

Autobiography and Education

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Autobiography has emerged within a number of educational endeavors as an informing principle which directs both theory and practice. This article argues that despite this activity, there is still little widespread appreciation within education for its special characteristics as a literary genre. The paper maps out the ontological status of autobiography. By analyzing three major contributions to the theory of the genre, its boundaries and key concepts are revealed and discussed. The paper recommends that educators become more familiar with the genre in order to appreciate both its complexities and potential.

Dupuis un peu plus d'une decennie, on fait de plus en plus usage, en éducation, de la rédaction d'autobiographies. Bien que cette pratique soit assez largement répandue, les caractéristiques du genre littéraire lui-même sont trop peu connues. Le propos de cet article est de préciser le statut ontologique de l'autobiographie. Cette réflexion pourra éclairer l'éducateur quant aux possibilités et aux limites de cette pratique en éducation.

Introduction

In a little under two decades, the use of autobiography has emerged to redirect both theory and practice in a heterogeneous collection of educational endeavors. For example, in language education and writing instruction, the work of James Britton (1970; 1981; 1982; 1983) has gained much of its popularity and persuasive force by focusing on students' construction of autobiographical narratives as an indispensable component of the larger category of personal, expressive writing. Likewise, autobiography has been used in teacher preparation courses (Abbs, 1976; Grumet, 1981). It is claimed that inviting students to reflect in writing upon their own personal and educational experiences enables them to gain a deeper knowledge of the kinds of influences likely to affect their present and future abilities as teachers. Autobiography is also recommended as a way towards discovering sources of personal conflict and motivation. In addition, one wing of the academic discipline of curriculum theory has come increasingly to rely on autobiography as a key conceptual and methodological plank in its platform for reconceptualizing the field (Pinar, 1975; Pinar & Grumet, 1976; Grumet, 1981). William Reid (1978) believes that this move "seems in tune with the general intellectual climate" (p. 105) whereby curriculum study should begin to sever its connection with the behavioral sciences and "exchange them for collaboration with the established humanities" (p. 105). So it is that workers in curriculum (Connelly & Clandinin, 1987; Elbaz & Elbaz, 1981; Kelly, 1975; Milner, 1978)

have begun to employ specifically literary concepts and ideas and to promote their use as tools for curriculum analysis. As a consequence, narrative, and especially autobiography, as an example of what Jerome Bruner (1987) calls "self-narrative" (p. 11), has come to be seen as another form of thought, a "mode of cognitive functioning" (Bruner, 1987, p. 11) of equal validity and importance as the kind of thinking that goes into constructing logical or inductive arguments. Therefore autobiography as self-narrative not only works as a distinctive way of ordering experience, but is an "irreducible" (Bruner, 1986, p. 11) method of constructing reality.

It is the major argument of my paper, however, that for all this activity within education, there is still little widespread appreciation for the special features of the genre that have warranted so much attention. For it clearly matters that any educator who might wish not only to remain *au courant* about developments in the field, but who also might wish to gain some understanding of the potential within autobiography, ought at least to possess a map of the territory, one which seeks in broad outline to trace its contours. There is a singular need for an exploration into the ontology of autobiography as first and foremost a *literary* genre, a genre which, as we shall discover, is in its general characteristics deceptively complex and engaging. The aim of this paper, then, is to assist in providing such a map for educators.

Three basic points must be made immediately. First, because autobiography has been used as a term within literary studies which embraces a plethora of discourses (e. g. confessions, letters, diaries, memoirs) that have little connection apart from their examination of a narrator's "self," literary commentators have experienced difficulty in arriving at a conception which does justice to all its various characteristics. Some have devised theories which groan under the conceptual weight they are required to bear; others, in attempting empirical rigor, have found themselves in the role of Procrustes, lopping elements off any exceptions to their rules in an effort to have them fit at all costs. As examples of how widely some attempts can range, major statements have appeared over the last thirty years whose titles themselves indicate their authors' special focus: *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Pascal, 1960), *Versions of the Self* (Morris, 1966), *Metaphors of Self* (Olney, 1972), *A Structural Study of Autobiography* (Mehlman, 1974), *Autobiographical Acts* (Bruss, 1976). And if this theoretical activity impresses with its variety, then the situation is similar, or as James Olney (1989) states, "nearly absolute" (p. 236), for practitioners in the genre.

Secondly, it is also worth stating that one must be wary of transferring the terms uncovered in this analysis too directly or slavishly into education, since the interests of the literary theorist or historian may be different from the interests of those in education. I contend, however, that this is a risk worth taking, for as we shall see, autobiographical theory rightly appreciated has been, and will continue to be, a source of stimulating insights and food for thought. And lastly, although it is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into a thorough critique of the diverse ways autobiography has been employed as a curricular tool, I want to conclude

by considering briefly the work of two representative practitioners of autobiographical method in teacher preparation courses. This analysis is included primarily as a warning to temper the kind of enthusiasm for novelty that has perennially bedeviled education. In the meantime, I believe the field will be well served if what is to follow initiates more general reflection and debate.

An Inquiry Into the Limits of the Genre

A substantial problem faced by any theory of autobiography concerns the boundaries of the genre, what is and what is not to "count" as autobiography. It is well, then, that we begin by considering Georges Gusdorf's (1980) essay "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography." The frequency with which Gusdorf's work is cited and discussed within most critics' work attests to its importance as a landmark in contemporary theory.

Before considering Gusdorf's classic statement on autobiography, one major caveat must be acknowledged. Susan Stanford Friedman (1988) believes that Gusdorf's work raises "serious theoretical problems" (p. 34) for all groups, especially women, who take a different view of self-creation and self-consciousness. Gusdorf's individualistic model is criticized by Friedman on two counts — first, that it does not deal with "the importance of a culturally imposed group identity for women and minorities" (p. 34), and second, that it "ignores the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity" (pp. 34-35). Thus, from both an ideological and psychological viewpoint Friedman claims that Gusdorf ignores the "relational identities" (p. 35) that are at work in the individuation processes of men and women. Although the full import of Friedman's criticisms cannot be taken up here, we would do well to recall them as a forceful corrective to much of what is to follow, especially in the presence of the gender-laden language in which the ideas of Gusdorf and others are couched.

Gusdorf begins by demonstrating how autobiography as a genre has not always existed, nor does it exist everywhere. As he states, "it would seem that autobiography is not to be found outside our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern particular to Western man" (Gusdorf, 1980, p. 29). Autobiography exists when individuals begin to delight in their own image and think themselves worthy of special interest. Gusdorf's use of metaphor is the clue here to his central point. On the one hand, his figurative language motions towards a moral economy of the self, wherein by narrating one's own life story, one can preserve "this precious capital that ought not to disappear" (p. 29). On the other hand, the legalistic, or more provocatively, evangelical, metaphor advances the autobiographer as witness: "He calls himself as witness for himself; others he calls as witness for what is irreplaceable in his presence" (p. 29).

This awareness of individuality is a late product of civilization, and Gusdorf theorizes that the isolated being was rarely the important unit. Gusdorf's myth is one of a lost organic community where each person was born into a social role; individuality, then, occurs when this role is shed; only under these conditions can identity and a wish to explore it become problematic. As he says, "Autobiography

becomes possible only under certain metaphysical preconditions" (p. 30). Curiosity about the individual is a direct consequence of the Copernican Revolution: Our place in the cosmic cycle was replaced by the adventure of the autonomous individual. In this sense, biography as a literary genre provides only the exterior of the person; if the person happens to be a "Great Man," his life is reviewed through the ideological lenses of the age and according to the demands of current propaganda. Autobiography implies a spiritual revolution: "The artist and model coincide, the historian tackles himself as object" (p. 31).

The notion here is that a subject who seizes on the self as object engages complex psychological mechanisms in which there is an encounter with a double. However, this double is at once more fascinating and frightening since the individual perceives that self as both fragile and vulnerable. Narcissus is invoked in this instance as the archtypal figure, one who falls in love with his reflection mirrored in the pool. GUSDORF does not fail to link the medieval perfection of silver-backed mirrors to a disruption in human experience; likewise, contemporary psychoanalysis of the Lacanian variety employs the idea of the "mirror stage" to account for the emergence within infants' consciousness of their own personalities. The ability to distinguish what is outside from what is within lies at the heart of that later ability to shape a version of social reality. Primitives who believe that mirrors or photographs will somehow steal their souls are totally unlike civilized children who have "had all the leisure necessary to make themselves at home with the changing garments of appearances that they have clothed themselves in under the alluring influence of the mirror" (p. 33).

Although autobiography appeared in the Middle Ages and Renaissance in writing such as Augustine's *Confessions* and Montaigne's *Essais*, it is with the Romantic era that the rediscovery of autobiography took place. Ideas of individuality were then coupled with notions of sincerity wherein telling all about the self became a positive virtue. GUSDORF begins to account for this by introducing the concepts of history and anthropology, concepts that allow him to locate autobiography in its cultural moment. In order to accomplish this, GUSDORF must first make some crucial and critical distinctions between an historian of the self and an autobiographer.

The historian of the self is analogous to the painter who wishes to produce a self portrait; however, as with the portraitist, the historian can only capture a moment of external appearance. The autobiographer, on the other hand, "reassemble[s] the scattered elements of his individual life and . . . regroup[s] them in a comprehensive sketch" (p. 35). As a painting is a representation of the present, an autobiography retraces a period, a development across time. Unlike the author of a private journal who notes impressions and mental states from day to day without any concern for continuity, the autobiographer is required to keep a distance with respect to self "in order to reconstitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity" (p. 35). If memoirs are always a "revenge on history" (p. 36), then the autobiographer's act of memory is carried out for its own sake, to "recover and redeem lost time in fixing it forever" (p. 37).

In this notion of autobiography as intervention, the author assumes the task of reconstructing the unity of a life in time. Although Gusdorf knows that events both determine and place limits on any unity of attitude and action, there are "essential themes" (p. 37) of personality that impose themselves on the "complex material of exterior reality" (p. 37). Thus the anthropological prerogative of autobiography is clear: "It is one means to self knowledge thanks to the fact that it recomposes and interprets a life in its totality" (p. 38). Autobiography as a "second reading of experience" (p. 38) is truer than the first reading because it adds consciousness of itself to the raw contingencies of experience. By invoking Hegel's dictum that "consciousness of self is the birthplace of truth," Gusdorf can then establish that the passage from raw experience to consciousness in memory modifies the significance of the experience, a passage which cannot only be sought again through time, but can be "rediscovered and drawn together again beyond time" (p. 39). Memoirs and confessions are not objective and disinterested but are works of personal justification. Autobiography, which on the surface looks like an effort at retracing the history of a life, in fact hides a deeper intention. This is none other than "an apologetics or theodicy of the individual being" (p. 39).

But Gusdorf finds several basic problems with this ontological quest. The historian of the self takes the unity and identity of the self for granted and imagines that he can "merge what he was with what he has become" (p. 39). In life, however, there is a constant tension between our conscious projects and the unconscious drives that motivate them. A narrative consisting of memories composed after the event by someone who knows the outcome in advance, cannot hope to capture this tension, this unfolding of the unknown. "Thus the original sin of autobiography is first one of logical coherence and rationalization" (p. 41). In this sense, autobiography substitutes that which has been formed for that which is in the process of being formed.

For the autobiographer, this narrative problem is insurmountable; the narrator always starts, knowing the outcome of the story in advance. It is because of this synoptic imperative within "true" autobiography that other forms such as daybooks and journals fail to convey the essence of a life, no matter how minutely ordered. These discourses are caricatures of real life; the attempt to capture life's flux is doomed to failure, and becomes instead a sterile rendering of places, names, and dates. From this reasoning, Gusdorf adduces the principle that the significance of autobiography should be sought "beyond truth and falsity" (p. 43) as we might commonly conceive of these notions. Certainly, the historian has a right to check out an autobiographical narrative for accuracy, but a reader might with more profit view the narrative as a work of art and pay more attention to its stylistic harmony than to its faithfulness to the "facts" of the life itself. We therefore tolerate errors, omissions, even downright lies, in the service of discovering the truth of the individual. Yet as important as this lying in the service of truth purports to be, the literary function of autobiography is secondary when one compares it with the truth-claims of the anthropological approach. The motto

here seems to be that in creating, one begins to be created: The liberating moments of self creation are enacted in language, but language shaped according to a primary desire to elucidate the past, to draw out the structure of our being-in-time. The emancipatory, and one might almost say, the therapeutic impulse behind this self-examination, implies that individuals are no longer the same persons after the struggle to interrogate the essence of their beings more intensely. So it is that we can with some justification alter the assertion that *le style c'est l'homme to le style construit l'homme*.

In sum, then, Gusdorf concludes that it is not the task of autobiography to show us the stages of the individual's life — that should be left to the historian or biographer — but rather to reveal to us the effort of a creator “to give the meaning of his own mythic tale” (p. 48). There is never any end to our dialogue with ourselves in search of our own absolutes, the ground of our being. Instead, like Jacob, we continue to wrestle with our angels; in reality, however, we grapple only with ourselves, or with the shadow of a self that can never finally be laid hold of or subdued.

In spite of Gusdorf's ground-breaking work, however, many subsequent commentators seem to have suffered from collective amnesia when it comes to tracking down Gusdorf's essential point, namely, that the significance of autobiography was to be found in its “anthropological” rather than in its purely “literary” function as a genre. Gusdorf himself is, in part, responsible for this confusion, since he fell foul of his own mythic thinking in that he considered Narcissus the appropriate myth for the (literal) mirror-gazing autobiographer. The attractions of the Narcissus myth are easy to see; indeed as Olney (1980) states, “This shift of attention from *bios* to *autos* — from the life to the self — was, I believe, largely responsible for opening things up and turning them in a philosophical, psychological, and literary direction” (p. 19). However Gusdorf, although in part responsible for this shift of attention to the literary qualities of autobiography, never lost sight of its alternative, anthropological significance. What Gusdorf was really arguing for, and what educators in particular would seem to require, is a conception of autobiography that, in Gunn's (1982) words, is “sufficiently capacious to account for [it] as a human, cultural, and even a religious activity” (p. 10). Consequently we might begin to consider an alternative myth to capture the essence of autobiography. To this end, Gunn (1982) suggests that Antaeus, rather than Narcissus, should guide our conception of the form. Under this conception, the self that comes to life is not that of Narcissus who drowned reaching for his mirror-image in the pool, but rather the example of Antaeus, who, so long as he remained in touch with the earth, could not be killed. Hercules, learning his secret, suspended Antaeus in the air and hence was able to overcome him. As Gunn (1982) put it, “Understood as the story of Antaeus, the real question of the autobiographical self then becomes *where do I belong?* not, *who am I?* The question of the self's identity becomes the question of the self's location in a world” (p. 23). To assist in perhaps redressing the balance away from the specific literary claims for autobiography by following

through on this notion of worldliness, of grounding the self in its historical and cultural contexts, we can turn now towards the work of Karl Weintraub.

Major Concepts Expanded (1): History and Consciousness

We turn now from Gusdorf's attempt to delineate the boundaries of the genre — an effort that located the "true" autobiographical impulse in a writer's pursuit of his own mythos in language — to the work of an historian of ideas, Karl J. Weintraub, whose essay "Autobiography and Historical Consciousness" (1975) represents in miniature ideas he would expand upon in his later volume, *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (1978). As befits these reflections of a self-styled "simpleminded historian" (1975, p. 821), Weintraub is anxious to situate more precisely the emergence of autobiography as a major Western preoccupation. He locates the use of the term in Germany shortly after 1800, and notes that its first usage in English, according to the *OED*, was in a 1809 article in the *Quarterly Review* by Robert Southey. Thus autobiography and its cultural function is seen as part of the "intellectual revolution" (p. 821) which also saw the emergence of the "modern form of historical mindedness we call historism or historicism" (p. 821). For Weintraub, the essence of autobiography is "concretely *experienced* reality and not the realm of brute external fact" (p. 822). Biography reverses the process of deriving value from the inward absorption of external fact by trying to discern the inner structure of a life from data on outward behavior or conduct, or from statements about that inner life. In other forms such as memoirs or reminiscences, the writer's eye is focused less on the inner experience and more on the recording of external facts and events. Autobiography, if it is to be more than an account of what Weintraub calls the "I-and-its-circumstances" (p. 824), must adhere more closely to its real subject matter — character, personality, self-conception — "all those difficult-to-define matters which ultimately determine the inner coherence and meaning of a life" (p. 824). "Real" autobiography, then, must be an interweaving of self-consciousness and experience, and all centered upon "an aware self aware of its relation to its experience" (p. 824).

Weintraub is certain that the genuine autobiographic impulse stems primarily from a point of view, "a co-ordinate point in space and time at which the autobiographer stands to view his life" (p. 824). Secondly, this point of view is located somewhere beyond a moment of crisis or a set of experiences which approximates the same function as a crisis. From Augustine to Rousseau, Vico to Goethe, all experienced some point of crisis at which time their lives underwent a wrenching. At this nodal moment, the course of a life is seen to have connecting lines that were previously hidden, a new direction becomes clear where only wandering existed before. Weintraub stresses that during this crisis the writer's retrospective view discerns a *pattern* in experience, otherwise the autobiographic function becomes mere self-orientation, a function that would result in the form being "crippled or undeveloped" (p. 825). Where self-discovery or self-orientation predominates, the genuine autobiographical act of seeing the essential wholeness

of a life is missing. Once this point of view has been gained, the writer "imposes on the past the order of the present" (p. 826). This results in facts being "placed into relationships retroactively in which they did not stand when they were first experienced" (p. 826). These facts are singled out because they are seen to have some symptomatic meaning they did not possess before. Past life is therefore being rearranged, or as Weintraub would have it, retrospectively interpreted, in terms of the meaning that life is now seen to hold. "The dominant autobiographic truth, therefore, is the vision or pattern or meaning of life which the autobiographer has at the moment of writing his autobiography" (p. 827).

But if this view stresses the temporal dimension inherent in the autobiographical act, it also conceals the notion that the writer is likely to have been conditioned by prevailing ideas of what the word "life" means. If one of the hallmarks of life is that it is a process, then autobiography may have a special function in helping us to understand its dynamics. In this task there is a need, as Weintraub states, "to balance diachronic and synchronic elements" (p. 829) since both are required to comprehend how an individual developed through time. Here, self-portraiture must be subsumed under the prior imperative of viewing life-as-process. To have introduced the idea of a life that "develops" or "unfolds" is to foreground the tendency within autobiography of recapturing that process in narrative. If one emphasizes the idea of human nature, then the notion of unfolding comes into play. What is present from the beginning, in embryo as it were, gradually unfolds as if by predetermined necessity. For example, once the moment of crisis has been experienced, as with Augustine, life can be seen as the unfolding of the Creator's design for him that he was previously too blind to see. On the other hand, in the figure of Rousseau, we observe the concept of life as a development through time. For Rousseau, civilization corrupted the unfolding of the naturally good, and so he explored the conditions that would have to prevail if man were to translate his potential into actual life. In the words of Weintraub's memorable sentence, "In living with one's world, one forms a self as the world moves on, and one helps form a world as oneself is being formed" (p. 833). Thus if autobiography is an historical genre that retrospectively interprets a significant portion of a life, it behooves us to attend to the underlying assumptions of the writer regarding the process of that life as it interacts with the world. In this way we will begin to view autobiography as a genre which contains a powerful historic dimension.

Another of Weintraub's major contentions is that "The manner in which men conceive of the nature of the self largely determines the form and process of the autobiographic writing" (p. 834). If a person is seen as a creature with a fixed potential, then the history of autobiography is the story of the effort to attain the true form of Humanity. "One form of self results in one form of autobiography" (p. 834). But if we posit Humanity's Protean nature, then the history of the genre becomes the story of Humanity's changing conception of the self. Likewise, the history of self-conceptions can also assist in the exploration of different cultural

configurations. If this is so, then autobiography not only aids our understanding of history, but again helps us to understand life as continuous process.

One item of significance for autobiography is the tendency within cultures to compress their essential values and convictions into models of human behavior. Thus, in the process of self-formation an individual has constant access to concrete examples or models of being. However, it is not simply that person's model but exerts a greater power because it can be taken to have a more universal application. When an individual wishes to dedicate a life to the attainment of an ideal, immediate guidelines can be found in patterning that behavior after a model. In this way, the story of a life can be fitted into some basic archetypal form, e.g. the stoic, the cynic, the saint. Weintraub states that models "are of particular importance in youth and adolescence" (p. 838), yet the dominant personality conception of Western civilization does not fit the model type, but is in fact antithetical to it.

Since the Renaissance, the ideal has been captured in our notion of the individual. Under this conception the individual is all; one must be true to one's own "self." Decisions about life must be based on their appropriateness to that self-conception. When one is possessed by a consciousness of one's individuality, there is no room for role playing, nor should the autobiography be compressed into a "prepressed formal literary frame" (p. 839). It is in this discussion of the emergence of the individual in history that Weintraub signals the overriding thesis of his paper: "The development of autobiography as a necessary cultural form for giving expression to personal history went hand in hand with his turn towards individuality" (p. 841).

Yet this individual self-searching is made more complex today as different cultures (and sub-cultures) present different models, and as the world splinters and diversifies into national and personal "lifestyles." One method of coping with this overload is to regain a sense of history, to review the autobiographies of individuals who wrote from more traditional conceptions of personality. To do so is to uncover in more pristine form the "variegated richness of consciousness" (p. 843) and to prepare the ground from which a deeper and truer understanding of individuality can flourish.

Weintraub concludes his paper with a plea, not only for a fuller appreciation of the historical dimension in the relationship between autobiography, consciousness and individuality, but for the sociological and moral aspects of it as well. By becoming a literary form in which individuality could best account for itself, autobiography obtained a cultural function it did not possess before. This self-conscious cultivation was the same thing "as living in the world with historical consciousness of the world" (p. 847). But since we are above all social beings, bound to society and culture in innumerable ways, "real" self-cultivation involves a concomitant responsibility to the world. Such a sense of social responsibility will cure us from all narcissistic learning and return our gaze towards finding how, through our self-examination, society may be improved.

Major Concepts (2): Language, Fiction, Psycho-Analysis

To this point certain features have emerged that appear common to most discussions of the genre — concerns about the nature of time, of consciousness, and of the formation of the self. To turn now to John Sturrock's (1977) essay, "The New Model Autobiographer," is to face a provocative and stimulating approach to the form. Initially, much of what Sturrock has to say recapitulates ideas delineated in the work of the two previous commentators, but his new points of orientation and of emphasis raise issues that pertain to the potential of the genre seen from a post-modern perspective.

Sturrock begins by noting small but important grammatical differences between the words biographer and autobiographer. Biography can be used predictively to describe what someone does, whereas autobiographer cannot. Autobiographers are only incidentally authors of an autobiography, and will be classified by whatever else it is that they are famous for. As Sturrock says, "Biography is a trade, autobiography a subsidiary and unrepeatable event" (p. 51). Although, as readers, our expectations of autobiography as a genre are different from our expectations of biography — they must perhaps be less cluttered with data, more intimate, etc. — they have one thing in common: They are both stories. Narrative is part of the deep structure of both modes. But as Sturrock goes on to assert, there is a profound link between autobiography and fiction in that, *pace* Gusdorf, "the untruths it tells may be as rich, or richer, in significance than the truths" (p. 52).

It is Sturrock's firm contention that autobiography would do well to recognize how close it stands to fiction, since he claims that the genre has for too long been saddled with methods of composition more appropriate for biography. Biographical narrative is, above all, chronological narrative: The biographer records the events in the subject's life in the order in which they happened. The biographer may employ an occasional flashback or leap forward in time, but if this was to be the preferred method, it would lead to a species of narratological anarchy.

Autobiography, on the other hand, derives much of its fascination because, as spectator's of a person's psyche, it slakes our curiosity, it reaches the parts where another mode cannot reach. Since the advent of psycho-analysis, these private disclosures have come to be seen, not as an alternative to the public record of a life, but as its truest expression. "It is to the hidden mythology of a life that we have learned to look for a rationale of outward behavior, to those obsessive structures of the mind that alone guarantee the consistency of a personality" (p. 54). Autobiography, then, has everything to learn from psycho-analysis since the latter will shuttle back and forth between past and present, ordered by the sequence of mental events in the present. A life story ordered by chronology "is the counterfeit integration of a random life into a convenient fiction" (p. 55). To defend against such an integration, a life story must be articulated differently; not, incidentally, in the discontinuous method of a diary where there may be breaks in the record of events, but instead in a continuity that is not chronological. What method, it might be asked, will promote such an outcome? Sturrock's

answer is to turn to an examination of the French autobiographer Michel Leiris, who, he claims, is the exemplary autobiographer for our times.

The first article of Leiris' faith is his confidence in the cognitive power of language. Language has "secrets," and to penetrate to them is to learn something about the world and about the self. To demonstrate this, Leiris attends to the associations that certain emotive words — "Soul," "Woman," "The Infinite" — have for him; he therefore organizes the volumes of his autobiography by deliberately following the network of associations that will cause him greatest unease. Autobiography, then, becomes an exercise in logotherapy. Sturrock claims that this power of association "brings into light mnemonic instead of temporal contiguities, [and] has infinitely more to tell us about our permanent psychic organization than the power of chronology" (p. 59).

This notion of giving over the power of words to the autobiographer, a ceding that has traditionally devolved on the poet, means in effect that autobiography now "might be the exploration of the author's *language* rather than his life" (p. 60 emphasis added). This orientation will require a reorientation on the part of readers, in that they will be required to cope with a strategy which seeks to undo fixed ideas of linearity and chronology. Likewise, a new model autobiographer working from these premises will be able to reinstate description into the writing, that heretofore suspect element which is what happens in narratives when the narration stops. It is this adventure through description that Sturrock claims traditional chronological autobiographies lack. "A higher degree of candor altogether is reached when the autobiographer sets off in pursuit of the unlit portions of his past rather than the lit ones and produces revelations that were revelations for himself too" (p. 62). The revolution Leiris has made is now available to everyone. What is required is an initial act of courage and commitment to follow where one's associations, no matter how painful, may lead.

Conclusion

I began by stating that the aim of this paper was to inspect the ontological status of autobiography, to map out the contours of the territory claimed by the genre as its own. It was put forward that the utility of such an undertaking would reside in grounding our thinking about autobiography more precisely, and in bringing to the surface notions of the genre that have warranted its various uses in education. Our engagement with these ideas has allowed us to raise as problematic the nature of concepts central to the genre, concepts which must be addressed whether our goals are theoretical or practical. Ideas involving the self, identity, history, time, narrative, interpretation, experience and knowledge have emerged as constant items on any agenda wishing to lay claim to the insights afforded by the study or application of autobiography. It is equally clear, however, that these notions have been gleaned from documents whose authors are either literary critics or historians, scholars whose interests are not directly oriented towards education. Still, by identifying the characteristics and potential within autobiography as a particular form of written discourse, and by situating it more accurately

within a cultural and historical context, we are not able to make and maintain the kinds of distinctions that might bring some conceptual coherence to our thinking on autobiography and education.

Furthermore, such knowledge will make it less likely that we will overstate our claims for our use of the genre. Let us take, for example, teacher preparation courses. A practitioner like Peter Abbs (1976) wants to incorporate autobiography as a linchpin of any teacher training program. The act of writing an autobiography which reflects on the students' experiences of education will, he says, "reveal the intimate relationship between being and knowing, between existence and education, between self and culture" (p. 148). So far, so good. However, this journey into the "true self," into one's "own centre" (p. 164) takes place in a class which meets "once a week and lasts a minimum of one hour" (p. 164). I would suggest that, notwithstanding Abb's knowledge of the genesis and development of autobiography as a literary genre (as befits a disciple of F.R. Leavis), he has failed to think out clearly enough the relationship between the narratives produced by his students and the extent to which any written account of the self may be construed as largely fictional. If he had done so, he would have found ways to submit his students' narratives to the same rigorous interpretive scrutiny that he would have to any work of fiction. At moments like this it is not always wisest to adopt a naive realist's approach and accept that these narratives automatically afford a transparent window on a student's "self."

On the other hand, Madeleine Grumet's (1981) account of a similar process which emphasizes the notions of distanciation and appropriation of the students' texts, promises a more hopeful outcome, since it is constantly aware of the shifting problems involved in the notion of textuality itself. As the student goes to work producing an interpretive text in response to the original autobiographical text, and then a further text in response to the interpretive text, the student is provoked into questioning the ways he has "construed his experience" as well as "the ways in which the curriculum has invaded his own perceptual lens" (p. 128). This process is disquieting" (p. 128), and shows that "subjectivity does not come easy" (p. 128). Although Abbs and Grumet appear to share the same philosophical understanding and hope for the genre, the anticipated outcome of their processes is conceived in radically different terms. For Abbs, to turn a student toward the true self is analogous to a religious conversion; thus alerted in this one-for-all way, the student then goes forth in evangelical fashion to become what Mathieson (1975) designates "a preacher of culture." Grumet (1980), on the other and, wants to hold fast to "the rigorous dialectic of distanciation and appropriation" (p. 129) as a movement that implies a continuous process of becoming, a movement that denies the fixed status of the "self." In this way both the existential and historical dimensions of autobiographical writing can be addressed and sustained.

To have ended summarily with these kinds of distinctions in the work of Abbs and Grumet is to highlight the extent to which the practical application of autobiography can act to constrain as well as to liberate its effectiveness for

educational thought and practice. Although, as we have seen, there are post-modern elements still remaining within autobiographical theory which retain the potential to further inform both domains, enough has been said here to lend credence to Reid's earlier claim. If a discipline like curriculum theory for example, wishes to exchange being colonized by the social sciences for collaboration with the humanities, then it too must treat autobiography, as well as all similarly powerful literary genres and concepts, with a requisite measure of resistance and respect before any hard-won educational territory is carelessly signed away.

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