

AUTOBIOGRAPHY-AS-NOVEL: CONROY AND KAZIN'S MEMORIES OF CHILDHOOD

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The problem of the relationship between autobiography and autobiographical fiction is directly related to the reader's expectations when he approaches the book if he thinks it is a real text or a fictional text. According to Norman Holland, the expectation the reader brings to a literary work imposes certain limits on the kind of experience the work can give him:

... If we come to a work expecting to test it according to our everyday notions of reality, we will have a less emotional experience than if we come to it not reality-testing. The reason is, reality-testing makes us more aware of ourselves... we feel as though it is happening in our minds. In non-fiction in particular, when we experience it as literature, we displace our commitment from the reality-issues it presents to the language for its own sake.¹

On the other hand, an autobiographer's truth is only a subjective truth; it is not history, but just what the autobiographer sees. The autobiography is the history of a self, its own response to the world or the way it is altered by the world. It is not, in other words, a portrait of the way the world really is.

For Alfred Kazin, autobiography as narrative "obviously seeks the effect of fiction and cannot use basic resources of fiction without becoming fiction".² Frank Conroy's *Stop-time* and Alfred Kazin's *A Walker in the City* use fictional techniques and they become a special genre autobiographies-as-novels.

In fiction there are three potential minds: the author's, the character's and the reader's, while in non-fiction there is not the character's but only the author's persona. According to John Mandel Barret, the writer is controlled by the genre he chooses, and as the autobiographer has to give an account of the facts of his own life, he is limited by three generic restrictions:

... the first is that his materials must be the content of his own life; the second is that he must write retrospectively, and the third is that he must write with fidelity to the spirit of the truth.³

It is clear that the main difference between autobiography and fiction is that the novelist is free to invent the materials he uses, while the autobiographer has to deal with the facts of his own life.

F. R. Hart thinks⁴ there is a contradiction between the opinions of Georges Gusdorf, who says that in autobiography the author is looking for his real identity, but adds that it matters little if it has errors since the value of art is real; and Kazin, who affirms that although Hemingway and others use facts to produce enjoyable narrative, the creative writer turns to autobiography looking for the satisfaction that fiction cannot produce for him.

Among the critics who consider autobiography to be expressions of essential truth are Wayne Shumaker, John Barrett, and also Edwin Muir, who thinks that he could follow some images freely "if I were writing an autobiographical novel but now I stick to fact".⁵ Stephen Spender wonders whether he should have written his autobiography as a novel, but now "the hero is I".⁶ Vladimir Nabokov writes to repossess the realities of the past and revolts against the fictionalist, and W.B. Yeats⁷ confesses that he has changed nothing with his knowledge but many things without his knowledge.⁸

There are two critics who consider the theme of truth problematic Holland⁹ thinks that there is nothing in an autobiographical passage to permit us to distinguish history and fiction —the reader is free to respond, though in understanding personal history one seeks an imaginative comprehension of another's historic identity— and Roy Pascal¹⁰ says that truth is a problematic goal to be sought.

Hart defines the truth in autobiography as the relation between the autobiographer and his personal or historical subject, and adds that it is necessary to take into account "what kind of I is selected, how far the selected I is an inductive invention or an intentional creation, whether one single or one multiple I persists throughout the work, if there is an I comprehensive, essential, total, or an I partial, chronological and analytically restricted".¹¹ Other critics define the truth of the I in terms of the tension between a life looked at from the inside or a life looked at from the outside, a true tension between the inner, the subjective, or the outer, the objective, worlds Frank Conroy obliges us in *Stop-time* to distinguish between Conroy the author and Frank the child; he generates a stable ironic tension between the life of the author and the main character.

Some of the most popular and new forms of autobiography are, for Albert Stone,

... an attempt to recreate a self amid and against a variety of cultural cross currents and forces, which limit or deny that possibility.¹²

Autobiography becomes not simply an attempt to retell one's past life on a linear scale but a novel written in the present, with one's past life as its subject. And as any presentation of the self through language, it is a fragment or

selection a fiction. This explains how Frank Conroy can write a novel about a character who has his own name and is deliberately simplified, a character who is an artfully crafted projection of himself.

According to Peter Bailey, it is not difficult to insert a fictionalized projection of the self into a novel, or it is as easy as inventing any other element in the novel, autobiographical or not. The most difficult task is to manipulate the chosen materials in order to achieve the special tension which gives rise to the atmosphere of the book—to build the novel from the beginning to the end. This brings us to Conroy's autobiography-as-novel. He wants both novelistic form and the sense of real life in his book, and this struggle between autobiography and art, life and literary form is the main factor in the tension that transforms his autobiographical narrative into a well-structured novel:

In *Stop-time* the autobiographical materials are translated into aesthetic ones through an act of creative imagination, details from life altered and rearranged by the author in order that his art not his life be allowed to dictate the various contiguities, convergences and ironies which appear in this book.¹³

While the autobiographer has to see his past from the present, “has to limit himself to retrospection”,¹⁴ the novelist can create a world that never existed, except in his imagination. “The autobiographer must feel himself committed to casting his glance back over real history”:¹⁵ Conroy tells of his first experiences, and those of his family, sometimes even in a linear way:

My father stopped living with us when I was three or four... I was twelve when my father died. From the ages of nine to eleven I was sent to an experimental boarding school in Pennsylvania called Freemont. I wasn't home more than a few days during these years (pp. 11-2).

The autobiographer may organize his past as he likes. Barrett explains that Kazin begins *A Walker in the City* in the present: “Every time I go back to Brownsville it is as if I had never been away” (p. 5). But he only deals with his own past and mainly with those aspects from which the most important events of his life have evolved: “When I was a child I thought we lived at the end of the world” (p. 8). He did not accept the surroundings where his parents lived, separated from the rest of America, and he decided to choose another place where he could become as assimilated to his country—America, the American way of life—and become an American.

Conroy uses extremely different fictional techniques: one of them is to present an unknown young writer as hero, so the story possesses a plot appropriate to a novel—the growing up of Frank Conroy from the age of three or four until his moment of escape from the family when he arrives at college.

The framework of the prologue and epilogue is also novelistic, bracketing the narrative and establishing its emotional and temporal setting. The author introduces himself as a person living in England and writing a book: "When we were in England I worked well. Four or five hundred words every afternoon" (p. 9). Even though he confesses that life was good for him, he used to go to London once or twice a week "in a wild, escalating passion of frustration, blinded by some mysterious mixture of guilt, moroseness, and desire" (p. 9). He is married and in love with his wife, thus he wasn't chasing after women, but rather after something "invisible", something that he never could find. The most important moments occur on his way back home, driving his car at three a.m.: "The drive home was the point of it all"; he enjoyed wildly

... accelerating on every turn, winding up the big engine, my brain finally clean and white, washed out by the danger and the roar of the wind (p. 9).

The car is a linking element and a central motif in the book. The epilogue is just an extension like the prologue; both take place ten years after the last scene in the autobiography proper. At the end of the book, Conroy continues playing with the idea of suicide, but he is a perfectionist and even though he states the fountain of the village "was coming directly at me, coming very fast as the car skidded broadside across the square" (p. 284), he drives perfectly and escapes alive —autobiography requires that the author be alive, and this highlights the main difference between it and biography, which deals with the life of a person no longer living.

These two scenes —the prologue and the epilogue— are linked by a similar appearance by the author in chapter twelve, almost in the middle of the story. The writer is also driving "in total communion with the car", feeling inside warm, cozy and drunk: in the prologue Conroy introduces himself to the reader and prepares him to expect a real subject instead of a character in a novel; in the epilogue the author merges with the protagonist, and there the most important feature is rhythm, which constitutes an abstract thread from the beginning to the end of the book:

I am a completely rhythmic being... My arms move the wheel in constant adjustment, my heart beats, I breathe in and out, my eyes move in my head —all of it a subtle counterpoint of rhythms, infinitely syncopated, and in my drunkenness, endlessly beautiful (p. 179).

There are more fictional features to disconcert the reader, who would take seriously the publisher's classification of the book as "autobiography" on the back cover. For instance, the titles given to the twenty short chapters, "Savages", "Space and a Dead Mule", "Please don't take my sunshine away", and so forth, all suggest fictional works more than factual episodes.

The writer becomes visible in the prologue, the epilogue and other parts of the story just to explain to the reader that the book is an autobiography—Conroy's own life. From the prologue we see the rebel—an adult rebel—but the autobiography is about a child or an adolescent holding off insanity, fighting against his own fears and desires.

The tendency to focus on childhood and adolescence, not paying too much attention to adulthood, is a very important feature both in Kazin's and Conroy's autobiographies. In the eighteenth century, with the Enlightenment, the most important faculty of the human mind was Reason. For example, in his autobiography Benjamin Franklin is most interested in himself as a public figure, as an adult. The only aspect of his childhood that is important is its contribution to adulthood, to the development of his reason.

The eighteenth century was fascinated with maturity; the growth toward manhood seemed so desirable that many autobiographers denied the importance of their childhoods, only telling some anecdotes from their early years that were susceptible to moral interpretation: childhood matters in terms of foretelling maturity; what attracts the readers' interest is adulthood, a man's success in his life. Franklin is sure that readers want to know about his own accomplishments in the world.

As a matter of fact, the writers of autobiography in the eighteenth century saw themselves primarily as social beings, and they declare their development through descriptions of their personal experience. For men, adult life, despite its social responsibilities, meant freedom and expressiveness.

In the nineteenth century, with the rising of Romanticism, childhood becomes a fashion. They idealize the child since he is closer or nearer to Nature, and devalue the social world—manners and society—since it represents a perversion of Nature. Autobiographies about childhood are an attempt to go back, an attempt to escape from history, and from society. In the nineteenth century autobiographers tend to prize childhood, while in the eighteenth century children were considered "little people". The concept of the child, as we understand it today, was invented in the nineteenth century, and it is connected with Rousseau's ideas: if the child is closer to Nature, he is closer to truth and to our essential selves.

Rousseau was in favour of the world of natural goodness of children and against the destructive effect civilization had on us. He considered his early years the happiest time of his life, and urged adults to feel nostalgia for those vanished days, thinking that it could not be possible to imagine a more blessed entrance into life than childhood, and it was a crucial and a satisfying time of life.¹⁶

The special importance of childhood or the attention paid to early formative stages of personal development can be of prime significance for autobiography, and a glance into this kind of literature reveals that the stories concentrating on remembered experiences and emotions of childhood are most important for the genre. From Mark Twain to Henry James, some of the most

popular and imaginative historians of the self have been preoccupied with the beginning stages of their lives.

According to the new theories that appeared in the nineteenth century, children were no longer regarded as the miniature adults pictured before, but were thought to be guided by different forces:

Whereas Thoreau had advised his mature readers to retain a childlike freshness of vision uncorrupted by civilization, Howells, Clemens, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, George W. Peck, and Frank Stockton savored the "badness" of childhood as a primitive instinct irretrievably *lost* to adults.¹⁷

A look at Henry James's autobiography shows that the old writer is recreating the world of the child: a land of romance, the America of James's childhood, an innocent world of innocent people, involved in innocent pastimes observed by the innocent child. The "others" in the world of Henry James, the small boy, the son and the brother were every one and everything apart from his own sensations:

... in that early time I seem to have been constantly eager to exchange my lot for that of somebody else, on the assumed certainty of gaining by the bargain... They were so *other* —that was what I felt; and to *be* other, other almost anyhow, seemed as good... unattainable, impossible...¹⁸

James's memoirs are purely and simply the story of a small boy, a small Henry who dedicated himself early and passionately to the role of an observer of life, a great observer who passes all his childhood learning to observe. A *Small Boy and Others* is a kind of novel of a child, because he is trying, through all its lines, to give the effect of the past, the impressions the child had of himself —James's imaginative reconstruction of the first years of his life.

Burton Pike tries to find out what lies behind the writers' obsession with childhood which may be the importance for the adult of his early years in the development of the span of his whole career. The attraction the writer feels for his childhood derives from the apparent "permanence of life" before the full development of his ego and

It merges as a screening device which enables him to express in the present of writing certain ideas and feelings which his active consciousness might lead him to reject.¹⁹

If early life is so important to autobiographers that it obliges them to go over this ground again and again it may be because childhood offers a way of blocking the time leading up to death —the terms "death", "eternity" and "immortality" are synonymous with "timelessness".

From the main point of temporality, the adult writing about childhood seems to be fascinated by the apparent permanence of life. Writing from a psychoanalytic perspective, the autobiography of childhood in general reveals a fascination with states of timelessness. It may be, according to Burton Pike²⁰, "a fascination with death itself, the ultimately timeless state". The adult longs for the child's timelessness from his childhood self, as though these moments had some special significance for him. Instead of nostalgia or pain, there is merely the laconic admission that his mind was still.

In Conroy's autobiography, after the violent scene of Freemont, in "Savages":

Although Ligget's beating is part of my life (past, present, and future coexist in the unconscious, says Freud), and although I've worried about it off and on for years, all I can say about it is that brutality happens easily. I learned almost nothing from beating up Ligget. (p. 19)

Conroy introduces himself as the adult writer, confessing that his "faith in the firmness of time slips away gradually" (p. 21). He begins to believe that some other principle organizes existence. His memory flashes like "clips of film from unrelated movies". He wonders suddenly if he is alive even though he knows he is not dead:

... floating around like this that I almost gratefully accept the delusion that I've lived another life, remote from me now, and completely forgotten... (p. 21)

He remembers again Freemont, and remembering it, he discovers "the exact, spatial center of my life, the one still point" (p. 21). And some pages later:

The days were emptiness, a vast, spacious emptiness in which the fact of being alive became almost meaningless. The first fragile beginnings of a personality starting to collect in my twelve-year-old soul were immediately sucked up into the silence... The overbearing, undeniable reality of those empty days. (p. 61)

In his struggle to escape from insanity, "the fear that everything would go blank, that I would become the sky, without a body, without thought" (p. 61), he tries to order his life, becoming a real perfectionist, but he sadly recognizes that a child has no choice but to accept the immediate experiences of his life, he "simply is"; so, he "went to sleep" as the only escape or solution: stillness.

In the "yo-yo" chapter, there are digressions on how much he hates the totally uneatable food he brings to school from home. He looks sadly at the paper bag, at the wrapping, while he thinks that the whole thing is a "fraud",

but he has no money to buy something he likes, so he transcends hunger and his mind achieves “perfect balance, perfect stillness” (p. 125). In the library, looking at the plate decorated with the figure of a cat, his mind “empty” of thought begins to wander:

Without an ego, one simply looks. The image of the cat, entirely whole and entirely static, is a signal to the mind to come to rest. (p. 139)

When the young Frank feels uneasy at home, sadness creeps over him “a sadness so profound I understood it could not have come from life”, this sadness that was not emotion at all, only the consciousness of “vast emptinesses”. Afterwards, sadness gives way to hopelessness, “stillness inside me, the thanatoid silence frightening me” (p. 170).

In the twentieth century, the focus is on adolescence as a kind of general tendency. But, why does it change in our century from childhood to adolescence? Was it time to throw out many Romantic notions, even though we are still in a Romantic age in some ways? The idealization of adolescence also comes from a reaction against adulthood. This is a kind of idealization of the rebel, perhaps because adolescence is not influenced by established society. A typical autobiography of adolescence is an autobiography of rebellion, for instance *A Walker in the City or Stop-time*. In Kazin's book, the walker is looking for his adolescence, he knows that he has already assimilated into American culture, but he wants to go back to understand that process of assimilation. His adolescent self is a rebel against what he (the adult) has to accept: his parents' past and their life in a Jewish neighbourhood. He criticizes what his parents do and rebels against the concept of living in America without being a real American. The adult writer explains what he thought in his childhood and adolescence about this feeling of estrangement. For this reason, to reconstruct those thought processes, he had to go back home.

Even though he never rebels actually against his parents, he has two definite expectations: to become an American and to remain a Jew. Although in his adolescence he lost the second expectation, the first always remains. But he is a good son and does what his parents want him to do; he only rebels mentally. He does not like what he has to do, and that is very painful for him. He probably thinks of rebellion more strongly as an adult when he is writing the book than when he was a child, and this is the main difference between Kazin and Conroy, who is a real rebel. The contrast between the two books lies in the responses of the main characters, their different types of adolescent rebellion.

In the twentieth century, social forces have become stronger and stronger. Nations are more powerful and try to limit the individual free will. In a system that is overwhelming, adolescents and the people belonging to an ethnic minority group have to rebel, mainly if they feel more oppressed. Kazin thinks that belonging to Brownsville excludes the possibility of belonging to America

and as long as he belongs to a Jewish minority he cannot belong to the larger society: America.

Literature in the twentieth century often focuses on a character against the establishment. Some of them can be described as life-long rebels: Frank Conroy reports on his manhood and takes risks with his car, playing with his life, as if he wanted to say that death represents the only alternative to puberty.

The preoccupation with adolescence in our century is like a reconciliation between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, and the exaltation of the maximum potential for the chance of changing the world: Conroy's French friend paints the "process", the movement of the lock on the Metro door—he captures movement in a static drawing—and *Stop-time's* narrative tries to be different or new by depicting the process of Frank's life, showing a real preoccupation with the barrier that separates the author from his frightening past. It orders his memory, which tries to escape from insanity. Similarly, the remembrance of his father's madness makes him wish to be conscious and to search for normalcy, and both the child and the adolescent move continually between the pole of "normalcy" and the pole of "insanity". But psychological conflicts like those that appear in the pages of *Stop-time* are not easily solved, because "to throw one's life into proper perspective, as Conroy seeks to do by projecting it into a novel, may leave him with nothing more than a life thrown into literary perspective".²¹

Anyway, something unusual has occurred: either autobiographers have altered their aims and objectives to include novelistic techniques, or the novelists, seeing the popularity and vitality of autobiography, are interested more and more in personal history, which uses elements of both to disorient the reader, who tries to fix the conventional distinction between history and fiction, and ensure that the struggle for personal identity remains the main point of the autobiography. The new narrative challenges not only the possibility of a verifiable narrative but also the simple persistence of a coherent self as well.

But, ¿what is more important in autobiography, content or form? For Stone, "autobiography is a content, not any particular form and is free to borrow fresh vigor from all the life's changing experiences and from the other cultural forces of its age".²² And he adds that what books on personal narrative, written in the last decades, have in common is the quality of searching for a language and form capable of representing "private discontinuity amid public order". If autobiography once tried merely to recount the author's life on a linear scale, nowadays it has changed into a new form: a novel written in the present whose subject is the author's life in the past. Alfred Kazin, an accomplished autobiographer in *A Walker in the City*, rewrites his past out of contradictory impulses. For him, autobiography is a narrative which has no purpose other than to tell a story to create the effect of a story which above all values his narrative, which seems to be a synonym for fiction. Instead of telling a linear narrative of his own life, he tells another kind of story,

using facts as a strategy. The main focus remains in autobiography, even though the form may be different: the autobiographer tries to recapture some traces of a real, historical self, to complete his life.

Nevertheless, if Kazin's and Conroy's books are similar with regard to several points—for both their autobiographies try to authenticate the narrator's mature identity, joining the present writer with his recaptured family past—the selves they seek are different. In *A Walker in the City*, Kazin rejects his own cultural past. He considers it impossible to be accepted in the world outside his immediate, ethnic neighbourhood, and attempts to enter that world through writing. In *Stop-time*, Conroy wants to destroy his past by extinguishing the consciousness in which it is preserved (for this reason he tries to commit suicide), but he changes his mind little by little when he clarifies, interprets and comes to accept the events of his childhood and adolescence:

“I've won. I made it. I'm starting a new life”. And it was true. Haverford College would give me the chance to start with a clean slate, and that was all I'd ever wanted. My acceptance into a good college meant I could destroy my past. It seemed to me to amount to an order to destroy my past, a past I didn't understand, a past I feared, and a past with which I had expected to be forever encumbered. In the fact of this incredible good fortune life took on an hallucinatory brightness. It was like a religious conversion... even that seemed unimportant. Nothing mattered from the past, neither the things I had loved nor those I had hated. (p. 278)

If Kazin wants to solve some doubts about the relationship between his past and present selves, knowing the real nature of the fascination the child felt with American history and how the boy searched for an American identity, Conroy is trying to settle his contradictory impulses toward the extinction of consciousness (driving fast in his Jaguar) and the subjugation of his experiences to the higher development of consciousness.

In both books, the adults' problems are not solved within the narrative, so the very act of writing the narrative becomes an attempt to resolve them. It is the writer who establishes the connection between his earlier, lost self and his adult self. In Kazin, he builds his bridge to America, which permits him to be an American without losing his Jewish roots, and in Conroy, he merges with his protagonist when the fears and amorphousness of the past become clear enough. *A Walker in the City* reveals one man's response to an ethnic minority's own vision of the self, which he wants to become a real American self, and *Stop-time* allows the protagonist to experience what Conroy experiences when he completes the book—a stoppage of time, an acceptance of his past without being afraid of madness any longer.

Alfred Kazin and Frank Conroy tell their memories of childhood and adolescence utilizing fictional techniques; both reinvent their past by exploiting fiction. The two books may be read as typical short stories about

childhood where the authors attempt to make sense of their own family history —*A Walker in the City* and *Stop-time* are clear examples of the technique of autobiography-as-novel.

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