

Why Do Scholars Write Autobiographies? or: Exile as a "Comfortable" Metaphor¹

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Abstract. In the past decade an increasing number of scholars have written autobiographies, notably in the field of literary criticism. Is it possible to identify a pattern to those works? How do contemporary scholars face the dilemma of autobiography as a genre? Such questions aim at discussing autobiography as a fictional genre. Therefore, to read an autobiography one must pay attention to the rhetorical frame chosen by the author.

In the past decade an increasing number of scholars have written autobiographies, notably in the field of literary criticism. Indeed, Henry Louis Gates's *Colored People: A Memoir* (1994) and Frank Lentricchia's *The Edge of Night: A Confession* (1994) seem to have stimulated several colleagues to take up the pen. Is it possible to identify a pattern to these works? How do contemporary scholars face the dilemma of autobiography as a genre? After all, literary critics should be aware of the pitfalls of the genre. Among so many examples, two autobiographies have caught the eye of readers who are not necessarily concerned with literary studies: Edward Said's *Out of Place* (1999) and Terry Eagleton's *The Gatekeeper* (2001).

Edward Said portrays himself as being torn apart between two worlds as well as between two languages. In his words: "I have never known what language I spoke first, Arabic or English, or which was really mine beyond any

doubt. What I do know, however, is that the two have always been together in my life, one resonating in the other, sometimes ironically, sometimes nostalgically, most often each correcting, and commenting on, the other.”² Indeed, this nomadic condition runs throughout the narrative and provides the frame for his self-definition: “I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self [...]”.³

Terry Eagleton, one of the stars of (and rebels against) the “Oxbridge” system as well as the author of numerous works of literary criticism, also pictures himself as being torn apart. In his case, he feels divided between classes. Recalling his early years, he writes: “Literacy was not the strongest point of my childhood community. It was a world which would no more have understood how you could make a living by writing books than how you could make one by picking wax from your ears.”⁴ Both authors frame themselves as being fundamentally marginal, exiled in a potentially hostile environment.

As a matter of fact, the composition of scholars’ autobiographies has a long tradition in which two models have become prevalent. On the one hand, the life of an accomplished scholar is commonly portrayed as being as uneventful as his work is regarded important. In this model, the true autobiography is the collection of his writings or the intensity of his readings—as Jorge Luis Borges would have it. David Hume conveyed it in the opening paragraph of *My Own Life*: “It is difficult for a man to speak of himself without vanity; therefore, I shall be short.”⁵ Dutiful in his observance of this creed, Hume summed up his existence in no more than a few eloquent pages, producing what today would be called a *curriculum vitae*: “It may be thought an instance of vanity that I pretend at all to write my life; but this Narrative shall contain little more than the History of my Writings.”⁶ This ideal of a life as unperturbed as possible by worldly affairs reveals how close the religious life was taken as a model to the scholar.

On the other hand, the figure of the uprooted has often been used to characterize both scholars and artists. From Ovid’s poems in exile to Dante’s memories of his own ostracism, the condition of the exile has almost become an existential commonplace to men of letters. Is it not true that in the nineteenth century the Romantic artist was an expert in presenting himself as a tormented soul exiled in his own complexity? Historically closer to our contemporary scholars, it is enough to recall the American writers of the 1920s: they made themselves famous as the “lost generation”—and happily so long as they were lost in the uncomfortable exile of Paris’s avant-garde milieu. As

Said has himself acknowledged in a well-known essay: "If true exile is a condition of terminal loss, why has it been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture? We have become accustomed to thinking of the modern period itself as spiritually orphaned and alienated."⁷

Said's and Eagleton's autobiographies are inextricably related to such models. Nonetheless, and in spite of being acclaimed literary critics, their efforts ironically fall short because they seem to believe in the capacity of their texts to live up to those models, especially to the *topos* of the exile. This will be my contention, and in order to unfold it I shall bring to the fore some earlier examples of intellectual autobiographies.

Hume wrote *My Own Life* in 1776. Some decades earlier, Giambattista Vico had already radicalized the convergence between life and work—or rather the absorption of life by work. In his *Life of Giambattista Vico written by Himself*, Vico resurrected Julius Caesar's rhetorical device of referring to oneself in the third person. His autobiography begins: "Giambattista Vico was born in Naples in the year 1670 of upright parents who left a good name after them."⁸ This rhetorical device allowed for an unexpected answer to the often overlooked impossibility of the autobiography as a genre. Is it not true that it should always be too early to properly begin its composition? And is it not even truer that it should always be too late to adequately conclude it? After all, how to find a proper conclusion to the narrative while the writer is composing it? How to reconcile the paradox of temporarily suspending the act of "living" in order to recall one's own life through its writing? The endless fascination caused by Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* seems to be directly related to this inner contradiction. The main character of the novel cannot reconstruct his life in an orderly fashion precisely because he keeps on living it intently in his infinite digressions and chaotic dialogues.

If the beginning of any autobiography is always arbitrary, how to write the scene of one's own death, unless the autobiographer becomes a fictional after-life narrator of his passing away? Vico started his autobiography in 1723, added a new section in 1728 and "completed" it in 1731. However, he would "only" die in 1744. A curious reader cannot fail to wonder what happened in the remaining years of Vico's life. Hume intuited it keenly while referring to his autobiography as "this funeral oration of myself."⁹

The Brazilian writer Machado de Assis, a creative and productive reader of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* as well as of Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*, imagined an ingenious solution to the dilemma of autobiography by developing Hume's

self-irony. In *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, the main character decides to produce an account of his life at the indisputably proper moment of doing it, namely, after his death. As a “deceased author” he is perfectly equipped not only to remember episodes of his entire life, but as a traditional third person narrator he is able to locate them in a meaningful account, attributing to each episode a specific place. Seemingly, a “deceased author” is the ideal narrator to remember episodes of all phases of his life, including above all his own death. As the character ponders over his narrative choice, he thinks: “I am not exactly a writer who is dead but a dead man who is a writer, for whom the grave was a second cradle.”¹⁰ The autobiography, then, should become the writing of “*mémoires d’outre tombe*.” In other words, the autobiography as a genre would not be an impossibility so long as it learns to overcome Daniel Defoe’s description of the hardships involved in providing a full account of Moll Flanders’s story: “We cannot say indeed, that this History is carried on quite to the End of the Life of this Famous *Moll Flanders*, as she calls her self, for no Body can write it after they are dead [...].”¹¹ Charles Darwin understood this paradox perfectly, transforming it into the underlying motivation of his autobiography: “I have attempted to write the following account of myself, as if I were a dead man in another world looking back at my own life.”¹²

It should also be stressed that the solution adopted by Vico has a practical advantage: once the philosopher employed the third person in his narrative, 74 years after Vico’s death, an admirer of his work, the Marquis of Villarosa, could satisfy the curious reader concluding Vico’s autobiography with no difficulty. In 1818 he added the section, “Vico’s Last Years.” The Marquis only needed to provide a brief transition and then to keep the same third person narrator: “Now that Vico had become, as he himself tells us, the father of a large family [...].” This fine transition is a powerful illustration of the overlooked impossibility of the autobiography as a genre unless its fictionality is fully acknowledged. Vico’s 1728 and 1731 additions to his original narrative already conveyed the dilemma of finding a plausible manner of “concluding” the account.

Indeed, Defoe had already fictionally offered an answer to Vico’s difficulties. In the sequence from which the above-mentioned passage is taken, he informs the reader: “[...] but her Husband’s Life being written by a third Hand, gives a full account of them both.”¹³ Nevertheless, it should be noted that Vico’s choice meant much more than simply a stylistic device, once the “third Hand” literally became Vico’s use of a third person narrator. That is to

say, while choosing this usage to refer to his life, Vico concocted a new genre, in which life molds itself after the work. In this sense, every work is always already autobiographical, since life is (or should be) the embodiment of work.

How does this take place in Vico's text? His conception of history, as developed in his masterpiece, *New Science*, implied the underlying design of Providence guiding the actions of humankind. Ultimately, Vico's autobiography reproduces the same pattern. It is as if every single accident in his life destined him to become the author of *New Science*. Immediately at the beginning of his account, the reader is offered a key to interpret it. Vico describes a tremendous fall from a ladder when he was seven years of age. Doctors thought that he would not recover. In the best scenario, he would survive but with serious consequences: "The surgeon, indeed, observing the broken cranium and considering the long period of unconsciousness, predicted that he would either die of it or grow up an idiot."¹⁴ As the reading of *Life of Giambattista Vico written by Himself* suggests, the diagnosis was mistaken. Moreover, through this incident, Vico establishes the model of his intellectual journey: a self-taught man, independent from institutions; a person always able to recover from unhappy events, the most notorious being his defeat in the election of a Chair at the University of Naples;¹⁵ someone willing to bear any sacrifice and seclusion in order to fully develop his mind. In a nutshell, the young Italian already appears as the predestined creator of a new science. In this way his own life prefigures the philosophy he later developed.

Edward Said resorts to a similar pattern, and at the beginning of his narrative offers a metaphor for its reading: "All families invent their parents and children, give each of them a story, a character, fate, and even a language. [...] Thus it took me about fifty years to become accustomed to, or, more exactly, to feel less uncomfortable with, 'Edward', a foolish English name yoked forcibly to the unmistakably Arabic family name Said."¹⁶ The author seems to project retrospectively his reflections on exile upon his own christening, evidencing the rhetorical construction of individual memory: the apparently odd mixture of an English and an Arabic name would have "contributed" to Said's future personal dilemma. This operation brings to one's mind Sterne's character, Tristram Shandy, whose name was mistakenly attributed at the moment of his registry. Tristram's father had chosen an honorable name for his son: "He shall be christened *Trimegistus*."¹⁷ The reasons could not be more persuasive; after all, "he was the greatest king—the greatest lawgiver—the greatest philosopher."¹⁸ Nonetheless, thanks to an

unhappy misunderstanding, the newborn is christened Tristram, an incident that seemingly "determines" most of his personality as well as his awkwardness throughout his life.

Eagleton too utilizes a similar strategy in order to provide an interpretive frame for his account. We have already seen how uncommon literacy was in his childhood community. It will not be surprising then to find that, "Later in life, I was to overcompensate for the uncertain literacy of my early environment. Whereas other academics worry about not being productive enough, my embarrassment has always been the opposite. Instead of finding myself unable to write books, I find myself unable to stop."¹⁹ In other words, both authors cope with the challenge of the autobiographical genre by employing a traditional nineteenth-century narrative device used widely in realist novels, according to which the life of the character, that is, Said's and Eagleton's lives, unfold in accordance to a powerful event or a decisive drive, providing coherence and cohesion to a myriad of events.

On the contrary, while Vico also provided an all-encompassing metaphor that meaningfully organized his experiences, his solution to the dilemma of autobiography is far more complex. It actually implies the discovery of a novel relationship. Instead of primarily recalling one's private life, a scholar's autobiography should become the story of the work accomplished, an account of the development and succession of themes and ideas. In this sense, David Hume followed the Italian's lead. Vico's use of the third person remains an extremely insightful finding. On the one hand, it textualizes the subsumption of life into work. On the other hand, it prompts a level of self-reflexiveness that in itself brings to the fore the model of critically detaching the autobiographer from his own "life" in order to stress the results of the "work."

In other words, given the inner contradiction of autobiography as a genre, it demands a narrative structure within which this contradiction becomes functional. Therefore, in order to write one's autobiography it is necessary to fictionally see one's life as if it is already "finished." Let us recall the beginning of Vico's *Life*, which is a case in point: "Giambattista Vico was born in Naples in the year 1670 [...]"²⁰ Vico was born in 1688. Why Vico "forgot" the exact date of his own birth is due simply to his desire to picture himself as a prodigy. Thus, the detachment propitiated by the usage of the third person does not necessarily keep one from the vanity associated by David Hume with the writing of autobiographies.

Therefore, because the autobiography should rely on an immediate level

of referentiality—the life of the writer who writes of his own life (and the tautology is insurmountable) can only become possible through the acknowledgement of its own fictionality. Silviano Santiago, one of the most important Brazilian contemporary writers as well as a noted literary critic, in his latest novels and short stories has put forward the thought-provoking model of “faked memories” or “true lies.” His latest collection of short stories, *Histórias mal contadas*, represents an insightful re-reading of the genre, and it is worth mentioning his achievement in the context of acknowledging the fictional drive implied in the autobiographical gesture. After all, is it not true that the gesture implied in the autobiographical narrative necessarily involves the most fictional act of temporarily suspending the act of “living?” Thus, if, according to Wolfgang Iser, fictionality, in its specific literary form,²¹ is an anthropological device through which we can approach what otherwise could not be conceived, and if, “inaccessible to us are the cardinal points of our existence—the beginning and the end,” then the autobiography as a genre reveals itself as a powerful fictional gesture that, given “the impossibility of being present to ourselves becomes our possibility to play ourselves out to the fullness that knows no bounds.”²² Is it not also true that autobiography allows the temporary overcoming of the most rigid bound of all? Death itself seems to be indefinitely postponed by the adversary register of one’s life.

For this reason, Philippe Lejeune’s *Le Pacte autobiographique* must be called into question. According to Lejeune, the autobiographical pact implies a direct link between the author, the narrator and the character depicted in the narrative: “Pour qu’il y ait autobiographie (et plus généralement littérature intime) il faut qu’il y ait identité de l’auteur, du narrateur et du personnage.”²³ This pact implies that the author uses the first person narrator since he is truthfully writing about a character that happens to be himself. Of course, an immediate relationship between the author and the object of the text cannot be denied, since it is the minimum prerequisite of the autobiography as a genre. However, and contrary to what Lejeune seems to believe, this relationship does not preclude the fictionality of the text; rather, it requires the constitutive presence of a fictional drive in the autobiographical account. Again, in order to write one’s autobiography it is necessary to see one’s life as if it is already “finished.” As Hayden White proposes in *Metahistory*, the historian can only cope with the past when he organizes it through the ordering of the events into the mold of a specific narrative structure.²⁴ I am suggesting that similarly the author of an autobiographical text can only see himself and his

own unfinished "past" through the lens of a literary model. Hence, to read an autobiography one must pay attention to the rhetorical frame chosen by the author to publicly present his life, although very often the rhetoric of the genre proclaims itself indifferent to the nature of its composition. Charles Darwin's statement is a common place: "I have taken no pains about my style of writing."²⁵ Edward Gibbon was equally straightforward: "the style shall be simple and familiar."²⁶ Simplicity and verisimilitude are supposed to strengthen each other, as we have learned since the classical codification of genres.

This rhetorical framing brings us back to Edward Said and Terry Eagleton. Contrary to the model of the uneventful existence of a scholar, they willingly share intimate details of their lives, not bothering to relate them to their intellectual achievements. For instance, Eagleton introduces the reader to his family without reservations. We meet his father, whose "life had the unattractiveness of the victim. Like many a parent, he sacrificed himself for his children, but that made him precisely not a model to emulate."²⁷ We also become acquainted with his grandmother, who "combined working-class poverty with petty-bourgeois values, and so was afflicted with the worst of both worlds."²⁸ This caricature of intimacy was already present in Frank Lentricchia's *The Edge of Night*: "About a year ago, in New York, an editor of a major publishing house said to me that I ought, up front, tell my readers who I am. Otherwise readers would have to crawl inside my head."²⁹ It seems that not only Lentricchia but also Said and Eagleton believe the editor's unexpected assumption. They have produced autobiographies that are full of intimate episodes and only incidentally concerned with their readings and writings. Maybe this is the reason why Lentricchia entertains the reader with such important information as this, conveyed with remarkable precision: "I leave on the USAir Ticket counter the sunglasses I wear 300 to 325 days per year."³⁰ Sometimes, literary critics can also indulge in unabashed narcissism, or vanity, to recall Hume's vocabulary: "I'll tell you what I like about writing. When I'm doing it, there's only the doing, the movement of my pen across the paper, the shape of the rhythms as I go, myself the rhythm."³¹ A couple of years later, allowing the reader to enter his mind without having to make too much effort, Lentricchia provides another confession, this time a little more surprising, if not embarrassing. He reveals the name of his mistress: "My silent encounters with literature are ravishly pleasurable like erotic transport. In private I was tranquility personified; in public, an actor in the endless strife and divisiveness of argument [...]."³² Of

course, it is an important symptom that a noted literary theorist has to entertain a secret life in which he mainly reads... literary works.

It is indeed not a novelty that an editor's invitation prompts the composition of an autobiography. Vico's *Life* was written under the patronage of the Count Porcía, who sponsored "autobiographies for the edification of young students and with a view to the reform of school and curricula."³³ Darwin similarly justified his incursion into the genre: "A German editor having written to me to ask for an account of the development of my mind and character with some sketch of my autobiography."³⁴ Vico and Darwin were engaged in the classical tradition of transmitting one's experiences and knowledge to posterity, which implied circumspection and an emphasis on the work accomplished. Gibbon's opening lines of his autobiography are paradigmatic: "In the fifty-second year of my age, after the completion of a toilsome and successful work, I now propose to employ some moments of my leisure in reviewing the simple transactions of a private and literary life."³⁵ Said's, Eagleton's, and above all Lentricchia's memoirs are symptomatic of the contemporary state of affairs in the academic world, which has been poignantly unveiled by David Shumway in his critique of "the star system in literary studies," whose most visible sign is directly related to the unheard-of exposition of the intimacy of scholars: "The importance of gossip and of other types of public discussion of the private lives of the stars is manifested in the current rash of autobiographies written by literary academics."³⁶

This difference prompts another one regarding the *topos* of the exile. While employing this classical *topos*, Said and Eagleton refer to a literary tradition that ultimately prevents them from seriously "believing" in the uniqueness or in the "truth" of their narratives. The rhetorical codes are well-known: the exiled feels torn between his homeland and his present location, and often this feeling is conveyed through the difficulties with an unknown or a poorly controlled language; this feeling favors a melancholic mood, which aims at winning the audience's sympathies for the author's condition. In other words, the *topos* of exile fosters an amicable reception that should in itself provide shelter to the exiled writer. Perhaps this is why the exile has "been transformed so easily into a potent, even enriching, motif of modern culture," recalling Said's question mentioned above. The exile offers a compelling metaphor as well as, at least in some cases, a complex manner of finding an especially detached vantage point that potentially fosters an acute critical perspective. According to Said, "James Joyce *chose* to be in exile: to give force to his artistic vocation. [...]

And although it is rare to pick banishment as a way of life, Joyce perfectly understood its trials.”³⁷ Vilém Flusser—a Czech philosopher who had to flee his homeland in order to escape the Nazis and who lived in Brazil for several decades until he returned to Europe and became widely acclaimed as an innovative media theorist—has developed a challenging “philosophy of emigration.”³⁸ In this philosophy, Flusser proposes that “taking up residence in homelessness,”³⁹ although initially a painful experience, makes it possible “to interpret the exile situation as a challenge to creativity.”⁴⁰ Of course, Flusser is not romanticizing the condition of being expelled from one’s own country. Nonetheless, he is proposing a crucial critical distinction between intellectuals and those who usually do not have the opportunity to voice their indignation and protest while exiled. This distinction is obviously at stake in my reading of the recent autobiographies written by literary critics.

The problem with Said’s *Out of Place* and Eagleton’s *The Gatekeeper* is that they seem to believe that the *topos* of exile properly fits the social role of stars in the academic world. They apparently do not realize that they have created a paradoxical instance: the institutional and officially supported exile. Usually scholars who portray themselves as exiled or marginalized in autobiographies are successful enough to have caught the eye of publishers eager not to engage the reader in their intellectual achievements but to expose their lives as if they had suddenly become celebrities. These “exiled” scholars are indeed acclaimed authors, and worldwide respected academics. Ovid’s exile, for instance, was much more than a *topos*. While exiled, he composed *Tristia* (A.D. 9), hoping to bridge a return to Rome with his poetry: “*Parve, nec invideo, sine me, Liber, ibis in Urbem, / Hei mihi! quo domino non licet ire tuo*” [“Go alone, Book that I envy, to the Urbis, / Where, poor me!, your master is not allowed to go”]. In spite of lines such as these, neither Augustus nor Tiberius forgave the poet. Exiled from Rome to the peripheral village of Tomos in A.D. 8, Ovid died there ten years later.

By contrast, for successful scholars exile has become a literary model through which they try to anticipate a criticism that, precisely because they are successful, is not often voiced. While mainly writing on behalf of marginalized cultures or classes, they have manufactured their careers at the very center they strongly criticize. The irony is self-evident. Perhaps through the *topos* of exile they attempt to see themselves as not having reached the top—where indeed they have been throughout their professional lives, due to their own intellectual merits, it must be noted. The problem is that to do so they have to write

denying the critical gaze with which they taught their students to read. In other words, they become not exactly “naïve readers,” that ideal figure dreamed of by some schools of close reading, but “naïve authors,” the ideological figure denounced by critics such as Lentricchia, Said and Eagleton.

Let me then conclude by bringing to this discussion Joseph Brodsky’s uncompromising reflection on exile, which echoes Vilém Flusser’s distinction mentioned above. We have not yet fully developed an approach that might be able to carry forward the toughness of a writer who resists any self-indulgence regarding the understanding of his troubled and complex personal circumstance:

As we gather here, in this attractive and well-lit room, on this cold December evening, to discuss the plight of the writer in exile, let us pause for a minute and think of some of those who, quite naturally, didn’t make it to this room. [...]

Whatever the proper name for this phenomenon is, whatever the motives, origins, and destinations of these people are, whatever their impact on the societies which they abandon and to which they come, one thing is absolutely clear: they make it very difficult to talk with a straight face about the plight of the writer in exile.⁴¹

Notes

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² Said, *Out of Place* 4.

³ *Idem* 295.

⁴ Eagleton 51.

⁵ Hume xxxi.

⁶ *Idem, ibidem*.

⁷ Said, “Reflections” 173.

⁸ Vico 111.

⁹ Hume xli. The full passage reads: “I cannot say that there is no vanity in making this funeral oration of myself, but I hope it is not a misplaced one; and this is a matter of fact which is easily cleared and ascertained.”

¹⁰ Assis 7.

¹¹ Defoe 5.

¹² Darwin 21.

¹³ Defoe 5.

¹⁴ Vico 111.

¹⁵ "The decisive event in Vico's life was his failure in the academic 'concourse' or competition of 1723. He was then fifty-five years of age, and had lingered for nearly a quarter of a century in the propaedeutic chair of rhetoric, whose main function was to prepare students for admission to the law course. It paid a miserable hundred ducats a year" (Fisch 8).

¹⁶ Said, "Reflections" 3.

¹⁷ Sterne 202.

¹⁸ *Idem* 205.

¹⁹ Eagleton 54-55.

²⁰ *Idem, ibidem*.

²¹ It is important to realize that, "since both the fictive and the imaginary feature anthropological dispositions, they are not confined to literature but also play a role in our everyday lives" (Iser xiii).

²² *Idem* 297.

²³ Lejeune 15. Regarding the referentiality, see the following passage: "L' autobiographie étant un genre référentiel, elle est naturellement soumise en même temps à l'impératif de ressemblance au niveau du modèle, mais ce n'est qu'un aspect secondaire" (40).

²⁴ "I treat the historical work as what it most manifestly is: a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse. Histories (and philosophies of history as well) combine certain amount of 'data', theoretical concepts for 'explaining' these data, and a narrative structure for their presentation as an icon of sets of events presumed to have occurred in times past" (White ix).

²⁵ Darwin 21.

²⁶ Gibbon 39.

²⁷ Eagleton 115.

²⁸ *Idem* 117.

²⁹ Lentricchia 5-6.

³⁰ *Idem* 62.

³¹ *Idem* 7.

³² Lentricchia 25.

³³ Fisch 2.

³⁴ Darwin 21.

³⁵ Gibbon 39.

³⁶ Shumway 96.

³⁷ Said. "Reflections" 182, author's emphasis.

³⁸ Flusser, *Freedom of the Migrant* 21-24.

³⁹ Flusser, *Writings* 91-103.

⁴⁰ Flusser *Writings* 104.

⁴¹ Brodsky 22-23. I owe Henning Ritter for this reference.

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