

Autobiography and transmission

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1) Seeing oneself both as an actor and as a spectator

Nowadays, the tendency to make one's existence visible is made manifest in many ways; there seems to be a desire to allow one's personality to be shaped by others (in this, instant communication media – such as chat lines, smses, and even the “big brother” show – play an important part); though this tendency is quite strong, it will never be possible for self-knowledge to limit itself to the feelings and emotions expressed in real time.

‘I make a character out of myself’ - writes Claire. Writing on a computer, to her, means to escape from this writing by the self for the self, and seeing the other through the lines: ‘In order to forge my identity, telling about myself was a means that no longer satisfied me, it was necessary that I should become part of a series of intemporal aptitudes.’ (by Philippe Lejeune, Cher écran, Editions Seuil, Paris, 2000, page 127)

Writing on the computer became more universal for Claire, because it made her feel, as she said herself, like both an actress and a spectator.

2) Seeing the self “objectively”

Though many different forms of self-representation are coming into play, as shown by Claire's behaviour, self-knowledge is based upon a long elaboration, and writing, drawing, or trying to express oneself is in its self an opus.

Starting from the hypothesis that writing and autobiographical work (diaries, confessions, letters, interviews, drawings) are useful for self-knowledge, one may ask what self-

knowledge means. Does it mean expressing oneself, bearing witness to one's self and to one's personality? In what way? One fact is certain: all autobiographies do not bear witness to the self in the same manner; some synthesize, others accompany or even stimulate the personal pathfinding.

Autobiography can, in many cases, be considered the best way to self-knowledge, in as much as it elaborates in the first person an observation point of one's existence, reusing any other, exterior viewpoint that might make the self an object to observe.

Jean Jacques Rousseau is one of the philosophers who expressed this conviction most openly. He writes, at the beginning of the *confessions* (1764-1776):

I undertake a work that has no other examples, and will have no imitators. I wish to show my fellow men a man in all his naked truth; that man will be me.

Myself alone. I know my heart, and I know mankind. I am unlike anyone I know, and I dare believe that I am not made in the same way as anybody else that exists. If I am not worth more, I am at least different. Whether nature operated well or badly in opening the shape into which it thrust me, that can be judged upon only after having read me. (Jean Jacques Rousseau, Les confessions, Paris, Gallimard, 1959, page 5)

Who is this *I*, able to reflect upon its self and to ask “*Who am I?*”, “*What is my truth?*”

Again Jean Jacques Rousseau, in the following paragraph, is convinced of his ability to turn an objective eye upon himself; he wishes God to be his witness:

Let the trumpet of Judgement blow as loud as it wants; I will come, with this book in my hand, to present myself to the supreme judge. I will say clearly: “This is what I have done, what I have thought, what I have been. I have stated the good and the evil with equal frankness (...) I have shown myself as I was, despicable and vile, good, generous and sublime. I have revealed my intimate self as You have seen it. Eternal being, gather around me the uncountable mass of my fellow men: let them hear my confessions, let them blush at my unworthiness (...), and let one of them tell You, if he dares: “I was a better man than he”. (ibidem)

Jean Jacques Rousseau emphasizes the absolute objectivity of his revelation. He

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wishes to exalt his past so as to reveal his own existence, naked so to speak, or in a state of purity, and synchronically accompanied by the feeling of existence.

3) The construction of the self through autobiography

It is possible to adopt another point of view: doing autobiographical work does not mean to tell one's story with complacency or in an aesthetic way, to summarise one's life, to provide others with an insight, but rather to acquire one's freedom. In this case, it would be a human necessity, a duty or a task one owes oneself, and not at all the luxury of an idle life.

Knowing oneself means to gather one's strength resolutely, in order to go forward, to summon one's energy and find the tools to carry out one's projects. Self-knowledge is therefore an agent and an active self that one gets to know in action, and which is transformed into its own activity.

In this sense, it is not an intellectual or a contemplative work, it is not a theoretical work, but a way of taking action upon oneself, an active approach to one's person. In this case, self-knowledge consists in modifying one's "object", discovering it to be incomplete. Knowing one's self corresponds to knowing one's own freedom, creating it, and putting it into motion.

By this choice, one ceases to observe one's past, and discovers one's capacity and initiative to open the future. The subject knows the luminous part of the self, the lighter part on his being, and thus realises his capacity to be a cause in this world, to start something on his own because it arises *ex nihilo*. The point is not, therefore, to dig up the authentic self, looking into the past, but to turn to action and to the future.

Several autobiographical works witness how one can use a diary to build an image of the self, and to anchor one's self to the construction of one's experience of life.

This is in part Luisa's intention. Luisa uses her diary to contrast her dreary life within the four walls of the family home, with no possibility of facing the outside world. Her diary is a tool to forge a complex portrait of her being:

But now, helping my children to get through school, (...), I know I have lived up to my miserable culture and I have decided to accept myself as I am including my ignorance so I put my picture on the front page with all my personal data, so as to defeat any temptation to burn you, because I'll look at myself and I will understand that you, diary, are the real Luisa, for better or for worse, and to forsake you would be suicide. (I quaderni di Luisa - Diario di una resistenza casalinga, Milano-Piacenza, 2002, page 20)

The extract, copied faithfully from the original, shows a unique case that is however comparable to

others: the individual achieves its self in its work, by creating this image of an agent that shapes the self.

The problem of a threat to radical subjectivism remains. That is to create an image of myself that I like and that allows me to plan new initiatives (though I may not live up to my expectations and my plans), or to create a false image, completely detached from my real possibilities and my actual achievements.

4) The mirror reflection of images between the self and others

My own image is articulated, no doubt, on the reflection that others show me of my person, and therefore cannot be completely detached from a certain objectivity.

In fact, the image that one builds from the outside, or in the third person, is quite different from the one created in the first person, because it rests much more on the past, and pays more attention to repetitions, to traits that recur in time. (These represent a hindrance to action, because they limit me to certain characteristics, or character traits that prevent me from achieving certain projects or expectations.) These tendencies can be deduced from my past and characterise me, fixing my person into a personality. They are a dark and heavy part that restricts my projects to a certain area, relative to the events of my past. Other are more sensitive to my unconscious self than I can possibly be because they can see it operating, and also see certain repetitions, a certain heaviness, the received part of my personality, a part that eludes my choices. The unconscious is in fact

both individual and collective, since the self obviously does not build its self out of nothing, or in an isolated way, but within a culture. Such being the case, doing autobiographical work means to see one's self as a Me that adopts a subjective point of view to summarise a context or a collective tradition. This can often be observed among country folk, where individuals are loath to give a strictly personal image of themselves, and prefer to take on the context and use forms of expression and codes of story telling belonging to the community.

That is the case with Vincenzo Palumbo, from Accadia (Foggia). He told his life story in close cohesion to the life of the collective, using drawing as his medium. His pictures are

Looking closely, the point does not seem to be to oppose these two images: the collective one and the individual one, the factual one and the self-created one, but to understand to what extent they are intertwined, and whether they should be. The point is not to declare one false and the other true, one naïvely subjective and intentional and the other more objective and uninvolved.

Actually, the image of myself that allows me to act is corrected by the image that is shown to me by others. Vice versa, the image that others show me of myself is invested by my image of myself.

The relation between these two images of different sources, stemming from different



This unpublished picture illustrates an episode from Vincenzo Palumbo's childhood: Not having any toys, he had cut out the copper rim of the cauldron to play with, and that is why his mother is chasing him with a broomstick.

quite original in this specific case, and do not use collective patterns. They describe family life and the working atmosphere. Some of his pictures have been published in *Immagini di Accadia nei segni di Vincenzo Palumbo*, Napoli, Editor Generoso Procaccini, 2000)

perspectives, is dynamic.

One can speak of a reciprocal mirroring, or of a dialogue between two different perspectives that explain that the interpretation of the self should be such a complex and constant process.

The Mexican painter Frida Kahlo was well aware of this. She depicted herself double, dressed as a European and as an india, in a dramatic exchange between her two natures, the one cultural, the other emotional.



Mexico city, 1939. This painting, done shortly after her divorce from Diego Riviera, summarises the circumstances Frida found herself in: a Mexican Frida, loved by Diego (in her hand, she holds a miniature portrait of her husband), and her European half, unwanted, slowly bleeding to death. This narcissistic haemorrhage can be stopped only by a positive acceptance of her defeat. This is the function, as well as one of the meanings of the painting.

5) The dialectic between the self and the other

There is yet another perspective to bear in mind: more than ever nowadays, the younger generation seeks to confront the outside world.

Self interpretation appears to consist in being oneself in relation to others in the midst of cultural data, while keeping an eye on the subjective point of view. Frida Kahlo expresses a delicate balance between the vision of self by the self, and the vision that others have of that same perception. The search for the self and for personal freedom is related to the point of view received by others, that allows the creation of the self.

If a person writes, or talks, or draws, it is certainly to adopt this subjective perspective of the self. The act of writing for one's own sake, creating one's own little corner, or the decision to open up and let oneself be read, remains a paradox.

It seems an interesting question for autobiographical archives to establish when, by whom, and why?