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The Perils of Autobiography

Cover Page Footnote

This essay was presented as part of the Rycenga Lecture Series at Sacred Heart University on March 19, 1991.

H. PORTER ABBOTT

*The Perils of Autobiography**

To begin, I want to talk about the man who was probably England's foremost authority on newts. This would have been around 1910. His name was Bruce Cummings, and he was born in 1889 in the village of Barnstaple in North Devon. His father was a journalist of modest means who enjoyed a following of local readers. Very early in life Cummings became fascinated with the natural world and when his health (always uncertain) permitted he would spend long stretches of time hiking about the countryside, combing the hills and wetlands, gathering specimens of, among other things, newts. It was out of this headlong activity that a career soon shaped itself. He was going to be a naturalist. He was not going to be just any naturalist, he was going to be England's best naturalist. And being a precocious child, and indulged by his father, it looked like this was not an entirely unreasonable goal. What he wanted in the way of books and equipment, he got — as far as the family budget would allow it. Certainly it seemed, despite his frequent ailments and comparative poverty, that he would at the very least become a naturalist of considerable stature.

The reason we know so much about the early years of Bruce Cummings is that when he was thirteen years old he started keeping a diary. The first entry in this diary is: "I am writing an essay on the life-history of insects and have abandoned the idea of writing on 'How Cats Spend their Time.'" Either of these would have been, I think, unusual projects for a thirteen-year-old. That he could entertain them at this age says quite a bit about his patience and power of concentration. Much of the diary is marvelous in the same way, expressing a constant intensity of enthusiasm for anything the world might have to offer. "I am a magpie at a Baghdad bazaar," he wrote later on, "hopping about, useless, inquisitive, fascinated by a lot of astonishing things."

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As it turned out, Cummings did not become England's greatest naturalist, nor did he even become, despite his personal expertise in newts, a naturalist of even modest repute — though, for the record, this entirely self-educated young man did score so well on a national examination that he won an appointment as naturalist in the British Museum. That was in 1910. But the lack of a university education and the connections that would have come with it, and especially the harassment of his continuing, often mysterious, physical disabilities, made the prospect of national success grow increasingly dim during the years just before the War. Still, Cummings had a plan to fall back on. The plan gradually took shape in those years before the War and, put briefly, it was this: he was going to write the great inter-connected chain of novels in the English tradition. He was going to do for England what Balzac had done for France when he set out to write the *Comédie humaine*, that enormous fictional enterprise of 145 projected volumes, of which 90 volumes, including over 2000 characters, were completed. If, because of his health, Cummings could not be England's greatest naturalist, he would at least be England's greatest novelist.

But neither career had any chance of being realized because Cummings was in fact suffering from what they then called Disseminated Sclerosis. This is the degenerative disease of the nervous system which we now refer to as Multiple Sclerosis. As there was no known cure at the time, Cummings' doctor chose not to tell his patient what he was suffering from, though Cummings eventually did find out, roughly 18 months after his doctor had first diagnosed the symptoms. This was in 1915 when Cummings, out of idle curiosity, unsealed a letter his doctor had intended for the recruiting office. "I thought it might be interesting to see what Dr. M. had to say," he wrote in his diary. And then, on the next line, quite characteristically, notes: "It was." Cummings had, by this time, married. Before her engagement, his fiancée had been fully informed by Cummings' doctor as to her future husband's prospects, but she was undeterred and married him anyway. So for awhile after 1915, their relationship is marked by a moving effort on both their parts to conceal this knowledge, each from the other.

Despite the advance of his disease, Bruce Cummings remained an enormously ambitious man. His own self-description of choice

was "egotist," and with the collapse of his two life-ambitions, he still required a vehicle by which to stamp his own distinct impression on the world. Such a vehicle happened to be at hand. This was the diary that he had been keeping since the age of thirteen and which now had grown wonderfully in size. His life's diary was to be his life's work. So precious did it now become to him that he had a special box made, equipped with handles at either end, which he called his "coffin" and in which he kept his diary, sometimes going so far as to have it removed from the city to protect it from the bombs that were falling on London from German Zeppelins. He had narcissistic fantasies of avenging Zeppelins homing in to target the product of his egotism.

So his life, in effect, became his life project. He proceeded to put together selections from this immense diary, and when he had packaged it, he called it *The Journal of a Disappointed Man* and he called himself W.N.P. Barbellion, a name he had once seen on a shop-front in London. When the story of his life finally appeared in print in 1919, complete with an introduction by H.G. Wells, it was the book of the hour. It went through four printings in seven months. Much of the credit for its success lay in the fact that Barbellion had a good ear for the language and a great eye for expressive detail. But what worked most powerfully in favor of the book's success was the way Cummings' humorous self-deprecation and his irrepressible love of life played off richly against the growing heartbreak of his physical deterioration. It was, for all the inherent discontinuity of the diary mode, a story with a clear tragic shape to it. The last two entries are the single words "Miserable" and "Self-disgust," followed by the bald editorial notation in brackets that Barbellion died on December 31, 1917.

The curious thing about this conclusion is that Bruce Cummings, alias W.N.P. Barbellion, did not die on December 31, 1917. In fact he was still alive in the summer of 1919 when the book appeared and therefore well positioned (as some among his disappointed readership pointed out later) to savor the moving public response to his passing. To make this situation even more curious, Cummings was at that very time hard at work putting together more fragments of his diary for a sequel he fully intended to publish. In essence, he was putting together a time-bomb which,

when it went off, would destroy the reputation which he had so effectively created. Even before the appearance of the sequel, doubts had been raised about the authenticity of *The Journal of a Disappointed Man*, a book too good to be true. Some surmised that it was the fabrication of its introducer, H.G. Wells.

When *A Last Diary* came out in 1920, with dates that extended beyond 1917, W.N.P. Barbellion was in fact dead. But this did not help. The readership felt abused. It felt that it had extended its emotional confidence under false pretenses. And this, I am convinced, is the main reason that these two books (and a third, *Enjoying Life and Other Essays*, also published in 1920) have never been successfully revived. Penguin brought out a paperback edition of the *Disappointed Man* in the 1940s, and The Multiple Sclerosis Society has brought out several editions of the *Disappointed Man* over the years, one of which is in print today. But it is rarely given much attention, which is a shame because there is some very good writing in it. Here, for example, is a passage from *A Last Diary*:

Rupert Brooke said the brightest thing in the world was a leaf with the sun shining on it. God pity his ignorance! The brightest thing in the world is a Ctenophor in a glass jar standing in the sun. This is a bit of a secret, for no one knows about it save only the naturalist. I had a new sponge the other day and it smelt of the sea till I had soaked it. But what a vista that smell opened up! — rock pools, gobies, blennies, anemones (crassicorn, dahlia — oh! I forget). And at the end of my little excursion into memory I came upon the morning when I put some sanded, opaque bits of jelly, lying on the rim of the sea into a glass collecting jar, and to my amazement and delight they turned into Ctenophors — alive, swimming, and iridescent! You must imagine a tiny soap bubble, about the size of a filbert with four series of plates or cones arranged regularly on the soap bubble from its north to its south pole, and flashing spasmodically in unison as they beat the water.

I want to pause at this point to draw two morals from this brief history: one just in passing, the other my main point for the rest of this paper. The point in passing is this: that the meaning of a text, not to mention its market value, depends on its context. This may be an obvious point, but it is one about which we keep having to remind ourselves: neither meaning nor value solely inhere in a text. This text — *The Journal of a Disappointed Man* — which from 1919 to 1920 persisted steadily as an entity identical with itself, the same text telling of the same events, with the exact same set of black markings on its pages, underwent an enormous change in both its meaning and its value. It did so because of a change in the minds of its audience. To phrase this paradoxically, the text changed only because something that was not the text changed.

As a general idea governing all texts, this is nowadays a widely accepted insight into the nature of textual meaning. But if we asked the question, Would this sudden drop from public favor have happened if Cummings had represented his text from the start as fiction, say, as a novel? — the answer would have to be: No. In that case, the timing of the author's death in itself would have had quite a different impact, if any, on the value or meaning of the text. Cummings, in other words, violated what one critic has called "The Autobiographical Pact," a tacit agreement that what we read in an autobiography is the author's best effort to say what indeed happened. At the time, the point was driven into the ground in an attack by the historian A.F. Pollard, a kind of scholar-thug, who made exhaustive use of the Greenwich Observatory Meteorological records to show that Cummings had introduced many small, silent adjustments to his chronology. Cummings' brother leapt to his defense, arguing that factual truth is not the important issue here. But in his ham-fisted way, Pollard articulated what lay behind many readers' feeling of betrayal.

To get to my second point — and, in my view, the greatest peril of autobiography — I shall lead with a question: Why should such an otherwise highly intelligent individual make such a whopping goof? Short-term profits from sales? Highly unlikely. He was dying and would not personally profit from such a windfall. Perhaps he was thinking of his wife and daughter's welfare: Yet not only was the fraud bound to be discovered, but Cummings actually

hastened the discovery by immediately setting out to publish a sequel. The principle to invoke at this point runs something like this: when smart people make dumb mistakes, then there is something interesting going on. At the very least, mistakes like this are the signs of a need — or perhaps more accurately, given some of today's theoretical discourse, a desire — a desire so powerful that it overrides mere intelligence.

What is the desire here? I think it is the desire to have a life. My stress here is on the construction “a life.” To have lived “a life” is to have lived something with sufficient shape to be held up, something separable that one can gaze upon. Perhaps the Marxist term “reification” works here, at least in a loose sense, for what is sought is life as a thing. It stems from the desire to be rescued from the fluidity of life, from its on-goingness, its refusal to be complete. This reading accords with Cummings' life-time concern that he *be* something: England's greatest naturalist, England's Balzac. There is of course nothing unusual about this desire. You can find it expressed today in the bumper sticker that says: “Get a Life!” Without “a life” you are inauthentic, lacking, falling short; without “a life” you haven't really lived. Another way to put this is that Cummings, like most of us, wanted to be fictional, he demanded of his life that it have the kind of dramatic structure that we demand of fiction.

A further complication in the case of Bruce Cummings, once the diary became the chosen form for his life project, was that the competition was very tough. The last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century saw a vogue of diaries, beginning with the posthumous publication of the intensely inward *journal intime* of Henri Frederic Amiel in 1883. With this vogue came a revival of interest in earlier landmarks in the history of diared lives, like that of Benjamin Robert Haydon, the painter and friend of the English romantic poets, whose life ends in poverty, desperation and suicide. An hour after his last entry — “God forgive me. Amen” — Haydon was found with his throat slashed. That is certainly a climax, terrible yet sharply distinct. Equally vivid was the final record of Captain Robert Scott who froze to death in 1912 while racing Amundsen to the South Pole. “It seems a pity,” Scott wrote in the last entry of his diary,

“but I do not think I can write more.” Cummings admired Scott enormously, but the diarist who came closest to his own case and who, as it were, represented the fiercest competition was Marie Bashkirtseff. An ex-patriot Russian, fluent in four languages, capable in childhood of reading Plato and Virgil in the original, Bashkirtseff had at first concentrated her enormous personal ambition on becoming a singer of international prominence. Then, when her voice failed, she had become an even more promising painter, exhibiting in Paris by the time she was 20. In 1884, Bashkirtseff, not yet 24 years old, died of tuberculosis. Her diary, when it appeared in 1890, was a great sensation, sustained through the turn of the century through reprints and translations. When Cummings read it in 1914, he was grimly fascinated. “Oh, Marie Bashkirtseff!” he wrote, “how we should have hated one another!”

This then was the literary context in which Cummings viewed his own autobiographical enterprise as his life drew to an end. It was a context that almost required that a published life deliver the satisfactions of fiction. Before the discovery of his sickness, his own failure to achieve the vividness of tragic form had frequently plagued Cummings: “Instead of being Stevenson with tuberculosis, I’ve only been Jones with dyspepsia. . . . Why can’t I either have a first-rate disease or be a first-rate zoologist?” Toward the end, he is still absorbed by the importance of achieving a life that has good literary form: “It must be a hard thing to be commonplace and vulgar even in misfortune, to discover that the tragedy of your own precious life has been dramatically bad.” It is this concern, I think, that led Cummings to misplay his hand by tampering with the date of his death. It led him to yield to the temptation to inhabit a kind of dramatic form, if only for a few months, that his life did not in fact have.

So far I have been focussing on a discrete instance of my subject. But I believe that the temptation Cummings yielded to is an instance of a far more pervasive problem of autobiography, or more broadly still, of self-representation. To expand on this point, let me switch to a contemporary of Cummings’, Siegfried Sassoon, the World War I poet who in 1928 compounded his success as a poet with an autobiographical novel entitled *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting*

Man. This work, and the two volumes that followed it — collectively entitled *The Memoirs of George Sherston* — escaped the disaster courted by Cummings' volumes by being coded as fiction. They were about Sherston, not Sassoon. But Sassoon was working very closely with his own life and in the first volume he was personally coping with the experience of losing an entire way of life, a loss brought on by the war. More particularly, what the war had done was eliminate the viability of a type — the fox-hunting man — to which the young Sherston/Sassoon had strenuously aspired. The type itself had been bred fictionally in nineteenth-century books like *Jorrocks' Jaunts and Jollities* (1838) and *Mr. Sponge's Sporting Tour* (1853) by Robert Smith Surtees, books that Sherston and his contemporaries not only read but quite consciously enacted. In other words, where Cummings had sought, as Barbellion, the tragic completion of Marie Bashkirtseff, Sassoon sought, as Sherston, the mellower completion of the fox-hunting man — a completion that refined by a kind of literary milling the jagged complexities of Sassoon's lived reality, of among other things his Jewish heritage and his homosexuality.

But Sassoon (like, for that matter, Cummings) was not unaware of the fault-lines in his self-representational project. I want to take one passage in particular, which provides a kind of mirror inset of this general problem of seeking to be somehow *in* form. It occurs in the hours after the young horseman has at last, after much effort, won "The Colonel's Cup." Dazzled, he takes the Cup home and puts it on display on a table in the middle of the drawing room.

I lit a pair of candles which made their miniature gold reflections on the shining surface of the massive Cup. I couldn't keep my eyes away from it. I looked round the shadowed room on which all my childhood and adolescence had converged, but everything led back to the talisman; while I gazed and gazed on its lustre I said to myself, aloud, "It can't be true that it's really there on the table!" The photograph of Watts's "Love and Death" was there on the wall; but it meant no more to me than the strangeness of the stars which I had seen

without question, out in the quiet spring night. I was secure in a cozy little universe of my own, and it had rewarded me with the Colonel's Cup. My last thought before I fell asleep was, "Next season I'll come out in a pink coat."

This is what a French literary theorist might call the autobiographical *mise en abyme*. That is, what Sassoon has expressed in miniature through this tableau is the general difficulty which the book itself engages — the difficulty of conceiving of the self in terms of an object with form, something that can be seen and held. I suppose the complementary problem is that of thinking of the truth about things in a unitary way — that is, that one can find The Truth about something as complicated as human life. Looking and looking at the Cup, shining new light on it, Sherston seeks somehow to know The Truth about himself, to cross the gap between himself and the Cup, to penetrate the object sufficiently to feel himself as knowable. His last thought before falling asleep sustains the same orientation toward selfhood: selfhood conceived as a habitable coherency, something at once to be and to be seen. Next season, he will *be* something to be gazed upon, something with sharp, recognizable contours, a fox-hunting man in a pink coat.

This orientation toward selfhood, which I am arguing is the pre-eminent peril of autobiography, can be traced back to the father of modern autobiography, Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau wrote his *Confessions* in the 1760s, and though he didn't publish them during his lifetime, they were nonetheless read, as he fully intended. It sounds strange to say, but the fact that he wrote to be read, and indeed was read, was, of all Rousseau's many problems, his most serious. One can shine light on this problem by looking closely at the defense of his project that he presents in his opening paragraphs. In the course of making this defense, he imagines himself as he might appear before his ultimate Reader:

Let the last trump sound when it will, I shall come forward with this book in my hand, to present

myself before my Sovereign Judge, and proclaim aloud: "Here is what I have done, and if by chance I have used some immaterial embellishment it has been only to fill a void due to a defect of memory. I may have taken for fact what was no more than probability, but I have never put down as true what I knew to be false. I have displayed myself as I was, as vile and despicable when my behavior was such, as good, generous, and noble when I was so. I have bared my secret soul as Thou thyself hast seen it, Eternal Being!"

In staging his appearance before his Creator on the Day of Judgment, Rousseau deploys a common enough trope for this scene: that of the defendant standing in the dock before the judge, his hand on a book, swearing to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. In the customary trope, the book at hand is the Bible; yet Rousseau, in what must have seemed an outrageous variation, swears not on the Lord's Book but on his own. The scene, however, is more than simply outrageous. There is a deep incongruity here that deserves pursuing; it turns on the fact that the judge before whom Rousseau stages his appearance is an omniscient being. Before such a being one is oneself transparent, a fact which would render any additional instrument of self-revelation superfluous. Yet Rousseau features himself standing before his Creator with the record of his life in his hand, referring the Creator's gaze not to his self but to the object that stands for his self. Rousseau seems even to play with the precarious logic of this trope when he goes on to inform his omniscient Judge that "I have bared my secret soul even as Thou thyself hast seen it, Eternal Being."

Again the rule to invoke is the one we invoked above for Cummings: When intelligent people do dumb things, it is the sign of a powerful desire. The desire, in other words, intervenes to close off the working of an ordinarily perceptive sensibility. The desire in this case is precisely the desire that we have been discussing so far: the desire to have something one can point to that sufficiently stands for one, something that would allow one at once to be

oneself and to see oneself, something like a book. It may have been the intensity of this desire which, more than any organic reasons, caused Rousseau to fall deeper into the paranoia that characterized his later years. In attempting to set the record straight, to establish once and for all by textual means just who he was, Rousseau only compounded the opportunities for people to misinterpret him. This goes back to the other peril of autobiography that Cummings failed to cope with, the fact that texts change according to how they are read. You may be able to control the words as they appear physically on the page, but you can not control the words as they sink into the mind of your perceiver. Rousseau, who did so much to propagate the secular conviction of an autonomous, individual soul, nonetheless cared enormously how his soul was perceived by others. For this reason, it was very important that, eventually, God should read his book. God, after all, is the one reader who will get it right. As it was, Rousseau could only end his *Confessions* with an account of its first reading. It ended on a kind of rant:

For my part, I publicly and fearlessly declare that anyone, even if he has not read my writings, who will examine my nature, my character, my morals, my likings, my pleasures, and my habits with his own eyes and can still believe me a dishonorable man, is a man who deserves to be stifled.

Thus I concluded my reading, and everyone was silent. Mme. d'Egmont was the only person who seemed moved. She trembled visibly but quickly controlled herself, and remained quiet, as did the rest of the company. Such was the advantage I derived from my reading and my declaration.

“Such was the advantage” (“Tel fut le fruit”). This was a curious way to put it, yet at the same time moving when you think about the bitterness of frustrated desire that made Rousseau put the experience in that way. For the “advantage” he gained — the image cast back to him out of all this enormous labor — was that

of silent, unreadable faces and just the smallest bit of enigmatic trembling.

I think that much of the lifetime argument of Jean-Paul Sartre was based on a radical version of the insight I have been concerned with here. In the 1930s, when among other things he was working on an alternative to Freudian etiology, Sartre suggested that the stories we tell about ourselves are, all of them, reactions to a shared, yet unacknowledged, trauma — the perception that our lives, and by extension our selves, are inherently without form or meaning. When, after a lifetime spent unmasking the idea of the “life story,” he set out (with full awareness of the irony involved) to write his own life story, Sartre portrayed himself as a superior, and hence exceptionally ridiculous, version of this shared condition. The book was called *The Words*, published in 1964, and it told how, by the age of eleven, Sartre had hit upon the plan of living, what he called in *The Words* an entirely “posthumous existence.” In other words, he sought to live his obituary, to live his life as if it had already been written. In this way, he could feel that moments in the present had the luster of moments in a well-written story, free of the random, the accidental, and the insignificant.

One of the books that inspired the precocious lad was a book entitled *The Childhood of Famous Men*. It told the stories of other lads named Jean Jacques, Johann Sebastian, Sanzio and Miguel whose childhoods were nothing but a series of premonitory incidents:

A certain Sanzio was dying to see the Pope; he was so eager that he was taken to the public square one day where the Pope was due to pass by. The youngster turned pale and stared. Finally, someone said to him: “I suppose you’re satisfied, Raffaello? Did you at least take a good look at our Holy Father?” But the boy replied with a wild look: “What Holy Father? All I saw was colors!” Another day, little Miguel, who wanted to become a soldier, was sitting under a tree and enjoying a novel about chivalry when suddenly he was

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startled by a loud crash: an old lunatic of the neighborhood, a ruined squire, was capering on an old nag and thrusting his rusty lance at a windmill. At dinner, Miguel related the incident with such sweet, funny faces that he made everyone roar with laughter. But later, alone in his room, he threw his novel on the floor, stamped on it, and sobbed for a long time.

Jean-Paul's personal project was the posthumous legend, long delayed, of Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Bard of Aurillac." In this way, each moment that he lived could be enjoyed as a moment in the childhood of a long-neglected genius, one who would die in obscurity. Where the ultimate reader of Rousseau's life was to be God, the ultimate reader of Sartre's was to be his great-grand-nephew, in whose mind Sartre would live again long after his death, way off in the year 3000:

With loving horror, I felt his gaze pinning me down in my millinery. I shammed for him; I concocted double-edged remarks, which I let fall in public. Ann Marie would find me at my desk, scribbling away. She would say: "It's so dark! My little darling is ruining his eyes." It was an opportunity to reply in all innocence: "I could write even in dark." She would laugh, would call me her little silly, would put on the light; the trick was done; we were both unaware that I had just informed the year 3,000 of my future infirmity. Yes, toward the end of my life, more blind than Beethoven was deaf, I would work gropingly on my last book. People would say with disappointment: "But it's illegible!" There would even be talk of throwing it in the garbage. Finally, the Aurillac Municipal Library would ask for it out of pure piety. It would lie there for one hundred years, forgotten. And then, one day, out of love for me, young scholars would try to decipher it;

their entire lifetime would not be enough to restore what would, of course, be my masterpiece. My mother had left the room, I was alone, I repeated to myself slowly, above all without thinking about it: "In the dark!" There was a sharp crack: my great-grand-nephew, out there, had shut his book; he was dreaming about the childhood of his great-grand-uncle, and tears were rolling down his cheeks. "Nevertheless, it's true," he would sigh, "he wrote in the dark!"

What I have been calling a peril of autobiography is, as Sartre knew, rooted in a larger difficulty that human beings have to cope with. It is what the old poets called the dominion of mutability—life's inevitable lack of finish. The peril of autobiography is the temptation it offers to mask this condition, to convince us that something like wholeness and permanence can characterize our individual being, though such temptations are not solely the province of autobiography. They take many forms, one of which I found recently in a new book by Hans Moravec called *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence*. Moravec is one of the leading exponents of the view that there is no fundamental difference between the way the brain works and the way a computer works, and that therefore there is no serious impediment to our capacity to duplicate in a machine what is now performed organically. Led by his vision, Moravec goes on to predict the day when we will be able to transfer even our individual selves from their mortal envelopes to enduring and dependable machines. In a kind of rhapsody, he describes what your experience will be as your brain is surgically replicated:

Layer after layer the brain is simulated, then excavated. Eventually your skull is empty, and the surgeon's hand rests deep in your brainstem. Though you have not lost consciousness, or even your train of thought, your mind has been removed from the brain and transferred to a machine. In a final, disorienting step the surgeon

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lifts out his hand. Your suddenly abandoned body goes into spasms and dies. For a moment you experience only quiet and dark. Then, once again, you can open your eyes. Your perspective has shifted. The computer simulation has been disconnected from the cable leading to the surgeon's hand and reconnected to a shiny new body of the style, color, and material of your choice.

I don't have the expertise even to begin to argue whether or not Moravec's view of the way the brain works is right, but I can see in this passage a deep, personal contempt for life as it is currently lived, in the body.

One person who did not have a shiny new body was Bruce Cummings. I want to conclude with Cummings and the life he lived in his unmanageable body because, though he yielded to the temptation to give his life a wholeness it did not have, his sense of life was finally much richer than that of Moravec. Cohabiting with the egoist who sought tragic stature was a more complex individual who, throughout much of his diary, expresses an extraordinary openness to what was happening to him:

I lie on my back and rest awhile. Then I force myself over to the left side by putting my right arm over the left side of the bed beneath the woodwork and pulling (my right arm is stronger than any of the other limbs). To-night, Nurse had not placed me in the middle of the bed (I was too much over on the right side), so even my long arm could not reach down beneath the woodwork on the left. I cursed Nanny for a scabby old bean, struggled, and at last got over on my left side. The next thing was to get my legs bent up — now out as stiff and straight as ferrules. When lying on the left side I long ago found out that it is useless to get my right leg up first, as it only shoots out again when I come to grapple with the left. So I

put my right arm down, seized the left leg just above the knee and pulled! The first result is always a violent spasm in the legs and back. But I hang on and presently it dies away, and the leg begins to move upward a little. Last night Nanny uncrossed my legs, but was not careful to separate them. Consequently, knee stuck side by side to knee, and foot to foot, as if glued, and I found, in pulling at my left, I had the stubborn live weight of both to lift up. I would get them part way, then by a careless movement of the hand on a ticklish spot both would shoot out again. So on for an hour — my only relief to curse Nanny.

I do not think it is entirely sentimentality that leads me to prefer this rendering of a dying body to Moravec's vision of a shiny new one. Certainly I would not have begrudged Cummings a better body than the one he had, solely on the grounds of the pleasure of his text. But what is expressed in this passage are qualities of attention and acceptance which would serve any of us in the course of our own lives' indeterminacies. Were it possible to rid life of its indeterminacies, I suppose such qualities would serve no useful function. Yet even were such qualities eventually rendered useless, I am inclined to think that their value would still exceed any of the more programmable pleasures.

About the desire to have a life that you mentioned in connection with Cummings: I can see this in the work of a public figure like Simone de Beauvoir when she creates, for her benefit, a whole life story. But as to the diaries and letters of women who didn't have a public life and didn't intend (as far as I can tell) that anyone would ever see what they wrote — these seem to be different. Do you think there's a difference of intention here?

Yes, I think there can be an enormous difference. And showing this difference is one of the interesting consequences of the current effort to bring to light the unpublished diaries and letters of women.

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As I read them, one trait that shows up repeatedly in these quite different texts is what you might call a greater acceptance of the accidental (something that I was trying to suggest in my final remarks on Cummings). I'm tempted to go on and say that in texts like these there is not so much a concern to construct a life as there is to experience a kind of living itself, something going on in the text at the moment of writing.

However, it's important to be cautious in the way we generalize here. There is a great deal of variety, a great mixture of motives, in all self-writing. Moreover, even in the most apparently haphazard and private kinds of writing, the tendency of language is to package experience, to give it a wholeness it does not have. There has been some theoretical effort to argue that language is itself an instrument of patriarchal control or containment, that all writing (conducted with the emblematic pen) is masculine. Pursued at length, this idea makes writing a no-win situation for any who might want to escape attitudes of containment. Others point to work like Virginia Woolf's diaries, in which Woolf makes a point of continually stopping the action, intruding, pointing out what's happening right now, breaking the coherences of language and narrative — in other words, using language against itself.

The recent works on autobiography and feminist theory have blossomed and brought forth many creative things, but there's been such a tendency to focus on women that at times I think the situation of men appears to have been forgotten. Would you care to comment on the possible contribution of feminist theory to an understanding of male self-representation?

Yes. I think that's one of the reasons I am so personally interested in this subject. (I am after all male.) The feminist critique of male writing — by figures like Cixous, Kristeva, Irigaray — is implicit in what I have been saying this evening. Rousseau is, after all, the person who cannot rest until he's got it all together. Even if it's a long lumpy thing, his *Confessions* hold the promise of eventual containment. This fits the feminist critique. What that critique sometimes (though not always) loses sight of is how much Rousseau suffers for this condition. He pays very dearly for the

concept of being complete. There is little room for the changeable and flowing in this concept of identity.

I think you see the same thing in Sassoon, particularly in his intense nostalgia (a trait he has in common with Rousseau). What is nostalgia, after all? The yearning for a lost wholeness that never existed? That seems to me an intuitively just definition. In Sassoon, it means fictionally reconstructing a past in which the separation of his parents, his Jewish heritage, his emerging homosexuality are all erased. I don't mean to put *The Foxhunting Man* down as a simple book, but I do think the illusion of simplicity and wholeness, even as a memory of something gone forever, is one of the consoling functions of that text.

Nor, for that matter, would I want to suggest that this is purely a problem of male writers and that women don't have cravings for the same kind of wholeness of self. I do think there is something to the association of maleness with the need for delineated borders of identity, but exactly how that association should be expressed is beyond my current powers of understanding.

Not to downplay feminist readings of autobiography, but there has been a great deal of interest recently in black writers and autobiographers, and some have argued that, as far as autobiography is concerned, the difference of racial identity may be more important than that of gender. I was wondering what you thought of that.

I don't buy it — at least entirely. I guess I would put it this way: the distinction between black and white autobiography is less pronounced than the male/female distinction within black or white autobiography. The *Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, for example, could rightly be described as an autobiography about a man's assertion of his manhood. As I read it, the critical scene in this narrative is a fight Douglass has with Mr. Covey. By beating the white overlord with his own two fists, Douglass confirms his identity as the independent and assertive protagonist of his life story. In the twentieth century, the inheritor of Douglass' mantle has been Richard Wright, whose autobiography, *Black Boy*, is also the record of an emerging male autonomy. A key point in that text

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is Wright's discovery of H.L. Mencken — a man who, as he notes, could use the written word like a sword.

There has been a good deal of recent work on black women's autobiography, and among that work the principal exponent of a gender difference has been Joanne Braxton's *Black Women Writing Autobiography*. This is part of a larger argument she has been making for what she calls the "Afra-American" voice. In her treatment of the black tradition in autobiography, she seeks to displace the Douglass/Wright model with that of "the outraged mother." The case seems to me to be pretty strong.

You said at one point that it was a mistake to look for The Truth in autobiography. I need more of an explanation of that. Isn't the truth what makes autobiography interesting? We are all different, aren't we, and doesn't the truth of that difference show up in autobiography? Isn't this what we read autobiography for?

Well, this gets right down to the heart of the matter. On the one hand, the evidence seems to indicate that there is no difference between the degree of fictionality of an autobiography and that of what we usually call a novel. In other words, both are equally creative acts, the products of selection, shaping, re-arranging. A determined biographer can always put the lie to an autobiographer, the way Pollard did to Cummings. On the other hand, Mark Twain was quite right when he says that it doesn't matter how much you lie in your autobiography, the reader will eventually find you out. Which is kind of like saying, you can never escape being yourself. This is why I sometimes prefer the term "autography" to "autobiography." It puts the emphasis on the writer's autograph, that signature that will always show up in spite of the stories you tell about yourself. This is what you were getting at, I think, when you said we express our personal difference in our autobiographies. When you pick up your pen, it's not somebody else's signature you write, but your own.

It may be, then, that the problem of truth you have isolated here is not a writing problem, but a reading problem. The question becomes: When we read autobiography what is the kind of truth we are reading for? If we are reading for historical truth, the truth of

what actually happened, we are not going to get anything we can really rely on. But if we read for the signature, we have rich evidence to work with. The ending of Cummings' journal may have been historically false, but the falsehood expresses something quite true about the author.

And this brings me back to my main point. The peril of autobiography is that we may read our own life stories as if they were historically true, conveying to ourselves an image of wholeness and completion that we never had, screening from view what we don't want to see. Conversely, the value of autobiography emerges when we read it instead as a kind of action, taking place at the moment of writing, responding to the complex play of our desires, always changing, always incomplete.