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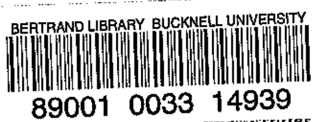
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JAY

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# Being in the Text: Autobiography and the Problem of the Subject

*Paul L. Jay*

> The "subject" is not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is.
>
> Nietzsche[1]

A preoccupation during the last decade with the problem of the subject in literary discourse, and with the role of language in our conception of the "self," has led to a new interest in autobiography, and in autobiographical fiction.[2] Perhaps this is because in no other kind of literary work is the relation between the self-as-author, and the self-as-subject, at once so obvious, and yet so problematical. This paradox led Rodolphe Gasché, editor of a recent special issue of *MLN* entitled "Autobiography and the Problem of the Subject" to observe that due in part to its own "insurmountable contradictions" autobiography is a "paradigm for writing as such; either as the mode of confronting the inaugural gesture of writing involved in all discourse, or as a privileged mark of the text's self-referentiality."[3] While autobiography, he continues, constitutes the "venture" of "a subject in search of identity," the contradictions inherent in such a constitutive enterprise are inseparably linked to the more general contradictions inherent to writing itself, where there is always a "radical disappropriation" of identity by language.[4]

Nietzsche's insistence that the subject, the "I," is not a "given," but an "invention," has now become nearly axiomatic. We have become accustomed, when thinking about the concept of a thinking or a writing "subject," at once to demystify and problematize that concept, to understand it as having reference less to a Natural, privileged, and potentially unified psychological *condition,* than to a

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historically constituted set of *ideas* and *assumptions* whose referents are complexly dispersed in the very language which seeks to constitute them. Nietzsche, contrary to what his detractors might say, does not deny the possibility of "fact" in a formulation like this. He simply insists that the fact of "subjectivity" is that "subjectivity" *as it had previously been formulated* is a fiction, and that our own (particular and historical) role in creating that fiction is more properly—and importantly—a fact:

> "The subject" is the fiction that many similar states in us are the effect of one substratum: but it is we who first created the "similarity" of these states; our adjusting them and making them similar is the fact, not their similarity (—which ought rather to be denied—).[5]

Nietzsche's focus, it must be stressed, is on the idea of subjectivity as a process. The "I" is not a "spirit" we have entered so much as it is a conceptual language we have ourselves created.[6] It can be observed that the contradiction here between *identity* and *discourse*—between, that is, the self and any representation of it—is absolute, since the "self" can only exist conceptually *as* a representation.[7] Further, this contradiction is identical to the one Gasché identifies when he speaks of the constitutive enterprise of the subject in (and of) an autobiographical work, for the "disappropriation" of the subject's identity by language in the activity of writing is an extension, a representation, of that same "disappropriation" as it occurs in the very activity of thinking the "self" into "being." As Paul de Man has rightly insisted, the "moments" in an autobiographical work are not "located in a history," but are the "manifestation . . . of a linguistic structure."[8] De Man metaphorizes the "radical disappropriation" of which Gasché writes when he observes that the "doors" through which an autobiographer enters his work are "revolving" ones, an image meant to represent the "motion of tropes" as they turn "events" into linguistic structures.[9] This is, then, an image of the problem of the subject in autobiography, where the necessary "motion of tropes" disappropriates the identity of the subject, taking what is "given" and making it into something unavoidably "invented" and "projected."

While the problematical status of the subject in the midst of such a process of disappropriation may be a relatively new topic for theorists of autobiography like Gasché and de Man, it is decidedly *not* a new topic for autobiography itself.[10] For the kinds of contradictions outlined above have been regularly confronted by writers working in an autobiographical mode at least since St. Augustine. The *Confessions*, we should recall, contains a long and intricate examination of the disappropriating effects of cognition and representation, and it does so in the context of a most methodical literary self-analysis.



This meditation, which constitutes a kind of critical commentary on the difficult task Augustine has himself undertaken in seeking to find, and then represent himself in language, surfaces in Books X and XI of the *Confessions*. These two books, which contain the famous discourses on memory and time, follow immediately the story of Augustine's life as it culminates in his dramatic conversion in the garden at Milan, and the subsequent death of his mother at Ostia. This "break" in the narrative—which has generally caused confusion and debate among Augustinian scholars[11]—is really not a break at all. While on the surface it does represent a temporal leap (from the death of Monica in 387 to the actual moments of the book's composition during 397 and 398), and while that leap is paralleled by the text's abrupt shift from a narrative, to an exegetical, technique, it actually continues the story of the "journey" of Augustine's soul recounted in the first nine books, but transposed now to the topography of his inner life, his mind. That is, when Augustine writes near the beginning of Book X that his subject will be "what I am now, at this very time when I make my confessions,"[12] he is not breaking off the story of his journey toward God, but affirming the fact that that journey has not ended, and has extended into the very time and activity of writing.[13] What has happened in the narration temporally is simply that Augustine has gotten to the point in his journey where he has come to realize that God is *within* him ("You were within me, while I was outside . . . You were within me, but I was not with you" [254]), and so the focus of his confession must turn inward, toward "what I know about myself" (233).

In turning inward to "the fields and spacious palaces of [his] memory" (236) Augustine performs an intricate deconstruction of the processes of perception, remembering, and representation, and he does so in a way which systematically calls into question the status of the "I" of his narrative, and the ability of its language to bridge the distance between the temporal self and an eternal God. Augustine begins his analysis with a distinction between things and their representations:

> [T]hings themselves do not enter [memory], but images of things perceived by sense are kept ready there for the thought of the one recalling them.
>
> (237)

The recognition here (so belabored as the newly discovered cornerstone of contemporary critical theory) that there is a double ontological displacement that occurs as the subject of perception is perceived, and then represented, is a crucial one for the status of the subject of Augustine's own work, since he also insists that

> When true accounts of the past are given, it is not the things themselves which have passed away, which are drawn forth from memory, but words conceived from their images.
>
> (291)

The implicit recognition here is that the "past" recounted by Augustine in his *Confessions* is the image of an image of a past which has "passed away." This also holds for the subject in the *Confessions*, who cannot "be" the author, who has "passed away," but rather, exists in it as a series of "words conceived from [its] images," since it is "in the vast court of my memory [that] I encounter myself and recall myself" (237).

It is precisely because of Augustine's recognition that his own language is "fallen," that it *disappropriates*, rather than mirrors, identity, that both he *and* his text must seek divine intercession by the Word. This intercession exists in the text in the form of what Kenneth Burke has called the "fountain of quotations" from scripture which "almost overwhelm" the book.[14] With the language of the Word woven thoroughly into his narrative, Augustine's past could be represented in a language he believed could literally transform (and authorize) its meaning. Recounting what had "passed away" into fallen images in the language of scripture Augustine sought to elevate the empirical events of his life to a level at which its meaning became "transcendent." In its role both as prodigal son and confessing writer, the subject in and of the *Confessions* is thus presented as a transcending being, elevated in part by the scriptural language of its text.[15] That language stands as an act of intercession which mirrors the intercession proper which Augustine sought in the Word's role as divine physician, a physician who might "gather [him] together again from that disordered state in which [he] lay in shattered pieces" (46). Without this double kind of intercession Augustine's story would remain, in Gasché's terms, the "venture" of "a subject in search of identity" within a text which, paradoxically, continually disappropriates that identity, while the subject within it would always remain on the very brink of irony, ever "shattered" and at "war" (100) with itself, "running off into . . . unlikeness" (336).[16]



This same threat is repeatedly confronted by Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, an autobiographical work which, as M. H. Abrams has noted, has its "ultimate source" in Augustine's *Confessions*.[17] Wordsworth also writes "as a pilgrim gone / In quest of highest truth" (XI, 392-93),[18] but like Augustine he must traverse a double topography, with one eye on the story of his past, and the other on the self who writes it, since his "theme" is "What pass'd within me" (III, 173-74). In the midst of such a task Wordsworth recognizes the same kinds of contradictions we have seen Augustine acknowledge. The central one, for this poem which seeks to recuperate the "might" of the poet's "Soul," is that that soul "lies far hidden from the reach of words" (III, 173-185). While the poem affirms the context for such a recuperation ("each man is a memory to himself" [III, 189]), it at the same time questions the efficacy of its central mechanism, for he "cannot say what portion" of his memories are actually "naked recollections," and which "may rather have been call'd to life / By after-meditation" (III, 645-48). No wonder that the problem of the subject is *The Prelude*'s principal preoccupation.[19]

Unlike the *Confessions*, where Augustine confines the critical examinations which call into question the efficacy of his project to the "exegetical" books which follow the narrative of his life, Wordsworth's *via memoria* is continually halted by them. Early on in the poem he acknowledges to himself and his reader the "wide . . . vacancy" which exists between the subject of his poem and the "Being" who is writing it:

> [S]o wide appears
> The vacancy between me and those days,
> Which yet have such self-presence in my mind
> That, sometimes, when I think of it, I seem
> Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
> And of some other Being.
>
> (II, 28-33)[20]

When he stops to think of it Wordsworth can recognize that the subject of his poem is "some other Being," different enough from himself to have another "consciousness." It needs to be emphasized that this "other" corresponds less to a past empirical "self" than to the poetic character who has his part in Wordsworth's poem, and who is created imaginatively by him in the ontological void referred to as a "vacancy" in the above passage. The subject in Wordsworth's poem, to recall Nietzsche's observation, is "not something given, it

is something added and invented and projected behind" both "what there is," *and* what there was. The problem of the subject in *The Prelude* is not simply that it is always a double "Being," but that as a poetically constructed subject, free-floating in a temporal "vacancy," it is a dispersed one which appears everywhere.

Wordsworth's recognition of this fact also surfaces in the poem in passages which metaphorize this dispersal, and the effect that it has on his poetic vision. In Book IV the poet is described

> As one who hangs down-bending from the side
> Of a slow-moving Boat, upon the breast
> Of a still water, solacing himself
> With such discoveries as his eye can make,
> Beneath him, in the bottom of the deeps, [he]
> Sees many beauteous sights, weeds, fishes, flowers
> Grots, pebbles, roots of trees, and fancies more;
> Yet often is perplex'd, and cannot part
> The shadow from the substance, rocks and sky,
> Mountains and clouds, from that which is indeed
> The region, and the things which there abide
> In their true dwelling; now is cross'd by gleam
> Of his own image, by a sunbeam now,
> And motions that are sent he knows not whence . . .
>
> (247-260)

The "motions" created in this scene on the still water by the floating subject are in their effect analogous to the disappropriating "motion of tropes" which we earlier saw de Man identify as the perceptual and representational process which transforms the identity of the historical, or "actual," into something *created* by the perceiving subject. Understood as a "text," the still water and the objects under it cannot help but reflect more than they are, cannot help but represent what is properly speaking outside, and above them. Moreover, the "image" of the poet itself inhabits the "region" of the perceptual plane (or, to follow Wordsworth's image, the perceptual "deep"), permeating an already perplexing mixture of "shadow and substance" with an insistent self-reflexivity. Like de Man's image of the "revolving door," Wordsworth's leaves no avenue of exit for the subject. Indeed, the subject in Wordsworth's poem can only endure as a trope in perpetual motion: "A Traveller I am, / And all my Tale is of Myself . . ." (III, 196-97). In part, this is due to the fact that unlike Augustine, this secular pilgrim has no divine Word, or intercessor, to come between his redemptive task



and what he calls the "frail element" of the language which must sustain it:[21]

> —Here must thou be, O Man!
> Strength to thyself; no Helper hast thou here;
> Here keepest thou thy individual state;
> No other can divide with thee this work,
> No secondary hand can intervene
> To fashion this ability . . .
>
> (XIII, 181-86)

The narrative strategy we observe in both of these works is a similar one: each seeks to use the resources of a literary mode of self-analysis in order to recall, and in the process of recalling, to reanimate, what is posited as a previously unified—or more authentic—self.[22] In this sense the "work" in Wordsworth's passage is the recuperative labor of the poet-autobiographer as he seeks to "fix the wavering balance" of his "mind" (I, 650).[23] Similarly, Augustine viewed the composition of his work as a "labor" in which his soul had become "a soil hard to work and demanding much sweat" (245). Part of the difficulty both writers faced, as we have seen, had to do with the inherent contradictions of the autobiographical enterprise itself, in which their own past identities could become disappropriated by the very texts which were to mirror them.

Notwithstanding these contradictions, however, both Augustine and Wordsworth saw themselves through to the completion of a totalizing kind of self-history which by its very nature posits the idea of a unified, historical, self. In this respect they certainly lack the kind of radical critique of subjectivity found in critics of the autobiographical form like Gasché and de Man. That critique *in* autobiographical works surfaces in the very break-up of the form itself, in the abandonment of narrative as a form for self-representation, and comes only with the "crisis of subjectivity" which has had such an enormous influence on 20th century literature.[24]

While the tendency of the autobiographer in the modern period, seen most clearly in Proust's *A la recherche*, and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist*, to acknowledge the inherent disjunction between the writing self and the subject of its text by fictionalizing the life does go part way in adjusting the *form* of autobiography to a new understanding of subjectivity, it nevertheless retains the totalizing and unifying *message* inherent to narrative itself. It is only with the conscious rejection of this mode that the problem of the subject in

autobiography comes, as it were, into its own, that it begins to embrace a new content in the very act of embracing a new form. This happens when the moments of self-consciousness about the autobiographical act we have seen in Augustine and Wordsworth overwhelm the narration of biography altogether, and become so pervasive as to literally displace the "past"—and the past "self"—as the subjects of autobiography.

An autobiography with very little, if any, "biography," may seem to constitute a contradiction in terms, but if we look briefly at two 20th century autobiographical works by Paul Valéry and Roland Barthes we will see that while the organizing role of biography in their works is taken over by philosophical, psychological, and epistemological questions they tend less to dismiss the biographical self than to redefine it. In their texts the writer's life remains central, but the "life" is no longer thought of strictly in terms of a chronological or historical series of events which are (or even should be) narratable. Rather, the "life" in the work of each comes more and more to be thought of not as exterior and chronological, but as interior and dispersed, not separate from the time of writing, but constituted in and by it.

While in a traditional definition of "autobiography" we might not think of Valéry's voluminous *Cahiers* as an autobiographical work its fragments, he wrote, are the "remnants" in which his "*moi* most clearly takes shape."[25] The *Cahiers* remained unpublished at the time of Valéry's death, save for a series of fragments selected and ordered for publication by the author in 1944 under the title "Propros Me Concernant" ("Remarks About Myself").[26] For the sake of focus we will limit our analysis to this shorter, published text.

"Propos Me Concernant" is remarkable at once for what it says about Valéry, and what it says about the problematical nature of the autobiographical act. It begins with the following "Foreword":

> The text of these "Remarks" brings together without order or system a few jottings and fragments from my notebooks, having to do with many things other than the author himself. Could it be that in these remnants his *moi* most clearly takes shape?
>
> They are no more than moments caught and set down as they came . . . with the repetitions, the gaps, the fluctuations . . . recorded by the meter of any life . . .
>
> I do not keep, I have never kept a record of my days . . . What do I care about my biography? What do my used-up days matter to me? Nothing of the past should be retained but . . . the bounty snatched from time . . . which necessarily loses at the same time its attachment to its source . . .



> No, I have no fondness for memories, which to me are images already used; a dreary useless waste . . .
>
> No, No! It is no pleasure to retrace in my mind those old paths of my life. I am not one to pursue remembrance of things past.
>
> (289-90)

The reference to Proust foregrounds Valéry's break with the idea of a self-reflexive text based on remembering. For Valéry the "self" and its "biography"—its "used-up days"—have a discontinuous relationship, so that "memory" does not animate, but necessarily hinders the author's work. If there is a relationship between the self, writing, and the past, it is a paradoxical one: the past may be a "source," but it is a "used-up" one, a dry well, whose function is lost in the obscurity of time. A "truthful" rendering of the past—when the past enters into the work at all—will be fragmented, repetitious, and full of gaps.

While Augustine, Wordsworth, or Proust might distrust the memory for its inaccuracies, Valéry distrusts it quite as much even when it seems to *be* accurate. "Memory," he writes, "is often as deceiving when accurate as when treacherous" (289). Moreover, and this is crucial, he insists that "the past . . . is more obliterated for me in its *chronological* and *narratable* development, so it seems to me, than it is for most" (289). The past, that is, exists for Valéry in a specifically non-chronological form, so that the most "treacherous" thing he might do as a writer would be to make it chronological, to make it "narratable." The fragmentary nature of his *Cahiers*, and of the shorter "Remarks," then, is meant to be a representation of his "past," rather than simply to obfuscate it.

The relationship envisioned by Valéry between his non-chronological past and his fragmented text is mirrored in the continuity he sees between that text and his own "*moi.*" Perceiving his own nature as fragmented and disunited, he has fashioned his self-reflexive work in a fragmented and disunited fashion. "I find no unity in my nature," he writes, "I see nothing [there] but a 'result of chance' " (291). A narrative, which would transform this pattern into a chronological one, would betray the very texture of the "life" it would be seeking to evoke:

> History can record little else than "events." But reduce a man to the facts that are the most striking and the easiest to perceive and define—his birth, his few adventures, his death—and you have lost sight of the texture of his life. Reduce a life to a "summary!" It is just the opposite that might be worth something.
>
> (291)

Understood by Valéry to be a specifically aesthetic enterprise, the autobiographical act is seen by him to constitute not a summation of the past, but (as Wordsworth understood[27]) a beneficent and liberating *intervention* in its illusory continuity: "I am aware that once my pen intervenes, I can make whatever I like out of what was" (301-02). Here the very disappropriation identified by Gasché and de Man is actually privileged as a resource for the writer.

When compared to the autobiographical projects of Augustine and Wordsworth, to a traditional conception of "autobiography" such as that practiced by, say, Benjamin Franklin, or even when compared to the practices of a thinly disguised fictional autobiography like Joyce's *Portrait,* Valéry's text (and the ideas it contains) constitutes a kind of anti-practice. However, Valéry's method (to the extent that we can even speak of it as a "method" at all) seeks not so much to be anti-mimetic, but to be mimetic in a new way, a way which seems to him to be more congruent with his sense of "self" than a "biographical" narrative could be. Valéry observes a kind of seamlessness between the discontinuous, "chance" components of his "*moi,*" and the fragmented form of his work. For him the self is "heaped together" in "successive accretions" of "accidents" from the outside which give it a "certain *shape,*" a shape "composed of bits and pieces that have never co-existed" (310). This is, of course, the very "shape" of his *Cahiers,* and its mimetic relationship to its author is made explicit when Valéry writes that "the entity Mr. P. V." is "a 'convenient notation'" (315).

Since the "*moi*" in "Remarks" is not the biographical Valéry, but an aesthetic creation, there is the sense in reading his text of an absolute kind of distance between the "remembered" and the writing self, that in the activity of writing Valéry is creating a "person" for the moment to write about another who does not—did not—exist. We recognize in the work the presence of an ephemeral, and yet an insistent, "other," whom it both animates and sustains. It is this same recognition on the part of Valéry which leads him to write elsewhere that he "is made up of many different persons and a principal witness who watches all these puppets bobbing."[28] It is the search to understand this "principal witness" which, he suggests at the close of "Remarks," both generates and troubles any self-reflexive writer:

> What is there of mine in what comes to me? What is there of me in what comes from me? Here the ridiculous problem of inspiration converges with the ridiculous problem of responsibility.



> In both cases the self is searching for a self. Who has done what I have done? . . .
>
> One *self* produces and acts; the other receives and sometimes judges.
>
> —But why in the devil do you have to *introduce* this self. And this *introduces* a new question.
>
> (333)

This "new question," it must be observed, is really not quite so new after all. In positing a "divided self"—a "self . . . searching for a self"—Valéry leaves inscribed within his text the traces of an ontological basis for the autobiographical "search" present in the form since Augustine ("Where was I? . . . I had departed even from myself" (114)), one which is perhaps nowhere more insistent than in *The Prelude.* For it is precisely a nostalgia for the lost "other" which underlies an autobiographical work like Augustine's or Wordsworth's, demanding that it elaborate its search in historical terms, having on the one hand a retrospective framework, and on the other a narrative structure.[29]

All of this collapses in the fragmented autobiographical discourse of *Roland Barthes.* Not only does Barthes's book seek to abolish the idea of a "double self," it also works methodically to construct a discursive form for the autobiographical work liberated from the narrative mode required by a nostalgia for the past. In this attempt the spiritual goal of the Augustinian and Wordsworthian journeys is avoided at every turn, with "transcendence" viewed by Barthes as a "risk" which his text will continually try to "attenuate."[30]

Like Valéry's, Barthes's work eschews both memory and biography, and insists that writing autobiographically is a thoroughly creative activity. He treats of the distance between the biographical and the written self by affirming it, deconstructing "Barthes" into a group of fragments which are arranged under a series of names, topics, and concepts. "The important thing," he insists,

> is that these little networks not be connected, that they not slide into a single enormous network which would be the structure of the book . . . It is in order to halt, to deflect, to divide this descent of discourse toward a destiny of the subject, that at certain moments [it] calls you to order (to disorder) and says: *Cut! Resume the story in another way* . . .
>
> (148)

With the fragmented structure of his book Barthes seeks to avoid the illusory representation of the self as coming under the domination of what we earlier saw Nietzsche call "one substratum." With

Nietzsche, Barthes's text constitutes a denial of the "fiction" of the subject as anything other than a creation of human consciousness and human language.

Like the *Cahiers,* then, Barthes's approach to "autobiography" constitutes a kind of anti-practice. If writers like Augustine and Wordsworth remember to re-member—to transcend, to restore, and to reconcile—Barthes's *Barthes* strives to create a dis-order, to "halt ," "deflect," and to "divide" the subject from its "destiny." This "destiny" is for Barthes not a Natural one, but the historically constructed idea that the "self," as "whole" and "recovered" (a "single enormous network") can restore itself in, or by writing, a text. Where Augustine wrote his *Confessions* to "heal" himself because he "lay in shattered pieces" (46), Barthes writes what is specifically an anti-confession of fragments he "calls R. B." to demonstrate, in part, that the "self" *is* shattered, scattered, decentered, and—at least in a text—always a "fiction:"

> This book is not a book of "confessions;" not that it is insincere, but because we have a different knowledge today than yesterday; such knowledge can be summarized as follows: What I write about myself is *never the last word:* the more "sincere" I am, the more interpretable I am, under the eye of other examples than those of the old authors, who believed they were required to submit themselves to but one law: *authenticity* . . . my texts are disjointed . . . the latter is nothing but a *further text . . . text upon text,* which never illuminates anything.
>
> (120)

Here, instead of the Augustinian pilgrim's end—a divinely "authentic" "illumination" which redeems the self for a transcendent and eternal end—Barthes is affirming what Eliot called the "exploration" which language itself affords, the continual "moving / Into another intensity" played out in his *Four Quartets.*[31] But for Barthes the autobiographical writer's movement is through an ever-interpretable self, who has no single "law" with which to designate his "authenticity." There is for Barthes no language which might constitute the last, the redemptive, the incarnate Word—certainly no language about the "past" which will grace the self with enlightenment:

> What right does my present have to speak of my past? Has my present some advantage over my past? What "grace" might have enlightened me?
>
> (121)



Based in part on the denial of such a "grace," Barthes's text seeks to deconstruct—or to reconstruct—the ontological foundations of the autobiographical text.[32] This is why it works so rigorously against being *nostalgic,* why it works, in fact, to present nostalgia as the condition of an illusion. In methodical fashion it resists nostalgia for the past, nostalgia for a past "self," and nostalgia for a more authentic narrative mode with which to present both. Barthes writes about himself in his book "without . . . ever knowing whether it is about my past or my present that I am speaking" (142). In denying that his past has any advantage over his present his text rejects nostalgia in favor of the more creative moments in which he is actually composing it. The very negation of "recovery," his "patchwork" text is a rewriting of the self who writes; "I . . . *re-write* myself—at a distance, a great distance—here and now" (142).

For Barthes nostalgia constitutes the illusory sense that there is a "place" to return to, and another self there to reanimate. A corollary of the idea that the self can simply be "divided," this notion of a "homesick" self is replaced with a more ghostly image of the subject as "dispersed" and "diffracted" *in the present.* In a fragment under the title "The person divided?" he writes that

> when we speak today of a divided subject, it is never to acknowledge his simple contradictions, his double postulations, etc.; it is a *diffraction* which is intended, a dispersion of energy in which there remains neither a central core nor a structure of meaning: I am not contradictory, I am dispersed.
>
> (143)

*Roland Barthes,* written to foreground this idea, resists the lure of both an idealized past *and* the idea that there is an "other" self residing there, so that a prior period of self-unification can never stand as its subject's goal. We need to note here, by point of contrast, how operative is the relationship for both Wordsworth and Augustine between writing a nostalgic autobiographical narrative and overcoming a "divided self." Augustine is nostalgic for his "home" with God, for his *return* to rest in the "heavenly mansion" of his Father. By the same token, Wordsworth insists upon returning home—literally, after the French Revolution, and figuratively, in his retrospective poetry—to overcome his own sense of self-division, and to reclaim, at "home" again with "mother nature," his powers as a poet. For both writers the feeling of self "division" generates a complex kind of nostalgia, which in turn feeds the sense of self-division until, ideally, each has journeyed home along

the *via memoria* of his narrative. Barthes's "home," on the other hand, is dispersed throughout his text. It resides in the very "rhetoric" of his fragmented narrative, and has its "bed" in the "imaginary" (95).

Having seen that the problematic status of the subject in a self-reflexive text has been a topic of autobiographical works since Augustine, we can understand this similar interest on the part of Valéry and Barthes as in part the repetition of an ongoing preoccupation. But on the other hand, it should also be clear that in the substance and form of the two 20th-century works we confront both epistemological and literary disjunctions which have their roots in a particular historical moment. For as we saw Barthes insist, his book is different from earlier "confessions . . . because we have a different knowledge today" than the "old authors," because we "speak today of a divided subject" in ways much more complex than the "simple contradictions" of "yesterday."

While the contents of much of "Remarks About Myself," and *Roland Barthes* articulate this "different knowledge" about writing and subjectivity, what is of even more interest for literary studies is the way in which both writers can be seen accomodating the form of their self-reflexive works to this "different knowledge." In this process the fragmented form of each work becomes an image on the representational plane of the breakdown of an old epistemology, a sign of the emergence of a new vision of the self as "heaped together" from "dispersed" fragments—in Nietzsche's words, "invented and projected behind what there is." Literary form, that is, can be observed here to be intimately linked to changing forms of knowledge and self-consciousness, and to the fact that the more an autobiographical writer becomes preoccupied with the constitutive relationship between language and subjectivity, the more the constitution of his text will change.[33]

In addition, with their biographies (in the conventional sense) less central to Valéry's and Barthes's conception of the "self" than was the case for Wordsworth, the *narrativity* of their works had necessarily to give way to a non-totalizing kind of *discourse.* Once the idea of "self-hood" has become disengaged from biography, the past, and history, the autobiographical text can no longer simply be a story, but, as we have seen, must unfold in a more elliptical and purely discursive way. For an author like Augustine or Wordsworth, who is trying in the composition of his work to "unify" himself with an absent, but somehow more "authentic" past self, a narrative *about* his past is a necessary kind of construction. But the belatedness he experiences as he constructs it always puts just out of reach its ability to help him achieve the kind of recovery he seeks. A discursive mode, on the other hand, one which fully situates the writer's self in the moments of its composition in his text, seeks to avoid this belatedness, and the unresolvable contradictions it creates. Whether this mode can be *effective* in this regard, of course, is another matter entirely. It may be that Barthes and Valéry have simply found ways to more carefully register this sense of belatedness, and the insurmountable contradictions attending *any* attempt to overcome it.



The kinds of textual strategies pursued by Valéry and Barthes can be seen to shift the gound of an autobiographical practice—by way of an analytic, rather than a retrospective, meditation—in a way even more radical than the fictional autobiographical methods of novelists like Joyce and Proust, and together they constitute a kind of generic mutation of autobiography which explodes the controlling notion of "genre" itself as it pertains to autobiographical works.[34] For with the fragmented, discursive practices of Valéry and Barthes the problematical 20th-century subject is written into an autobiographical text *as* a "disappropriated" subject, and in a way which radically (and appropriately) problematizes the very form of autobiography itself. What we might, then, call the modern "crisis of subjectivity" comes at once in these works to define both content and form. This crisis is the point of departure for both Valéry and Barthes. It is a beginning which at once destroys and reanimates the form of autobiography.[35]

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NOTES

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power,* trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 267.

2 See for instance Elizabeth W. Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), Jeffrey Mehlman, *A Structural Study of Autobiography: Proust, Leiris, Sartre, Lévi-Strauss* (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), and William Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ.

Press, 1980), as well as a special edition on autobiography of *New Literary History* (Vol. 9 [Autumn, 1977]).

3 Rodolphe Gasché, *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 93, No. 4 (May, 1978), p. 574.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, p. 269.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 266.

7 This does not mean, of course that there is no "self" represented in an autobiographical text. However, its identity is as informed by the mediations of language and literary structure as it is by the author's "personality"—which is itself already a conceptual representation.

8 Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 94, No. 5 (December, 1979), p. 922.

9 *Ibid.*

10 For a book-length study of the autobiographical act which employs concepts from contemporary critical theory see Mehlman's *A Structural Study of Autobiography.* See also Michael Sprinker, "Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography," in Olney's *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (pp. 321-342).

11 For a cogent discussion of this controversy see R. S. Pine-Coffin's introduction to his translation of the *Confessions* (New York: Penguin Books, 1961). See also John C. Cooper, "Why Did Augustine Write Books XI-XIII of the *Confessions?*" in *Augustinian Studies* 2 (1971), pp. 37-46. For a somewhat different discussion of these final books of the *Confessions* and their relation to the over-all structure of Augustine's autobiography see Spengemann's chapter on the *Confessions* in *The Forms of Autobiography.*

12 St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Image Books, 1960), p. 231. All quotations from the *Confessions* are from this edition and appear in parentheses in the text.

13 The fact that in composing his *Confessions* Augustine is not simply (and passively) telling the story of a past conversion, but is continuing his journey toward God in the very activity of writing, is made clear by his own description of the personal needs which animated and sustained the work. For he laments at the outset of writing his narrative—ten years *after* his conversion in the garden at Milan—that his soul "lies in ruins," that in making his confession he hopes that God will help him to "build it up again" (46).

14 Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 128.

15 Burke writes in this regard:

> The great store of Biblical texts, learned verbatim and spouted forth at appropriate moments (by Augustine), were like attitudinally slanted names for situations. Each time a situation arose, it presented itself to him in terms of some Scriptural formula that in effect "adopted a policy" with regard to it. Thus by confronting a current situation in terms of a Biblical response, such citations had the effect of making the situation itself essentially Biblical, to be classed with conditions not literally present at all. Thus there is a sense in which his Biblical terminology of motives enabled him to "transcend" the sheerly empirical events of his time.
>
> (*The Rhetoric of Religion*, p. 58)

16 For more on language, writing, and the autobiographical subject in Augustine see Margaret W. Ferguson, "Saint Augustine's Region of Unlikeness: The Crossing of Exile and Language," *The Georgia Review* 4, (1975), pp. 842-864, and Eugene Vance, "Augustine's Confessions and the Grammer of Selfhood," *Genre* 6, (1973), pp. 1-28.



17 M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1971), p. 83.

18 All quotations from *The Prelude* are from the 1805 version edited by Ernest De Selincourt and corrected by Stephen Gill (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970).

19 The role of Wordsworth in his poem is treated at length in Richard Onorato, *The Character of the Poet: Wordsworth In The Prelude* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971). Onorato's is a psychoanalytic study of the poem. The poem is read through the eyes of Lacanian reformulations of Freud by Robert Young in "The Eye and Progress of his Song: A Lacanian Reading of *The Prelude*," *Oxford Literary Review* 3 (1979), pp. 78-98. See also David P. Haney, "The Emergence of the Autobiographical Figure in *The Prelude*, Book I," *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 20 (Spring 1981), No. 1, pp. 33-63.

20 Elsewhere in the poem Wordsworth reflects that it is a

> Hard task to analyse a soul, in which
> Not only general habits and desires,
> But each most obvious and particular thought,
> Not in a mystical and idle sense
> But in the words of reason deeply weigh'd
> Hath no beginning.
>
> (II, 232-37)

The poem's narrative "story" is halted both in these moments of thoughtful meditation, and in moments when its flow is broken by a more dramatic illumination, or problem.

21 Wordsworth is writing here of the inadequacy of language for the "Bard" seeking to sing of a "soul divine." The contrast is between the eternal nature of this "deathless spirit" and the poet's verses, which will "perish:"

> Oh! why hath not the mind
> Some element to stamp her image on
> In nature somewhat nearer to her own?
> Why, gifted with such powers to send abroad
> Her spirit, must it lodge in shrines so frail?
>
> (V, 44-48)

22 In Augustine's case, of course, this "unity" is to come not in the return to a temporal and earthly, but a heavenly "past." Thus birth is a "fall" into "immoderation and unlikeness far distant" from God (336), and Augustine depends upon the Word in order that he be "recalled" to "unity" with Him (336). In the meantime, he writes, "we labor amid the remains of our obscurity" (337).

23 The "toil" of the poet's labor as he writes his poem is to pay off, he hopes, in the composition of an even more "honorable" work—probably *The Recluse:*

> [M]y hope has been that I might fetch
> Invigorating thoughts from former years,
> Might fix the wavering balance of my mind,
> And haply meet reproaches, too, whose power
> May spur me on, in manhood now mature,
> To honorable toil.
>
> (I, 648-653)

24 Among the better studies of this topic is Wylie Sypher, *Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art* (New York: Random House, 1962).

25 Paul Valéry, *Moi*, trans. Marthiel and Jackson Mathew (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), p. 287.

26 It appeared as the foreword to Berne-Joffroy, *Presence de Valéry* (Paris: Plon, 1944). All quotations from "Remarks About Myself" are from *Moi*, and appear in parentheses in the text.

27 For Wordsworth the autobiographical act constitutes an act of interference with his past. In composing his poem he was attempting, he wrote, to "rescue from decay the old / By timely interference" (I, 126-27).

28 Valéry, *Moi*, p. 14. For another discussion of the autobiographical aspects of Valéry's work see James Olney's discussion of Valéry's "La Jeune Parque" in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, pp. 249-59.

29 The narrative structure of both works is accompanied by each writer's feeling that he is on a "journey." For Augustine this journey is akin to that of the Prodigal Son, while for Wordsworth the very writing of his poem is considered a journey. He writes that he is a "traveller" and a "pilgrim" who "tread[s] . . . holy ground" (XII, 251), and refers to his poem as a "course" (XIII, 363) and a "path" (II, 287).

30 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), p. 95. All further quotations from this work appear in parentheses in the text.

31 T. S. Eliot, "East Coker, V," *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1952).

32 Barthes's own autobiographical method does not remain exempt from such a deconstruction. Concerning the structure of *Barthes* he writes:

> I have the illusion to suppose that by breaking up my discourse I cease to discourse in terms of the imaginary about myself, attenuating the risk of transcendence; but since the fragment . . . is *finally* a rhetorical genre and since rhetoric is that layer of language which best presents itself to interpretation, by supposing I disperse myself I merely return, quite docilely, to the bed of the imaginary.
>
> (95)

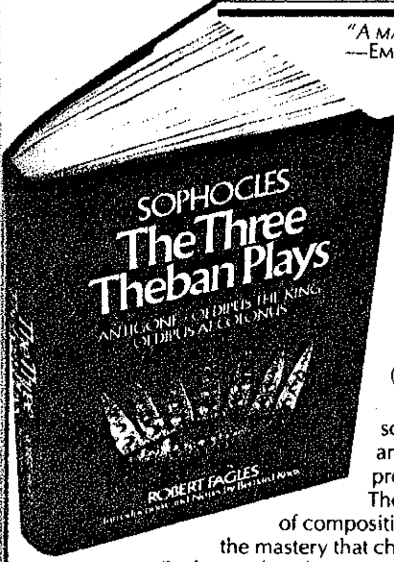
J. Gerald Kennedy, in "Roland Barthes, Autobiography, and the End of Writing," in *The Georgia Review*, Vol. XXXV, No. 2 (Summer 1981) argues that there is evidence in Barthes's late work—especially *La Chambre claire*—of the evolution of a "redefined notion of the subject" which would move away from *Roland Barthes*'s "centripetal conception of the subject."

33 The perceived relationship between language and authority on the part of the author of an autobiographical work will of course help determine the limits of its form. Augustine, understanding language to have power only as it emanates from the Word, is tied to a strictly representational form, since the "truth" of his life is already known by the God to whom his work is addressed. For Wordsworth, on the other hand, it is the power of poetry itself which is to have a recuperative function in his work, and the use of its language—and the epic form—is an extension of his recognition that "Power" flows from, and through, him. With Valéry and Barthes the "free" form of their books is an extension of the recognition that language's power, and its authority, is generated in a thoroughly secular fashion from within their *own* consciousnesses. Thus there is, for both, the sense of a nearly absolute creative freedom which allows their autobiographical works to be formally "experimental."

34 Defining "autobiography" as a "genre" is, as most critics of the form have recognized, an extremely difficult task. Any autobiography will of necessity be an aesthetically created object, with elements of fiction as well as fact. For discussions of the genre problem in autobiography see Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), and Spengemann's *The Forms of Autobiography*.



35 For an interesting discussion of the "end" of autobiography as such see Michael Sprinker, "Fictions of the Self: The End of Autobiography," in James Olney, ed., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*. Sprinker's title is something of a misnomer, it should be added. While the kinds of radically disruptive autobiographical texts about which this essay is concerned—as well as those discussed by Sprinker—were being written, people continued to write very traditional autobiographies. No doubt they will continue to do so. A work like *Roland Barthes* does not signify the "end" of autobiography anymore than *Finnegans Wake* brought about the "end" of the novel. Barthes's book does not represent the end of autobiography, for instance, but is a representation—a presentation—of its metamorphosis.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