ISBN 0 7992 0929 5

Printed by the Printing Department University of Cape Town

New Series No. 94

BAP 809.93592 COET

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

Truth in Autobiography

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Inaugural Lecture 3rd October, 1984

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TRUTH IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by

J.M. COETZEE

Autobiography is a kind of writing in which you tell the story of yourself as truthfully as you can, or as truthfully as you can bear to. Autobiography is usually thought of not as a kind of fiction-writing but as a kind of history-writing, with the same allegiance to the truth as history has.

I want to concentrate my attention on one of the most famous of autobiographies, the one that begins with the words:

> I am commencing an undertaking . . . without precedent . . . I want to set before my fellow-men the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature, that man being myself.

I am quoting from the opening of the *Confessions,* the life-story which Jean-Jacques Rousseau began writing when he was in his fifties, and which became public in 1782, after his death. Within the *Confessions* I will be concentrating on a single episode, and on the issue it addresses, namely, the *cost* of telling the truth.

In the passage I refer to (from Book I), Rousseau writes about his attitude toward pleasure, the pleasures one can buy and the pleasures that come free. By nature, Rousseau says, I am a very passionate person. But often I am inhibited from satisfying my desires by fear and shame. A mere knowing glance from a stranger can paralyze me. Furthermore, there is a whole range of desirable objects which I am prevented from enjoying by a peculiarity of my character. These objects are the class of objects that have to be bought. "Money poisons all."

> Women who could be bought for money would lose, as far as I am concerned, all their charms: I even doubt whether it would be in me to make use of them . . . I find it the same with all pleasures . . . : unless they cost me nothing, I find them insipid.

Why is desire poisoned for Rousseau when he has to buy what he wants? The first explanation he offers, as he tries to get to the truth of the matter, is that his make-up is simply such that an exchange involving money always becomes an unfair one. "If I pay a high price for a fresh egg, it is stale; for a nice piece of fruit, it is unripe; for a girl, she is spoilt."

He goes on to tell a story to illustrate what day-to-day life is like for a person with his peculiarity of character. He steps into a cake-shop, and the women in the shop seem to be laughing at him. He wants to go into a fruit-shop, but can't do so surreptitiously enough: he is so short-sighted that everyone around him looks like someone he knows.

> Everywhere I am intimidated, restrained by some obstacle or other . . . I return home like a fool, consumed with longing, having in my pocket the means of satisfying my longing, yet not having the courage to buy anything.

Self-analysis which goes no deeper than talk about "peculiarity of character" satisfies no one. Is the deeper truth that Rousseau is ashamed of his desires? Is the truth that he is stingy? It would be shameful to have to admit the truth of either of these explanations. The more shameful of the two is perhaps the second, the

confession of stinginess. Nevertheless, Rousseau is prepared to confront that possibility. There is certainly in me, he says, an inconsistency, an "almost sordid avarice" united with the "greatest contempt for money." Contempt for money together with an inability to let go of it: certainly a strange combination. But there is a way of understanding it. For, as long as you possess money, Rousseau suggests, money remains "an instrument of freedom." Once you have spent it, on the other hand, you have to begin pursuing it, and then it becomes "an instrument of slavery." Therefore spending money is like spending your freedom, while keeping it is like keeping your freedom.

But if money stands for freedom, we ask, why should you feel contempt for it? The reason is a very simple one, Rousseau replies. Money *stands for* freedom without *being* freedom. To desire money in itself is to make the mistake of confusing the *signans* with the *signatum*. It is like taking a picture of an apple for a real apple. And that, Rousseau concludes, is why I prefer to steal things rather than buy them.

This is a flabbergasting conclusion to come to. The hole in the logic is a gaping one. From the assertion that money is a mere sign of an exchange value, unworthy in itself of being desired, it by no means follows that the mediation of money between myself and what I desire spoils or (to use Rousseau's word) *poisons* my enjoyment of the cake or the apple or the woman or whatever. And indeed, Rousseau makes an oblique admission that he is aware of the gap in his argument. As you follow the story of my life, he promises, you will gradually get to know "my real temperament," and then you will begin to "understand all this, without my taking the trouble to tell [you]." In other words, he contrasts analytical understanding (understanding of the kind he has thus far failed to provide) with some kind of intuitive understanding, perhaps the intuitive understanding one has of a person one has known for a long time.

But we do not have to let the matter rest where Rousseau does. We are entitled to press for any kind of understanding we desire (that is, after all, part of what it means to be a *reader*). So let us put aside Rousseau's own explanations of his "peculiarity," his "contradiction" (explanations that are, after all, only readings of his own) and turn back to the shop scenes he has described. What is it that makes the transaction that takes place in shops, the transaction known as *buying*, so difficult for Rousseau? What strikes me about Rousseau's account of buying is the *nakedness* of the transaction, a nakedness from which Rousseau shies away – though what I call nakedness, people without Rousseau's "peculiarity" might call merely openness or legitimacy. By going into a shop and proffering money and saying, "I want that cake," Rousseau would be consenting to participate in a mode of treating his own desire, his own "I want," as if it were not unique but were the same as the desire of every Tom, Dick and Harry who wants a cake. His desire, that is to say, would be brought out into the open and equalized with the desires of others through the mediation of the system of exchange known as money. Worse, Rousseau's desire would not only be treated as exchangeable with the desire of Tom, Dick or Harry, but put on a *scale* of desire. It would become a five-sou desire, exchangeable with any other five-sou desire: the money system would give it the same value as the desire for eleven clothespegs or two thirds of a bar of soap or eighty millilitres of ink. It would no longer be *his* desire; rather, it would be a five-sou desire which he is experiencing, which is passing through him, its precise worth known by all the knowing eyes in the shop. He will have lost control of the terms on which he will make his desires known. If he chooses to think of his desires as resources, then he will have spent one of his resources.

To exchange a desire for a cake for the cake itself, via the secret transaction of theft, on the other hand, means that the mystery of the desire not only persists but in a certain way is augmented. What kind of desire for a cake is it that cannot be satisfied with a bought cake? That is, after all, the question we are still puzzling our heads over two hundred years after the *Confessions* were made public. A desire whose value is kept secret increases in fascination and therefore in value: Rousseau would not have stolen the cake (our reasoning goes) if his desire had been a mere five-sou desire, satisfiable by a five-sou cake; the cake must *stand for* something we do not know; the cake must be not only a cake but a sign, a clue to the truth. So the cake is stolen and eaten *and* the value of the desire for it (if not the desire itself) is retained. It is retained as a resource which, to the degree that it is mysterious, fascinating, illicit, shameful, can be exchanged for words in the economy of confession.

The system of exchange rejected by Rousseau is one in which desire is exchanged for a money equivalent which is then exchanged for the object. There is no need, indeed no way (and this is the trouble with them) of feeling shameful about these public exchanges. In the economy of confession, on the other hand, everything shameful is valuable: every secret or shameful appetite is confessable currency. (The same equivalence of the shameful to the valuable, we may note in passing, holds in the case of pornography. Pornography lives by promising to unveil forbidden spectacles. However, it cannot make its promises openly. For, our reasoning would go, if pornography can make open promises, then what it promises cannot be forbidden. Therefore pornography has to undertake the paradoxical exercise of advertising itself in secrecy, or at least with a sufficiently convincing pretence of secrecy. Censorship, insofar as it represses pornography into a life of secrecy, works hand in glove with it.)

We begin to see now why Rousseau cannot *afford* to carry his investigations further than he does; why, having offered us a glimpse of his peculiarity, he must retract it, wrap it up again. Time after time in the *Confessions*, Rousseau performs the double movement of offering to spend one of his mysterious contradictions, then withdrawing it, in order to maintain the freedom which, in his system, belongs to those who hold their assets in reserve. If you take away the last veil and are left with no mystery, no further confession is necessary. The risk of true confession is therefore not to the self but to the life of the medium. If you reveal the inner operations of the economy of confession, you kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.

There is another way in which we can see that Rousseau cannot afford to carry self-analysis to a conclusion, why analysis must break off or take a wrong turning or include a flaw, a gap, a non sequitur. It is unlikely that, in 1766, when he penned those ambitious words about the "undertaking without precedent" he was about to commence, Rousseau knew the truth he was undertaking to tell. What he started with, I would guess, was rather a desire to tell the truth (or, to be more accurate, a desire in which telling the truth was to be more or less implicated). From there on it was a matter of finding that in his history and in himself which would answer this complex and (it would turn out) ambivalent desire-to-the-truth. In other words, we can equally well see the confessional enterprise as one of *finding* the truth as of *telling* the truth; and in either case getting to the truth carries a threat, namely the threat of ending the enterprise.

There is also a third way of talking about the truth. There is a sense in which, going over the history of his life from a specific point in time, the time of writing, an

autobiographer can be said to be *making* the truth of his life. The gaps and evasions, perhaps even the lies, are then elements of the life-story, elements of the making of the story, elements of the maker of the story. Telling the story of your life (this line of reasoning would go) is not only a matter of representing the past – the day when you visited the cake-shop – but also a matter of representing the present in which you wrestle to explain to yourself what it was that *really* happened that day, beneath the surface (so to speak), and write down an explanation which may be full of gaps and evasions but at least gives a representation of the motions of your mind as you try to understand yourself. Indeed, the lies and evasions may be more interesting than the visit itself. (In some models of psychoanalysis, we might note, the analyst, listening for the truth of the patient, listens not for the patient's truths, the truths the patient finds or tells, but for the patient's lies and silences and evasions, believing that there lie the clues to the "real" truth. The patient's lie becomes the analyst's truth.)

It is this third notion of truth as something you *make* that Rousseau is pushed into subscribing to. He writes:

> I will write what comes to me, I will change [my style] according to my mood . . ., I will express everything as I feel it, as I see it, without affectation [i.e., without presenting myself as what I am not], without constraint, without being upset if the result is a mixture. I will give myself up simultaneously to the memory of the impression I received [in the past] and to [my] present feeling [about it], thus giving a twofold, two-level depiction of [*peindrai doublement*] the state of my soul.

There we have it: the two-level depiction in which the failure to get to the truth of the past (Why, truly, could I not buy the cake?) is compensated for by a representation, carried on at unconscious levels of language, of the twists and turns of a mind trying to get to grips with itself. We are moving into the realm, that is to say, of *authenticity:* whether Rousseau is telling the truth or lying, to us or to himself or to everyone, at least he is wholly committed to what he is doing, and we are being given a sight of the truth of that commitment.

There is something fishy, one must at once say, in the notion that authenticity is as good as truth. The self-serving side to the notion was ridiculed by Rousseau's harshest critic, Fyodor Dostoevsky, whose novels are full of people cherishing lies about themselves in the belief that the truth is not glamorous, that it is more important to be interesting than to be good. To Dostoevsky, confession, penance and forgiveness (essentially self-forgiveness) go together; to hope to attain the truth of one's life-story by self-interrogation merely lands one in an endless regression, since *any* position one settles on as the truth, however unkind it may be, can be subjected to sceptical questioning. For example: "But am I not lying to myself? Am I not making myself out to be worse than I am in order to make myself feel good about my ruthless honesty?" Dostoevsky's critique of the brand of secular confession he associates with the name of Rousseau is an incisive one; but to follow it would take me too far from my subject.

The word around which I have been circling for some time without settling is *sincerity,* which I define as the immediate presence of the moral self to the self. Surely, one might argue, all significant questions about truthfulness in autobiography can be restated as questions about the sincerity, that is, the moral self-knowledge of the autobiographer, and given simple answers. Surely sincerity is some kind of touchstone. Surely whatever is written in a spirit of sincerity is, in some sense, true.

The problem is, how can we know whether a man who wrote a book two hundred years ago was sincere? Are we not reduced to scrutinizing his language for signs which one observer might call lapses into insincerity but another observer failures of confessional rhetoric? If we look into its genealogy, does sincerity not begin to look more and more like a concept invented, or elevated to a central position, by Romanticism to privilege certain utterances as *not* having been engendered by rhetoric and therefore as belonging to an art above art? Sincerity, in this reading, becomes the master-term of a new anti-rhetorical rhetoric, an invention of devilish ingenuity, in that it claims to stand outside all systems of rhetoric. The questions that we, as post-Dostoevskians, are entitled to ask of the inventors of sincerity is: *cui bono?* Was the absolute of sincerity invented in a spirit of sincerity? Whatever way the question is answered, the concept of sincerity is, to use Rousseau's term, *poisoned* (which is not to say that it dies: we all know how it lives on).

The alternative we should consider is a twofold one: that, on the one hand, truth may be indispensable to autobiography; and, on the other, that it may serve a purely heuristic function. That is to say, while on the one hand it may be impossible to get from point A to point B in autobiography without involving yourself in a quest for the truth of the past, all that the quest may accomplish, on the other hand, is to get you from point A to point B in the text. Truth may be the heart of autobiography, but that is not to say that truth is at the heart of autobiography. There are truths it may cost too much to tell, not because they lie too close to the autobiographer's heart but because they lie too close to his art. (One such truth would be the answer to the question: What is the place of truth in autobiography?) It is not insincere, or not merely insincere, to fail to come out with these truths. An autobiographer is not only a man who once upon a time lived a life in which he loved, fought, suffered, strove, was misunderstood, and of which he now tells the story; he is also a man engaged in writing a story. That story is written within the limits of a pact, the pact of autobiography, one of the many pacts negotiated over the years between writers and readers (and always open to renegotiation) for each of the genres and sub-genres, pacts which cover, among other things, what demands may be made of each genre and what may not, what questions may be asked and what may not, what one may see and what one must be blind to. (Another of the clauses is that one shall be blind to the existence of the pact.)

Yet (and now we come to the heart of this lecture) have I not, in unveiling what I seem to be claiming to be the secret of the economy of Rousseau's *Confessions,* broken the very pact I have been talking about? On the one hand I claim that reading autobiography requires a convention of blindness; on the other I read Rousseau with my eyes wide open. By my own definition, can the activity I have been engaged in be called reading autobiography? And if the answer is, No, I have not been reading autobiography, I have been engaged in a different activity called literary criticism, which submits to no rules, then I can ask: If the desire of literary criticism is to tell every truth, to unveil whatever is veiled, to expose very secret to sight, why does it not tell its own secrets? Or does it claim to have none? I say (though "on the one hand," whatever that may mean) that truth is merely heuristic, yet in the secret that secrets held close to the chest are valuable I find the truth which Rousseau cannot afford to come out with. I say that autobiography cannot tell its own truth, and tell the truth it cannot tell. Does that not make of criticism the only mode in which final truths can be told; and how sincere is *that?*

The question I am asking is one about *privilege.* What privilege do I claim to tell the truth of Rousseau that Rousseau cannot tell? What is the privilege of criticism by which it claims to tell the truth of literature?

I do not propose to answer this question. Instead, I want to carefully count the cost of answering it. Is it not possible that to tell what the privilege of criticism over literature is would be to tell a truth that criticism cannot afford to tell, namely, why it wants the literary text to stand there in all its ignorance, side by side with the radiant truth of the text supplied by criticism, without the latter supplanting the former? Can literary criticism afford to say why it needs literature? (On the other hand, we might consider that this question may be formed falsely. For we know that a question may be stated so clearly that no one can be blind to its answer. Would it be in keeping for criticism to pose the question so clearly if it were the real question?)

Let me go back and oversimplify. The framework within which I have been talking is a framework of *economics,* and the question I have continually been asking is: What does each revelation I make *cost?* It has been important to me — or at least it has been my desire — to depersonalize this question, not to ask it as a question of the sincerity of the writer. What I have been treating as at stake has been the life of the discourse itself. In terms of the economic life of the discourse, it sometimes costs too much to make certain revelations: they threaten the ability of the discourse to grow, they threaten its freedom. Rousseau was right, in his particular confessional economy, to point to what is held back (money, the truth) as being the key to freedom, though the freedom I have been looking to has been the freedom of the autobiographical discourse itself. All forms of discourse may have secrets, of no great profundity, which they nevertheless cannot afford to unveil. Discourse is, from a certain point of view, a rather simple thing, fully described by two simple statements: one, that it goes on; and two, that having gone far enough, it stops. The present discourse has gone on; now it stops.

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