design. Paul Jay maintains that: “*The idea here that selfhood is a product of labor, that we continuously ‘thatch’ ourselves together anew out of ‘shreds’ and ‘tatters’, turn the activities of both the tailor and the editor into metaphors of being*” (1984: 104). Jay gives us the example of James Joyce, who has made Stephen represent the other self that he wants to be but he is not. Thus, the novel reproduces the past he refuses and opts for another self through Stephen: “*If **Portrait** is autobiographical, it is autobiographical in just this way: Joyce’s creation of Stephen represents a putting to death of his own past and his own past self, and yet all the same time it represents his rebirth as an artist*” (1982: 144). Jay’s point is akin to Roland Barthes’s claim of the impossibility to restore the whole of the past into fiction. Barthes writes: “*I do not try to restore myself.... I do not say: ‘I am going to describe myself’ but: ‘I am writing a text, and I call it R. B.’... I am the story which happens to me*” (1977: 56). He then adds: “*What I write about myself is never the last word: the more ‘sincere’ I am, the more interpretable I am, under the eye of other examples than those of the old authors, who believed they were required to submit themselves to one law: Authenticity*” (120).

There is, thus, confusion in representation: who speaks? Who reproduces whom? Is the ‘I’ my real ‘I’ or just an ‘I’less ‘I’-selfless ‘I’-or just an impersonal ‘I’ that represents another ‘He’ that is a part of me, and that I ignore? Bakhtin raises such dual in his **Dialogism**. He writes:

I acknowledge myself, an image that is my own, but on this distanced plane of memory such a consciousness of self is alienated from 'me'. I see myself through the eyes of another. This coincidence of forms—the view I have of myself as self, and the view I have of myself as other—bears an integral, and therefore naïve, character—there is no gap between the two—We have as yet no confession, no exposing of self. The one doing the depicting coincides with the one being depicted. (1992: 34)

And then, how can we depict or describe or report a past history of a self that we fail to detect: it does exist, yet ever-absent. It is in everything, yet, absent from everything! Olney describes such paradox as follows:

It [Self] bears no definition; it squirts like mercury away from observation; it is not known except privately and intuitively; it is for each of us, only itself, unlike anything else experienced or experienceable. And yet, the man who commits himself to the whole task of autobiographer intends to make this self the subject of his book and to import some sense of it to the reader (1972: 24).

The style is said to be the man (Comte Duffon). It holds some imprints and touches of its maker. “*The self,*” Olney maintains “*expresses itself by the metaphors it creates and projects, and we know it by those metaphors; but it did not exist as it now does and as it now is before creating its metaphor*” (1972: 34). In the words of Eric B. Williams: “*Language was thus never the product of nature but rather a medium of inward reflection and revelation (offenbarung)*” (1993: 60).

So, writing is being/becoming an ‘Other’; it is creating oneself through art. And so, the author remains historically alienated and undetectable in this ever-being new. This position is closely related to Susan Stanford Freidman, who assumes that: “*Alienation is not the result of creating a self in language; instead, alienation from the historically imposed image of the self is what motivates the writing, the creation of an alternative self in the autobiographical act*” (1988: 76).

So, truth cannot be grasped in artistic creation; yet, it does exist somewhere within the discourse. The critic William H. Grass points out that: “*Truth, I am convinced, has antipathy for art.[...] It is best when a writer has a deep and abiding indifference to it, although as a private person it may be vital to him*” (1971: 08). Grass adds that: “*The worlds which the writer creates are only imaginatively possible ones, they need not be at all like any real one, and the metaphysics any fiction implies is likely to be meaningless or false if taken as nature’s own*” (9-10).

Language is suggestive, and its suggestiveness makes its signifier hold many signifieds. Thus, interpretation becomes very personal. Furthermore, the author is not systematic and straightforward in his creative text: he says what he does not mean. He uses figures of speech and the like. J. Hillis Miller draws attention to such complexity and claims that: “*Irony is truth telling or a means of truth telling, of unveiling. At the same time, it is a defence against the truth. This doubleness makes it, though it seems so coolly reasonable, another mode of unreason, the unreason of a fundamental undecidability*” (1985: 48-9). In the same vein, William Righter adds: “*To represent something was to become the mask for a truth, either occult or abstract. So, myth became the subject of allegorical interpretation, which, in turn, was rationalized with more and more complexity.*” (1975: 08).

Seemingly, art tends to be self-referential: history and facts are only a means but never an end. Facts of fiction are facts in fiction. They seem realistic, but they are ‘out there’ in a world of never-never-time and never-never-space. Rajchman points out: “*Art turns to its basic means and materials; the artist’s act or gesture is addressed to no one and has no other warrant or function than itself. In some such sense, modernist works are said to be self-questioning*” (1985: 13).

In conclusion, I would say: any creative artist, whether in painting, or writing or acting is present in his creative act. The artist creates life through the imaginative transformations of fact.

Autobiography, thus, is self-realisation within the scope of art. As a reader, I see the author's mind in his work, and his work is more than the fragments of the past—his past. But if the work is a mirror, it does not reflect the artist; it reflects the person, who looks at it—the reader!

Then, is truth 'found' or 'created'? That is the question!

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