THE JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY PRESS

The New Model Autobiographer
Author(s): John Sturrock
Source: *New Literary History*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Self-Confrontation and Social Vision (Autumn, 1977), pp. 51-63
Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/468436
Accessed: 07-03-2019 21:13 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *New Literary History*

This content downloaded from 165.123.34.86 on Thu, 07 Mar 2019 21:13:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The New Model Autobiographer

John Sturrock

There are small but crucial grammatical differences between biographer and autobiographer: the two words do not work in quite the same way. *Biographer* can be used predicatively of someone to say what it is that he does; *autobiographer* cannot. The distinction holds good in life and even more sharply in death. Biographers, when they die and get an obituary, will hope to be commemorated at the very least as *a* (or better, provided they have worked hard and successfully, as *the*) biographer. Autobiographers are only incidentally the authors of an autobiography, and no rational necrology will describe them as *an,* let alone as *the,* autobiographer; instead, they will be classified by whatever else it is they have done or written—their prime ministership, it may be, or their poetry—which was their cue for writing an autobiography in the first place. Biography, in short, is a trade, autobiography a subsidiary and unrepeatable event; not even Rousseau made autobiography his profession.

It is the regulars, the biographers, who have established the conventions not only of their own practice, of biography, but of autobiography too. The usual objective of the autobiographer is to be his own biographer, the narrator of his life story in the first person. The near totality of autobiographies can fairly be called pseudobiographies, formally distinct from their model only by having "I" where it has "he" or "she." This is not to say that, as readers, our anticipations are the same for autobiography as for biography. We expect autobiography to be less cluttered with data, more intimate, more speculative, perhaps less single-mindedly retrospective than the "same" life story (meaning the life story of the same person) told from "outside." But the outside and inside stories have something in common: they are both stories. The shift from one perspective to the other is a surface one; it has no effect at all on the deep structure common to biography and autobiography.

The relation that ordinarily exists between the two forms stands out clearly and rather comically in the account of how the *Autobiography* of T. H. Huxley came to be written. This is, to put it mildly, a short work, occupying only nine pages of the recent reprint which it shares with the *Autobiography* of Charles Darwin.[1] It is short because Huxley wrote it with reluctance, in order to forestall a biography of himself: it is a

This content downloaded from 165.123.34.86 on Thu, 07 Mar 2019 21:13:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

preemptive document. A Victorian editor wanted to include Huxley's own narrative of his life in a book of biographical essays on illustrious Englishmen. Huxley first of all said no, but the editor continued to pester him and he eventually gave in. The language of his capitulation is symptomatic; he wrote to the editor: "you put before me the alternative of issuing something that may be all wrong, unless I furnish you with something authoritative; I do not say all right, because autobiographies are essentially works of fiction, whatever biographies may be."[2]

This is a decidedly sophisticated answer, whose upshot was Huxley's appearance as one of a pair of interlopers in a book with the quaint and cumbersome title of *From Handel to Halle: Biographical Sketches with Autobiographies of Professor Huxley and Professor Herkomer.* Huxley and the now obscure Professor Herkomer had supplied to the book credibility and the combined weight of their honorifics; the fact that they could be seen to have written their own chapters themselves was an endorsement of the truthfulness of the other contributions. This is real editorial cunning: the two autobiographers are heavily outnumbered, but their inclusion suggests that an equal degree of authenticity has been magically achieved in the biographical sections.

And this despite Huxley's formidable disclaimer that autobiography might be authoritative but was not truthful. This is not an argument against autobiography; on the contrary. What Huxley was on the brink of affirming was that "authoritative" in fact means (is synonymous with) "autobiographical," since whatever an autobiographer writes, however wild or deceitful, cannot but count as testimony. It is impossible, that is, for an autobiographer not to be autobiographical. Huxley had hit on the peculiarity of the genre, which is that the untruths it tells may be as rich, or richer, in significance than the truths. Autobiography has that ideal capaciousness which Paul Valéry found so objectionable in dreams and novels: "Le roman se rapproche formellement du rêve: on peut les définir l'un et l'autre par la considération de cette curieuse propriété: que tous leurs écarts leur appartiennent."[3]

It would do autobiography, I believe, a power of good to recognize how close it stands to fiction, for on the whole autobiographers have made a sadly insufficient use of their specific freedom. They should not, of course, use it to concoct deliberate falsehoods about themselves (unless they choose to introduce explicit falsehoods into their autobiographies so as to characterize the working of their imagination), but to liberate themselves from technical constraints better suited to biography. The formal subordination of autobiography to biography is both obsolete and damaging; it has saddled autobiog-

This content downloaded from 165.123.34.86 on Thu, 07 Mar 2019 21:13:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

raphy with rules of composition that should long ago have been revised in order to make more intelligent use of the autobiographer's remarkable privilege, of remaining an autobiographer no matter what he writes about himself. From any formal point of view, autobiography is a parasitical mode of writing, too timid or inert to shake off the conventions of biography.

The biographer's model in the composition of his work is that most elementary and universal of literary schemes, the narrative. His commission is to write the life story of his subject, and a life story is the shapeliest and most natural of narratives because it begins with birth and ends with death. Were the narrative element in what the biographer writes to falter or disappear from view, his work would be condemned or alternatively allowed to have succeeded, but in a genre other than biography. The biographer too inexpert or too avant-garde to stick to the life story risks disqualification.

Narrative, in a biography, means chronological narrative. Biographers, to a man, stick to the calendar; they record those episodes from their subject's life which they mean to record in the order in which they actually happened. Those happenings for which no date has survived are fitted into the chronological plan where reason indicates that they belong. For to abandon chronology in a biography, as the principle by which the text is organized, would be to abandon logic itself. Whatever substitute the biographer decided on would appear, and be, gratuitous; it would be his own rearrangement of the data, not a rearrangement imposed by the data themselves, and thus an inexcusable arrogation. The most the biographer can permit himself is those trivial jumps to and fro in time which add irony or economy to his narrative, or perhaps the more disruptive and sensational device of the flashback, which will inflate the story with a gratifying if bogus sense of direction as it presses on towards the point of coincidence with its opening. But flashbacks and more local anachronisms derive their influence from the chronological code they infringe; they are, currently, licensed departures from it.

It is hard to think of a serious alternative to chronology in the arrangement of biography. Unlike autobiography, biography is the representation of a completed life, and there can be no quarreling with the biographer's right to project the life he is representing orthogonally onto the page. There are, on the other hand, unserious alternatives to chronology which are well worth mentioning. Jorge Luis Borges, to whom no literary possibility was ever closed, has envisaged biographies of such challengingly fantastic kinds as the story of someone's dreams, or of his bodily organs, or of all the separate occasions in his life when he imagined the pyramids, and so on (ad

This content downloaded from 165.123.34.86 on Thu, 07 Mar 2019 21:13:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

infinitum one has to add). Borges' point is that there are really an infinite number of ways of arranging the full facts of a single life.[4]

Those which Borges selects will, we can be pretty sure, remain merely hypothetical styles of biography. They are fantastic, or impossible, for a simple reason: they are the stories of what is inaccessible to a biographer, of the unrecorded or even, in the case of the bodily organs, the unrecordable (short of the subject's passing his entire span plugged helpfully into electroencephalographs and other medical hardware). But the story of his dreams, or of all the occasions when he has imagined the pyramids, is not inaccessible to the autobiographer. On the contrary, many of us might say that it exemplifies, in however playful a spirit, just that extra degree of privacy which differentiates autobiography from biography and which, since the invention of psychoanalysis, has come more and more to seem not an alternative to the public record of a life but that life's truest explanation. It is to the hidden mythology of a life that we have learned to look for a rationale of outward behavior, to those obsessional structures of the mind that alone guarantee the consistency of a personality. Obsessions come to the surface when we act in identical or assimilable ways at different times of our lives; it is repetition which gives them away. But repetition seldom gets its due in a chronological narrative because the intervals between an event and its replica are too long.

Psychoanalysis, from which autobiography has everything to learn, claims, notoriously, to explain and sometimes to cure through the attention it gives to a patient's history; but this does not mean that the psychoanalyst is a historiographer. He is not concerned with the whole, chronologically ordered past of his patient but with particular episodes from it which he will relate to the present, submerged traumas whose recovery may explain an active neurosis. So far as chronology goes, therefore, the analysis will shuttle to and fro between past and present, and its continuity will be fixed, not by the sequence of events in the past, but by the sequence of mental events in the present. The order in which the past is restored answers to the intimate needs of the patient.

If the object of autobiography is to take possession of our past in as original and coherent a way as possible, then chronology works against that object by extending the past merely conventionally and claiming itself to be the source of life's meanings. For chronology, as we know very well, is seldom understood simply as a succession of events; it is read as an intelligent concatenation of events, and temporal sequences are effortlessly raised into causal ones. We are reassured by believing that what follows after also follows from, a reassurance we are fully entitled to reading a fictional narrative, whose se-

This content downloaded from 165.123.34.86 on Thu, 07 Mar 2019 21:13:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

quence has been dictated by its author; we are hardly entitled to it reading a chronological life story, which is largely a sequence of contingencies. A life story so organized is the counterfeit integration of a random life into a convenient fiction.

The defense against such an integration, or of such a total surrender to convention, is a formal one: the life story must be differently articulated—in diary form, for instance, which at least avoids the deceptive continuity of narrative. This is a form open to biographers and autobiographers alike, but little used by either. In it chronology shows at its purest and most wholesome, serving only to date the successive entries and not to link them. There need, indeed there should, be no syntactical or semantic bridges between the entries in a diary or journal; the diarist is abusing the form if he rereads what he has written previously and so influences the continuation. Intermittence is characteristic of the diary, whose visible discontinuity matches the discontinuity of writing as an activity.

The trouble is, though, that diaries or journals are still read continuously. No reader, however much a purist, will go to the lengths of reading only one entry a day. And an unbroken reading of a broken text soon starts to infiltrate those same conjunctions of meaning which the diarist has tried to eliminate. The diary form has an admirable austerity about it, but one would guess that it is seldom effective in the way we are looking for. To do away with continuity is pointless, when no writer can force his readers to do away with it with him. Discontinuity is not the best alternative for autobiographers; a more fruitful one is a continuity which is not chronological.

This sounds at first like anarchy; once freed from chronology, is the autobiographer to assemble his reminiscences in any order he likes? In principle, yes, although continuity itself is a constraint and a strong one. The chief deterrent which has kept autobiographers toeing the chronological line is the belief that a random order means no order at all. This belief is seriously mistaken when it comes to recollection. We know, since Freud, that such a random order is a delusion when we talk or, by extension, write about ourselves, that, on the contrary, the order in which thoughts or memories follow one another into consciousness is of the greatest significance; it is the clue to their deepest meaning for us.

If autobiography is to progress, therefore, it requires a revaluation less of the past than of the present, of the moment of writing. Biography, like all narrative, is teleological: everything which the biographer records about his subject will be read as contributing to that subject's ultimate achievement; the sandcastles which the Great Commander builds on the beach at the age of five are built not by a

This content downloaded from 165.123.34.86 on Thu, 07 Mar 2019 21:13:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

child but by the embryonic Great Commander. Autobiography is teleological in a rather different way because its author is still alive. Instead of explaining how its subject grew up and came to do what everyone knows he did, autobiography explains how its subject grew up and came to do what he is doing: "Il s'agit," rules Jean Starobinski, "de retracer la genèse de la situation actuelle."[5]

But what the autobiographer is doing is writing his autobiography, so that the destination of his life story is not a single, terminal point in time—the moment of the biographee's death or retirement—but a whole, unfinished series of points in time. The autobiographer's perspective grows longer as he writes, and what he has already written may in small ways transform him as his past begins to settle into some convincing shape. Hindsight, which is a danger to the historian, is a supreme virtue in autobiography. An autobiography written without hindsight—put together, that is, from notes written over many years and never afterwards revised—would be a curious document certainly, but also a perverse one. The autobiographical contract between writer and reader surely has a clause which says that the writer is addressing us from the moment of writing, not from the moments he is remembering. It is his duty to recast the written records he uses from his past; to do this is to use time instead of giving in to it.

Such, one might hope, would be the strategy of all autobiographers, but on the evidence it is the strategy of hardly any. So bound are they by chronology one can only conclude that they find it a relief, not an imposition. Before getting on to what is, in very many respects, the most thoughtful and adventurous autobiography I know of, that of the French writer Michel Leiris, I would like to quote from the preface of an English autobiographer whose original intentions were unorthodox and admirable, even if the realized work is all too orthodox. This is Stephen Spender, a man of Leiris' own postpsychoanalytical generation, like him a poet and, judging by what they have each written of themselves, of a comparably anxious, self-centered temperament. In *World Within World* Spender starts with this confession (a confession, be it noted, of failure and one that there was no obligation on him to make, since no reader of his autobiography would ever guess that he had intended it to take a different form): "I have let the main part of the narrative develop forwards from 1928 until the outbreak of the war. I say 'I have let it' do so because this was not my original intention. I meant first to write a book discussing my themes and illustrating them with narrative taken up at any point in time that I chose. However, after two or three trials, I saw the advantage of having an objective framework of events through which I could knock the holes of my subjective experience."[6]

This content downloaded from 165.123.34.86 on Thu, 07 Mar 2019 21:13:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

An advantage, as Spender claims, or, in the literal sense, an alibi? He does not say what the "themes" were which he anticipated would provide him with the armature of the book, or, more important still, in what order they would be introduced. Presumably they would have been the themes that he could detect as having recurred with the greatest insistence in his emotional or intellectual life and which could therefore be called to determine not only the composition of his autobiography but also the explanation of his life. But Spender backed down, and *World Within World,* give or take its digressions, interruptions, homilies, and so on, is a chronological account of his early life. No doubt Spender felt dissatisfied with his attempts at a thematic text, but was this because they were badly done or because for him, as for almost all writers of narrative, whatever is not chronological appears deficient? The hold which certain formal conventions keep over us can seem unbreakable.

It may be too that the attempted redistribution of his past life proved not only difficult but painful, leading as it sooner or later would to particular insights into his actions and inclinations he might prefer to keep to himself. By no means all the "themes" of our lives will turn out to be to our credit, and a few may be positively repugnant. What better alibi then, for an autobiographer, than chronology, which allows him to be somewhere else in time and prevents any really ugly "theme" from massing its full strength at one point in the story. To choose the association of ideas as the principle of composition in autobiography is to court embarrassment. Perhaps it is prurient to ask of autobiographers that they should make public what most upsets or inhibits them; but autobiography has always been an apologetic mode, and the more complete its violation of its author's peace of mind the better it lives up to its specification.

In *Orlando,* a biographical spoof that takes bold and instructive liberties with the form, Virginia Woolf has fun with what she calls "that riot and confusion of the passions and emotions which every good biographer detests."[7] To the good biographer, for whom human behavior has to run on rails if he is to keep control of his subject's life, such moments of turbulence are out of reach; they are too much for his technique. If there is evidence that his subject underwent one and he wants to recreate rather than just refer to it, his only hope is to evoke some comparable storm of his own. The autobiographer can evoke his own storms and present them as his own; and once rooted firmly in the present, autobiography can actually seek out those episodes from the past which are relived or refelt with the greatest discomfort. If chronology invites the autobiographer to draw decently back from memories whose potency worries him, then

This content downloaded from 165.123.34.86 on Thu, 07 Mar 2019 21:13:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

so much the worse for chronology, and so much the worse for his readers too, who have been cheated of the poetic experience of witnessing strong feeling forcing its way into language.

Michel Leiris, on whom all these arguments have been converging and from reading whom most of them were derived, became an autobiographer not long after he had tried psychoanalysis and got little or nothing from it. Psychoanalysis he had come to through Surrealism, a doctrine which, like other lapsed members of André Breton's chapel, Leiris has never altogether disowned. He would have been wrong to do so: some parts of it have helped greatly to make him an exemplary autobiographer.

He has preserved above all a faith in the cognitive powers of language; he believes that language has secrets, to penetrate which is to learn something about the world, and about oneself. As an autobiographer Leiris lends his attention as much to language as to life, concentrating on certain salient words or groups of words in the certainty that these will show themselves to be privileged points of entry into his past. He uses as an autobiographical program what Freud offers as a description of psychic dynamics: "In order that thought-processes may acquire quality, they are associated in human beings with verbal memories, whose residues of quality are sufficient to draw the attention of consciousness to them and to endow the process of thinking with a new mobile cathexis from consciousness."[8]

Freud of course wanted to understand not the process of remembering but the process of forgetting, and the signs in consciousness which teach us when and where to recognize the subconscious. The Freudian technique that Leiris chooses has as its premise that what most matters in a potential autobiography is what has been censored. Leiris goes very much further, in fact, than Stephen Spender had even planned to go. Not only does he organize his volumes of autobiography[9] by association of ideas (and sometimes of words) instead of by chronology, but he deliberately follows those networks of association which will cause him the greatest unease. Autobiography, by this new dispensation, becomes an exercise in self-therapy. Leiris began writing about himself to try to rationalize certain, as he believed, crippling weaknesses in his personality. The books were intended to have a practical result, which was to cure him of particularly tenacious inhibitions by making a public spectacle of their etiology. They failed, perhaps for the reason advanced in Jeffrey Mehlman's helpful if fiercely Lacanian essay on Leiris in *A Structural Study of Autobiography,* which is that language is never the possession of any individual so that to employ it is to be alienated from the self.[10] Leiris, in this interpretation, is a victim of convention, his hopes dashed by the realization that

This content downloaded from 165.123.34.86 on Thu, 07 Mar 2019 21:13:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

even a total sincerity must yield to protocol if it is to become words. His failure is the one foreseen by Diderot's "homme au paradoxe" in the *Paradoxe sur le comédien,* who recognized that his real-life *sensiblerie,* which caused him to become tongue-tied, confused, and eventually speechless, would never do for a portrayal of *sensiblerie* on the stage, which needed to be articulate. Leiris' success in performance is beyond question; what has been sacrificed is his private failure.

His mistake, we can agree with Mehlman, was to believe that the autobiographer might possess not only his own past but also his native language. That was his only mistake; he was right to ignore the usual conventions of autobiography. His most pointed rebuff to them comes right at the start of the very first volume, *L'Age d'homme,* whose opening section has the title "Vieillesse et mort." Such are the provocations of Surrealism. Under this heading, never before deemed possible for an autobiographical volume, Leiris in fact groups together images, memories, and reflections connected with those two themes. He is being ostentatiously morbid launching his autobiography with these terminal concerns, but at the same time identifying the particular phobia—the fear of annihilation—which he blames for so much of what has been unsatisfactory about his life.

Old age and death are succeeded, as rubrics, by other imposing abstractions: "The Infinite," "The Soul," "Subject and Object," in a series which becomes more and more idiosyncratic, to culminate in such inimitable groupings as "Stories of Injured Women" and "Stories of Dangerous Women." The arrangement is ambitious; Leiris sets out to make a book from his thoughts instead of from his acts and proves, finally, that, contrary to a common prejudice, in true autobiography words speak louder than actions. As an autobiographer, he belongs, it could be said, to the *Annales* school, working to recreate his own "mentalité," not to the older school for whom autobiography remains "événementiel."

Autobiography of this kind is not without a sense of direction. The narrative of *La règle du jeu* is one of the accumulation of self-knowledge and the establishment of order—the autobiographer's own order—in the past. Once chronology has been given up, the autobiographer is lost and must take his bearings by writing. He knows, as it were, nothing of his life until he has seen what he puts. The power of association, of bringing into the light mnemonic instead of temporal contiguities, has infinitely more to tell us about our permanent psychic organization than the power of chronology. The autobiographer, like the analysand, needs therefore to cultivate states of heightened receptivity, so that the censorship is outflanked and he is free to register as fully as he can what Leiris calls, in a central defini-

This content downloaded from 165.123.34.86 on Thu, 07 Mar 2019 21:13:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

tion of his method, "ces noeuds de faits, de sentiments, de notions se groupant autour d'une expérience plus colorée que les autres et jouant le rôle d'un signe ou d'une illustration assez frappante pour me servir de repère."[11]

The notion of the writer ceding the initiative to words is at least as old as Mallarmé, but it has been taken, *when* it has been taken, as a recommendation exclusively for poets or writers of lyrical, unworldly prose, not for autobiographers, who are classed with the writers of narrative and realism and forbidden to cede the initiative at all. The thought that an autobiography might be the exploration of its author's language rather than his life will seem eccentric to many and offensive to some. But the language and the life support one another; all that is at stake is which we see as coming first. The biographer is surely correct to produce a book in which the narrative appears to have dictated the narration; the autobiographer would do well to achieve the opposite effect, of a book where the narration appears to have dictated the narrative.

This is what Leiris has done and what many of his predecessors in autobiography might have done, given more courage. Autobiography is a form which has long appealed to poets, who will have grasped, even if they have largely failed to tap, its possibilities for that specifically poetic activity of realizing verbal paradigms. What they feared perhaps was the strain and emotional expense of such a procedure, maintained not over the quite short period of time it takes to work on a poem but over the months or years it takes to write an autobiography; what they may have feared even more was the resistance of their readers, who tolerate the blatant artifice and abstention from chronology in poems only because poems are known to be verbal constructs offering verbal satisfactions.

Readers will need reconditioning to think of autobiography in the same way. Books like the three volumes of *La règle du jeu* will not seem rectilinear to those whose fixed idea of a straight line is the straight line of chronology. Yet these books, like all books, *are* rectilinear; they are written as a succession of words and read as one. The straight line we are asked to follow is the one the writer traces as he writes. A large element of convention remains even so: that line is only apparently straight and unbroken, the books having been written intermittently and, in Leiris' case, over a number of years. The writer's stream of consciousness does not flow at the same speed or with the same intensity as the talker's. The writer has to write things down, and he can write things down only as fast as he can write things down; there is a brake on his will to associate. He is, moreover, on his own and must do without the guidance—the explanations, encouragement, the fatherly

This content downloaded from 165.123.34.86 on Thu, 07 Mar 2019 21:13:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

presence—of a psychoanalyst. His one interlocutor is a phantom: the audience for his work represented as yet entirely by himself. And being alone the writer also misses that useful obligation we generally feel in company not to fall wholly silent; in writing composition stands in for compulsion. The associative autobiography is thoroughly conventional, but its conventions seem to me to make better sense than the traditional ones.

As a literary innovation it should be classed with those other twentieth-century innovations which have introduced the writer explicitly into his text, and which have allowed linguistic accident—homophones, alliteration, rhyme—to fix the direction that the text is to take. Leiris describes his method as consisting essentially in "une méditation zigzaguant au fil de l'écriture,"[12] the word *zigzaguant* being an undoubted concession to any possible critics, with its inferred standard of rectilinearity. Recollection exceeds commentary I would guess in *La règle du jeu* and fairly lengthy episodes from the past are narrated chronologically; no autobiographer could follow up every association that came to him as he wrote. His text should be a compromise between intention and improvisation.

La règle du jeu does not add up to a history of Leiris' life; its coverage of the past would be strikingly incomplete even supposing its contents could be recombined into a rough chronological sequence. But if these books are not a history, what then are they? A description would be one answer, or a diagram of the autobiographer. Where orthodox narrative is temporal, this other sort is spatial, bearing in mind, though, that all verbal messages are extended in time. In some typologies of autobiography I do not doubt that Leiris would be disallowed, as having failed to satisfy certain elementary requirements, and notably the requirement of Starobinski "qu'il y ait précisément narration et non pas description."[13] What fails, by this test, to qualify as autobiography, is confined to being a "self-portrait."

Here there is a bias against "description," which is what happens in novels when narration stops. Description, traditionally, is a respite from the story, a stopping of the clock. But in the kind of autobiography we are talking about, that clock has never been started, description and narration have merged and description can now be seen for what it is, that is to say, consecutive and mobile. A "self-portrait" is a misnomer, applied to a literary work, because it implies the instantaneous production of a likeness of the author. It may be a convenience to call a book a "self-portrait" once it is complete, but it is highly misleading to call it that while it is being written. The term loses sight altogether of the business of writing and helps to reinforce the mistaken view that the process of narration is subsumed in the events

This content downloaded from 165.123.34.86 on Thu, 07 Mar 2019 21:13:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

narrated. It is some time now since Alain Robbe-Grillet declared that when it came to "telling stories," it was not the stories he objected to but the "telling," and anyone who has read with care the sly descriptions of objects in his novels, where the words he is led to use themselves corrupt the describer and turn him, against his intentions, into the narrator of preposterously jejune, melodramatic anecdotes, will dismiss any easy distinction between narration and description. With Leiris, as with Robbe-Grillet, to describe is itself an adventure.

It is this adventure that the old kind of autobiography lacks. A chronological narrative is a discipline which greatly hampers the autobiographer's freedom. It must work against self-discovery. A chronological autobiography may still be "revealing," but its revelations will for the most part be those which the autobiographer has stored up against the day when he writes his autobiography. That is the measure of candor normally required of the autobiographer. 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. There is suspense in that pursuit, and it can be shared with the sympathetic reader.

It is a paradox that Leiris' own profound, revolutionary autobiography should have had as its most urgent aim the negation of time. It was his intense fear of death and the extinction of his ego which led him away from chronology and to the belief that he might, through his alternative method of recovering the past, immunize himself against the fatal passage of time. He imagined, as a once loyal Surrealist no doubt should, that he might apprehend his past no longer as filiform but as a three-dimensional solid, inside which he could wander at will, safe from reminders of mortality. The structure of his autobiography was conditioned by his psychology; it is the wonderfully intelligent sublimation of his fears. But the innovations Leiris has made in autobiography are now available to everyone, and there is no reason why those autobiographers who decide to follow him should do so only because they share his fears.

The compulsion to which Leiris admits is, one might claim, a neurotic exaggeration of the wish behind all autobiography, to encompass one's life as a single, thoroughly meaningful whole and insure it against oblivion. But *La règle du jeu,* which began as an attempt at self-therapy, is both a literary triumph and a personal fiasco. Leiris expelled from his books what was to him the most unwelcome of conventions, that of chronology, only to be made cruelly aware that it is not chronology which kills us but time, and for the writer time is measured out by the movement of his pen.

LONDON

This content downloaded from 165.123.34.86 on Thu, 07 Mar 2019 21:13:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

NOTES

1 Charles Darwin and Thomas Henry Huxley, *Autobiographies,* ed. Gavin de Beer (London, 1974).
2 *Ibid.,* p. 100.
3 Quoted by Julia Kristeva in *Le texte du roman* (The Hague, 1970), p. 33*n.*
4 Jorge Luis Borges, *Otras inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires, 1960), p. 187.
5 Jean Starobinski, "Le style de l'autobiographie," *Poétique,* 3 (1970), 261.
6 Stephen Spender, *World Within World* (London, 1951), p. vii.
7 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (London, 1942), p. 10.
8 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams,* tr. James Strachey (London, 1961), p. 617.
9 There have been five in all: *L'Age d'homme* (Paris, 1946) and four volumes of *La règle du jeu—Biffures* (Paris, 1948), *Fourbis* (Paris, 1955), *Fibrilles* (Paris, 1966), and *Frêle bruit* (Paris, 1976).
10 Jeffrey Mehlman, *A Structural Study of Autobiography* (Ithaca and London, 1974).
11 *Biffures,* p. 259.
12 *Ibid.*
13 Starobinski, p. 257.

This content downloaded from 165.123.34.86 on Thu, 07 Mar 2019 21:13:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms