

SAYS WHO?

I CAN LOGICALLY BEGIN this issue on autobiography with no other pronoun. The subject imposes itself on the editor, and if he stretches for a way to talk about it, so be it. Selfishness, perhaps. They say that that can be dangerous, but who knows for sure? Sometimes you have to face matters squarely. We all do. Sometimes one has to fight custom, at other times to adopt it, to stand where one is and say *Aye*. (My word.)

Clearly there are degrees of objectivity in this business of self-revelation. There is the (personal, engaging, self-centred, egomaniacal) *I* (pick an adjective); the (impersonal, disengaging, lofty, generalizing) *one*; the (aloof, disinterested, partial) *he*; the (imperious, imperative) *you*; the (communal) *we* (or is this just a royal, editorial convention?). By these pronouns we connect with each other — apparently inexactly, for they *are* open to judgment. How, then to respond? Such pronouns are the stuff of courtroom theatre and sibling rivalry:

You did it.
I did not.
You did so.
Who says?
I says.
Sez you.
I saw him, and he did it.

(Whom do we believe?)

Evidence is limited, partial, biased, circumstantial, sometimes corroborative, sometimes merely irrelevant. How closely it comes to truth depends as much on a judge-and-jury's skills of interpretation as on the "facts" being unfolded. And autobiographies, filled with the selective games, guises, and biases of a (self-defensive, self-aware, self-revelatory) largely ordinary life, require readers with just such highly tuned interpretive skills.

Several recent publications call attention variously to the problems of bias. Graham Greene's *Ways of Escape* (Lester & Orpen Dennys) is one, the title itself suggesting before we even begin the book a novelistic stance with life; it

renders a set of autobiographical choices metaphorically, making a “flight” through life, not a winged glide above the common world, but a series of evasive tactics devised by the successive ages of the same man, as he contrives to make himself anew. “It is a curious business,” he writes, “to read an account of one’s own past written by — whom? Surely not by myself. The self of forty years ago is not the self of today and I read my own book, *The Lawless Roads*, as a stranger would.” But this convincing succession of premises hides a fiction. We may accept that his older and younger selves differ, but logic does not compel us to accept that the younger self will be as strange to the older “as a stranger” will be. Which he knows himself. The stance is a deliberate fiction, to engage the reader in a companionable kind of opening mystery — for the book is above all else an entertainment, a set of essays on the successive events in Greene’s life that led to Africa, Asia, America, Intelligence, and Public Fame. Each episode, as he writes it, shaped the new persona of his next decade. Anecdotally he tells of the way that most of his life’s experience, too, resulted in novel-writing, an activity which creates another problem for him as in retrospect he tries to unfold the sequence of his identities. As his novels become public property, they and “their author,” which is at some remove from “him,” invite public interpretation, identification. Greene is not required to accept identification with his characters or his interpreters’ definitions of himself, or with those (if he is really famous) who may choose to pose as him in look-alike contests or public restaurants. But to what degree are they (all of them) inevitably part of himself? “I found myself shaken by a metaphysical doubt,” he writes as he brings this volume to a close. “Had I been the imposter all the time? Was I the Other?” One might ask how serious such questions are, but must notice at the same time the writer’s skilful play with pronouns. This book has all along been a quest for some sort of discovery; if at the end an imposter “I” named “Other” finds a *shaken* (newly fragmented?) “myself,” what are we to make of it? An epiphany? (Hardly likely — it’s not spontaneous enough for that.) A deliberate confusion? (But to what end?) A joke? (The element of comedy goes often unappreciated by critics strong for “truth.”) At the very least the writer seems to be preserving his options, refusing the present as a definition of the future, already laying claim to the next identity (magus, perhaps) that it will be his to claim and inhabit.

Greene’s sentences also, however, warn us to be wary of the autobiographical novel. The “I” in an autobiography may be a fiction, but it is not identical with a “fictional I.” There remains a distinction between *fictionality* and *historicity*, which affects both the generic shape of the work and the critical response we bring to it. Audrey Thomas’s fiction may be “autobiographical”; like all novelists she draws upon what she sees and knows and remembers as well as upon what she imagines — but that does not make her novels autobiographies. It does not make F. P. Grove’s *A Search for America* an autobiography either, whatever the

author claimed. As far as Canadian writing is concerned, we do not clarify often enough the differences between the diary, the autobiography, and the first-person narrative viewpoint, nor have we sufficiently examined the differences between historical and literary (auto)biographical writing. *In Search of Myself* is tissued with imagination where one expects in the name of truth to find masks of reality; Malcolm Lowry's *Dark As the Grave Wherein My Friend Is Laid* is tissued with reality where one expects to find aesthetic distance and metaphoric control. Most diary-keepers (the explorers, many pioneers, Monica Storrs, Elizabeth Smith) have shaped daily events into an historical record; John Glassco, in *Memoirs of Montparnasse*, and Charles Ritchie, in *An Appetite for Life*, have shaped a journal into a literary event. But the resulting memoirs are not more "truthful" in the one case than in the other. Glassco — like Claire Martin, like Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee (in their magnificent *Days and Nights in Calcutta*), or like Lowry and Grove for that matter — has conveyed a *stance*, a version of experience, which may or may not adhere to externally verifiable *fact*, but may well, more effectively and even more accurately than a verifiable litany, convey the attitudes of a time, the priorities of a person, the biases of politics and place.

As theorists have lately been at pains to point out, autobiographies can take quite different stances. In *The Forms of Autobiography*, for example, William C. Spengemann delineates three categories: the *self-explanation*, which uses autobiography (in this cast The Past) as a means of justifying The Present; the *self-portrait*, which offers a kind of "philosophic" analysis of identity; and the *self-enactment*, which performs a personal psychodrama for the reader to observe and, perhaps, decode. And as forms vary, so do the motivations for writing. Some autobiographies are written because there are stories to tell; some are done for fame and money; and some are penned by ghost writers, which raises problems for critics, who must try to figure out not only who's being written about but also who's being revealed by the voice in the writing. June Callwood's literary hand, I'm given to believe, has appeared in the "autobiographies" of Barbara Walters and Otto Preminger; Ed Ogle's shaped Duncan Pryde's *Nunaga*; John Munro's created the literary voice for both John Diefenbaker's *One Canada* and Lester Pearson's *Mike*: one might well ask where one identity begins and the other ends.

Yet all can be fascinating. Writing recently in *Queen's Quarterly* about Canadian biography (once almost entirely the prerogative of historians), Donald Swainson itemizes some of the attractions of biography as a genre: "A study of a life humanizes the past and makes it immediate. A fascinating person holds our attention through drama and anecdote. While reading biography we absorb data and concepts about society. . . ." Autobiographies, too, offer glimpses of others. Eleanor Farjeon's *A Nursery in the Nineties* (which Oxford has recently reissued) recounts a splendid moment when her elated writer-father was about to give up

his colonial life to head to England to become famous — all because he had dedicated a book to Dickens and Dickens had responded with a letter. In cold ink the letter had moderately and indirectly said *Thank you, but if you submit material to my magazine it will not necessarily be accepted*. “Believe me,” he closed, “faithfully yours.” But as with ghost-written books, one might be tempted sometimes to trust surfaces too readily, to accept an autobiography’s judgments of others simply because of the seeming authority of the personal contact. A good reader must be alive to the fact that — whether accurate, false, or just accidentally misleading — the nature of the judgment often reveals much more than the surface declares. Susanna Moodie’s portrait of the little stumpy man, in *Roughing It in the Bush*, tells us as much of her own naiveté as it does objectively about her unwelcome visitor. She owns she didn’t like him — but whether because of some intrinsic character trait or because he preferred others to herself she does not absolutely make clear. And of course it is this tantalizing near-revelation of the self which gives any good autobiography its special cachet. People read such works out of interest and curiosity, in order to catch the changing versions of a self; they do so also for the enjoyment of having a personal companion guide them through moments of history, and for the chequered pleasures there are that lie in the process of turning I to eye.

W.H.N.

SAMANTHA CLARA LAYTON

Irving Layton

Into the ordinary day you came,
giving your small nose and chin to the air
and blinded by the noise you could not see.

Your mother’s smile was your benediction;
my wonderment will accompany you
all your days. Dear little girl, what blessings
shall I ask for you? Strong limbs, a mind firm
that looking on this world without dismay
turns furious lust into sweet romance?

These, my child, and more. Grace keep you
queenly and kind, a comfort to the ill and poor,
your presence a bounty of joy to all
that have vision of you, as I have now
who hold your fingers in my trembling hand.