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Autobiography from 1998 and 2016

Introductory Comments: The Itinerary of Autobiography

Autobiographie, 1998 et 2016. Remarques introductives : itinéraire de l'autobiographie

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Autobiography from 1998 and 2016

Introductory Comments: The Itinerary of Autobiography

Autobiographie, 1998 et 2016. Remarques introductives : itinéraire de l'autobiographie

Rachel Blau DuPlessis

- 1 How one construes or makes an autobiography changes through one's life.
- 2 This seems like a tautology. Obvious. Of course it does! One lives more (or at least longer), and more things happen to you and around you. They have to be written up. Or written on.
- 3 But what I really mean is that, looking at your own "autobiography" as a text, your tone may change, your attitude may change from what these were when you wrote something. Even the facts of your past life may "change"—or be seen in a different light. Word choices are reconsidered. Some actual attested facts become less important; others more. Your approach to your life and what you have done changes. Your interpretation of your work and of your acts may alter or modify. Your past angers or unhappiness may change in the present or erode in importance. You have other things, new or old, to emphasize and new judgments of the things you might hide or elide. Even the gaps change. The erasures change or might re-emerge as writing rather than erasures. All this boil-up presents formal problems, emotional issues, literary propulsions.
- 4 Therefore even if you simply write one autobiography, there is not one of these documents but several, even if some are only latent, inside your consciousness or articulated by your best judgment. These texts or drafts or attempts at autobiography gloss each other. Your motivation and intention are always at the ready—it is your life, after all, and perhaps you can go back into an autobiographical text and modify or expand.
- 5 This is what I have done here with this doubled text, two writings just under twenty years apart: 1998 and 2016. One is a letter in poem form, virtually unchanged. The other, carefully dated is something I wrote for this journal. Thus I have articulated a palimpsestic layering of autobiography itself in form, here, by doubling and glossing something I wrote in 1998. How was the original written? It was a text, possibly unsent, to

someone who asked a question of me—I think it was something like “is your work postmodern?” It is actually epistolary, and also in lines. This text creates itself and makes a structure via layering.

6 1998. Dear M

dear Mn
 dear near Mn (can't remember how to spell
 that Greek mother of the muses, she of embarrassing
 memory, the way any girls of 14
 hate that sexy farting mother)
 God, do you have to?
 that element Mn
 that flare of Magnesium is it?
 no, try Manganese, number 25, a grey-white
 brittle metal
 added to others increases harness
 and can increase magnetism)
 this is for you. And
 Mnosyneme. (I looked it up.)

=

7 2016. As for the postmodern

I am agnostic.
 Sometimes I believe it, sometimes not.
 Is it a term adequate to our time?
 The argument for a material break—computers, globalization,
 micro-sorting and data-slotting,
 the tabs “they” can keep on me—they know
 what catalogues to send me but
 oh they cannot know
 (or so I say)
 how to make me buy
 and so I glumph around
 often in certain
 Quaker-style old clothes
 in my quasi-Quaker town,
 whose faded, principled
 [unacknowledged upper] middle classness
 of sometimes patronizing caritas
 is hard to face (even as one rejects it)
 given the circulation of objects to buff you up,
 bread machines and such, while the poorest
 cities in the U.S., Chester, PA and Camden, N.J.
 are quite near.

=

8 2016. That consumerist imperative
 netted many people, to my shock.

Don't they see through it? See through the chemical foods?
 Now there's the purge—all involved with the personal body,
 with private life. The country's first bulimic
 in bulk, people waddle, stuffed without nourishment,
 then there's the purge: purge your house, purge your possessions,
 purge your stomach.
 It is a set of bodies sickened
 by their own engorgement with the lies that power
 has fed them
 for let's say, the past 18 years.
 The body politic? a rancorous community
 filled with resentments,
 caught in an almost invisible net.

=

- 9 1998. Post-modern?
 Why do I resist going along?
 Postmodern is so convenient!
 My work will never be consumed
 If I can't join some rubric.
- 10 Groucho Marx—why don't you look away
 so I can settle into a club that wants me!

=

- 11 1998. But
 I think I would like to begin the modern
 all over again.
 A modern, a real modern,
 with new arrangements of gender, and the erasure
 of "color lines" (as DuBois said)—color liens
 and color lies—
 and the mocking and erosions of nationalisms
 (as at least Woolf said, holding for the
 cosmopolite),
 the impossibility of genocides
 and no kids holding guns, no kids in the mines,
 no kids dredging garbage,
 no wrecking of the landscape by extraction,
 no non-vaccinated people with curable diseases and
- 12 ideally people working in the morning
 and then dancing (in public or private) later and into the night
 with insomnias of joy
 and not the rigid sleeplessness of dread or anguish
- 13 sustainable sharing the revolution of fairness and justice
 once alive, promising, in the air.

- 14 Why
was that too much to
ask?
- =
- 15 2016. The list got longer in twenty years.
I'd have to add fracking, and the 2008 Economic
Crash
caused, manipulated, but still unpunished.
SAVE SCHOOL NOT BANK
was the graffito I saw in a foreign country.
I'd have to add random terrorist murders, here and there,
randomized but not, finally, random,
fanatics of various kinds, almost, it must be noted, almost all male;
erosions of trust, trashing of civility,
femicides of possession—very common—rape within war
and rape as punishing control in what is called
normal life.
I'd have to add jailing populations of color,
the war coming home and the war exported; dialectics
of anger
egging each other on—we are now down the path
to social militarization; and
in this climate to write poetry, it seems nothing
more startling
to try
to do
and why?
because I need to, but not to decorate my age
or to invent allegories around little observations
or even to evoke a spiritual realm,
particularly—
I think transcendence is often much too easy
to fall into
and I have,
but the realm of poetry needs also to be
grainy,
and against its own grain.
To want
just a realm of the real, or the possible
but now it is hard to know
exactly how
- 16 to try
to do
and what my “need” is to do this.
(Yes, something about language, something about ethics.
Attentiveness and empathy.)

My aesthetic crisis is my political crisis.
Currently unresolved.

=

- 17 2016. And coincidentally worse
the next day from when I wrote the above,
the day of July 8, 2016,
when, after 2 police murders of black men
in that very week,
a suspect (with others), sniper fired
on Dallas police guarding a peaceful
Black Lives Matter
demonstration,
and killed (at this count) five policemen.

=

- 18 1998.
I was spoiled politically by the up-moment
of U.S. feminism, and
other movements: anti-war and civil rights—
these claims for social justice.
Turn the machine around.
Build another society.
Big time did I miss the boat.
They have named another monument after Reagan.
Over the next thirty years
people roused as me
will die off,
and no one will remember
or they will think it very quaint.
- 19 That we thought
it mattered.
- 20 But while I am alive, I claim another modern
the modern that should have been
social justice, gender justice
the adjudication of conflicting issues
- 21 a modern verso, turn back against much of what is,
capitalist depredation, oligarchic depredation,
exploitation and ruin, and
make that running line of verse turn and evoke
insist on the turn of what could have been
different.
- 22 So without memory, with a bad memory,
with the repressions of memory,
I resist amnesia.

- =
- 23 1998. The resistance to totality
is total.
“The whole
is what is untrue”
has certainly been my motto.
Fragments remain.
Remain fragments.
Inside the poetics are
other poetics, other poets.
- 24 We want clarity,
but even when clear
we seem hermetic.
- 25 Splits, flakes, bursts
- 26 his green glass gone smash
on the rooftop
- 27 he makes it gleam
but sometimes nothing gleams.
- 28 For me—that mirror
silver
face up in the asphalt
at 10th and Berks
by the projects.
- 29 2016. Why should I have seen
that as so gleaming.
“The Projects”
- 30 when as a [white] child I first heard
that word, I heard
“the projex”
- 31 with the sounded hex and the rhyming rejects.
- 32 1998. Essay is for me
resistance to totality.
My place for vector,
for letting go—my kind
of “composition by field.”
A loosening of something let
loose. A romp of thinking.
The place where the one-two step dance
of thesis-antithesis
is perpetually open,
for synthesis zooms and doesn’t
settle. Synthesis
is the most unstable,
a half-particle formed under pressure

in cyclotronic imaging
 spinning to its micro-timed
 demise.

=

- 33 1998/2016. It was me who suggested
 that the French translation
 of four Drafts done at
 Royaumont be called
 “essais” and not “brouillons”
- 34 and it was.
 And then on the long-awaited cover
 (a photo done by Hocquard of a pile
 of trashed books—which was my
 instruction and my desire)
- 35 I saw that *essais*
 made a partial anagram of DuPlessis—
 part of my name.
 Onomastics
 are the gymnastics of agency:
 otherwise
 why would the doctor
 who wanted to make his mark by human
 cloning
 be named Dr. Seed,
 and why would it have been
 Kadish
 of Lithuania who clandestinely
 photographed the Jewish ghetto
 on the very verge of what
 he knew
 was to be
 annihilation.
- 36 2016. These examples
 could be multiplied.
- 37 And the translation of twenty Drafts
 that appeared in French in 2013
 by Auxeméry
 done by Corti
 is called *Brouillons*.
- 38 It incorporates the work of “Essais.”
- 39 2016. Who can place
 one’s own work? Isn’t it enough
 just to get it done?
 No. Not today. There is a very well-sharpened
 machinery of reception—

self-stardom, publicity,
 superficially grateful and endlessly
 stagy, thanking people for
 the opportunity
 to give even more presentations
 of one's exquisite self.
 "I write my autobiography every day"
 "on Twitter and on Facebook."
 "Important to claim airtime, let people know"
 "otherwise you'll be ploughed under."
 Hence "we're"
 always investigating and
 talking about
 our extraordinary insides and our
 oh so happily rewarded accomplishments.
 The examination of conscience
 now sparkles with bling!

- 40 And of course by a certain age
 one knows plenty of dour jealous people
 who did not ever get "enough."
 Because there is no "enough."
 Repletion fails us; there is no stop.
- 41 It's an odd thing, at this juncture,
 to write in the zone of
 autobiography.
 With the claim "modestly."
 Impossible?
- 42 You have to assume erasures,
 half-truths, repressions,
 and some narcissism
 no matter how assiduously
 these are denied, or
 simply unmentioned.
- 43 1998. To return to your question.
 I have spent much time
 in the "between."
 [2016: I still do.]
- 44 I see the other side. I see and resist.
 If someone says "feminist," I will say
 "post-structuralist."
 And then to anything else (post-modern?)
 my rejoinder will be "feminist."
- 45 [2016: this was not always popular,
 to say the least. When Ann Snitow and I
 finally published *The Feminist
 Memoir Project*—precisely 1998—that we had so

laboriously edited and with so much intellectual love,
it looked like the nadir for that concept (gender justice)
and its positions and actions and stances.
Oh.]

- 46 From 1968 to 1988 (this being a nice round date)
my poetry
was too feminist for the objectivists
and too objectivist for the feminists.
Now, or circa 1988 to 1998,
sometimes Ron Silliman lets me know
almost without saying it (such is his affect)
that my reception is coat-tailing
on Language Poetries
so why don't I just "go to hell," as Huck Finn would say
and admit it.
I agree, I agree, I cannot exactly disagree—
his perspicacious beam on literary history
is pretty lucid.
All too well I see
the contours of reception and the places
one "takes up" with one's jostled "subjectivity,"
- 47 (2016) but mine included *Montemora* (that brilliant
internationalist journal of objectivist clarities
which was a great help in many particulars—
one might even say exemplary—and where my name once appeared on the
same cover with Jabès and my happiness was for that moment
complete)
- 48 and *Sulfur* (a place where my defection from the expressionist,
the surrealist, and the graphically embodied did not preclude
my actually appearing there and being encouraged by
being there)
- 49 and being part of the editorial collective
of *Feminist Studies*, not only an "academic journal"
but founded in someone's closet
just yesterday fifty years ago, and
one whose central struggle was to make gender
analyses part of vital and respected intellectual life. So this journal
to which many people devoted many often thankless hours
was part of the explosive paradigm shift
that feminist thinking
propelled, and this was something I did for fifteen years
(to speak of "autobiography").
- 50 All this
all at the same time.
- 51 Plus, critically, (and along with a brave cohort of
other women)

- I was reading women writers and
writing about them—which was then an easy path
to professional suicide.
- 52 Until, that is, the paradigm changed enough
precisely because (agency-alert) of our struggles,
and the hot air went out of certain
canon-shaped balloons.
- 53 I was “going to hell” twenty ways come Sunday.
It was lively enough.
- 54 So as for Language Poetry—admirable if, in their seed-time
sometimes a bit rough-shod on the issues of gender, I was not
there and got only interesting scintillations of its formation
and formulations.
In many ways, Thomas Kuhn
had already been enough—
I read it in 1971. Yes!
- 55 However, (1998/2016) it’s true I was parallel
to Language Poetries (perhaps we both had read
The structure of scientific revolutions)
in the critique of consciousness, of cultural forms,
and of ideology,
in the resistance to the institutions of Poetry,
in interests in the histories of avant-gardes,
and in the uses of modernisms
and finally in the perpetually perplexing question
in the literary and political zones—though these are
not exactly the same—
- 56 What Is To Be Done?
- 57 So while I see parallels to my now engaging
Language Colleagues
(you know who you are)
I’d say somehow I got there
all by myself
in isolation in Lille, France and in Swarthmore, PA
in the years 1971-1988
mainly by myself (there were also Frances Jaffer,
Beverly Dahlen, and Kathleen Fraser,
epistolary companions).
- 58 By myself with all the uncorrected intellectual errors
the lack of social skills (for negotiating groups)
and the awkwardness
that you see so visible here.
- 59 I wanted “re-vision” without cease; I even wanted more
than Adrienne Rich might have allowed in her
changing definitions of what that would entail
(i.e. with men or without them).

I want permanent unfinishable dialectics.
I want an endless repositioning, with ethical qualification.
I can see the many paths (though of course not all of them).
The term for this is “negativity.”

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