

WORK IN PROGRESS

A Nietzschean Interpretation of Autobiography

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My research question asks how Nietzsche can be used to put notions of truth in autobiography into question. I approach this in three ways: first, by taking up Nietzsche's legacy of questioning/challenging assumptions and directing this toward autobiography; second, by considering Nietzsche's thoughts on the relation of the individual to history; and third, by close-reading the autobiographies of Benjamin Franklin and Luc Sante to examine how these authors engage with the difficulties of truth and history raised by Nietzsche. The discussion here of Nietzsche will necessarily be somewhat generalized for brevity's sake and the autobiographical selections representative of a severely limited range of voices. Nonetheless, these two have been chosen because Benjamin Franklin's autobiography stands as "probably the second most influential autobiography of all time"¹ and Luc Sante's "Factory of Facts" is the book that set this entire journey into motion.

One of the questions that autobiography must constantly negotiate is the question of difference. What makes autobiography different from fiction? What makes autobiography different from history? And how far can one autobiography differ from another until the likeness becomes unbelievable? To examine these questions, we must first recognize key assumptions about the genre: an autobiographical narrative ought to run in chronological order; this narrative is about the author, by the author; and the narrative, as an artifact of the author, is based on verifiable fact. These supposedly distinguish autobiography from fiction. However, as Ben Yagoda observes in his book, *Memoir: A History*, the line between autobiography and fiction has rarely, if ever, been distinct. He points to *Robinson Crusoe* as a major work that challenged attitudes towards truth. At the turn of the seventeenth century, before books became widely circulated and before people began writing for profit, "truth was of a general quality; it wouldn't have occurred to anyone that every detail happened precisely as described."² However,

Robinson Crusoe "shook everything up. While some readers realized *Crusoe* was fiction, others believed it to be true...but Defoe wasn't trying to deceive anyone. He merely recognized, and was one of the first authors to exploit, the fact that human beings

1 Ben Yagoda. *Memoir: A History* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009): 71.

2 *Ibid.*, 47.

respond powerfully to narratives that are (or make credible claims to be) true...All [writers] followed his lead in writing fictional books in autobiographical form—and by this point, readers understood that the people and events in novels were fictional.”³

In a stunning reversal, readers today often understand works of fiction such as Scott Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise* and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* as being *true*.

The confusion between autobiography and fiction probably arises because, when it comes to autobiography, we are thinking of a life in terms of a story with a beginning, middle, and end. Unintentionally, we probably tend to think that autobiographies must also *operate* like stories. This is reinforced by the fact that autobiography and fiction share many of the same rhetorical techniques, both being written narratives, and therefore cannot be clearly differentiated through a point-by-point categorization of literary techniques. However, instinct tells us that there *is* a difference between fiction and autobiography, which probably dwells in autobiography’s foundations as a historical document. But what does it mean to be historical? According to Georges Gusdorf, autobiography starts with entrance:

“into the perilous domain of history. The man who takes the trouble to tell of himself knows that the present differs from the past and that it will not be repeated in the future; he has become more aware of differences than of similarities; given the constant change, given the uncertainty of events and of men, he believes it a useful and valuable thing to fix his own image so that he can be certain it will not disappear like all things in this world.”⁴

Gusdorf continues to write that the “original sin” of autobiography is “first one of logical coherence and rationalization...autobiography is condemned to substitute endlessly the completely formed for that which is in the process of being formed.”⁵ The autobiographer, who has the advantage of hindsight, often depicts life as clearer and simpler than it really was and calls that true. Gusdorf references Bergson’s criticism, which focuses on “classical theories of volition and free will for reconstructing a mode of conduct after the fact and then imagining that at the decisive moments there existed a clear choice among various possibilities, whereas in fact actual freedom proceeds on its own impetus and there is ordinarily no choice at all,” asserting that this weighs down autobiography with the “burden of insecurity.”⁶ Fiction does not carry the same burden of insecurity. Even if Bergson’s critique of free will and volition is true, it does not diminish the *necessity* of this self-deception. Life requires forgetting as much as it does remembering in order for humans to continue acting. As Nietzsche writes, “the unhistorical and the historical are equally necessary for the health of an individual, a people, and a culture.”⁷

Where Gusdorf argues that man distorts life through historicizing it, and thereby sins, Nietzsche, on the other hand, argues that history is the mark of humanity:

“man says ‘I remember’ and envies the animal which immediately forgets and sees

3 *Ibid.*, 48.

4 Georges Gusdorf. *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980): 30.

5 *Ibid.*, 41.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (New York: Hackett Publishing Co., 1980): 10.

each moment really die, sink back into deep night extinguished forever. In this way the animal lives *unhistorically*...Man on the other hand resists the great and ever greater weight of the past: this oppresses him and bends him sideways.”⁸

The challenge to the autobiographer, in a Nietzschean sense, is how *not* to be dragged down by the chains of the past; we “require history for life and action, not for the smug avoiding of life and action, or even to whitewash a selfish life and cowardly, bad acts. Only so far as history serves life will we serve it.”⁹

Benjamin Franklin and Luc Sante provide two very different examples of how history might serve life and also demonstrate different uses of the unhistorical. We can see from our previous quotations of Nietzsche that *unhistorical* has two meanings: a state of interpretation and a state of forgetfulness. In Franklin, the unhistorical is employed mainly through forgetfulness, or omission, in order to preserve a particular characterization of Franklin and secure his place in public history as a good, wise man. In contrast, Sante’s *Factory of Facts* explores his family’s private history in order to create a place for himself in that narrative, and his autobiography is documentation of his creative, interpretative struggle to find a place in history by continuously redefining himself in terms of the past.

Franklin’s *Autobiography* is presented in a pedagogical frame of mind, hopefully to be of use to posterity. In a letter to Franklin, Vaughan echoes the theme of formation, emphasizing, “It is in *youth* that we plant our chief habits and prejudices...but your biography will not merely teach self-education, but the education of *a wise man*.”¹⁰ The triad of education, formation, and youth ride on a particular perspective of history in which the events of one’s life are interpreted as meaningful in context of the end. Franklin clearly makes decisions regarding the narrative of his life based on this principle, for example, in justifying a particular detour by writing, “But as Prose Writing has been of great Use to Me in the course of my life, and was a principal means of my advancement, I shall tell you how in such a situation I acquired what little ability I have in that way.”¹¹ The pedagogical nature of Franklin’s work and its focus on himself, his career, and his decisions moves it into the public sector of existence, where “it is official facts that carry weight here, and intentions are judged by their performance. One should not take the narrator’s word for it, but should consider his version of the facts as one contribution to his own biography.”¹²

One of the key examples of forgetting in Franklin’s *Autobiography* arrives in the noticeable *lack* of difficulty in his life. As Yagoda wryly notes, “while Franklin has his low moments, they unanimously involve momentary discomfort or inconvenience, not soul torment or self doubt.”¹³ One might say, as Franklin intends you to, that the smooth sailing Franklin experiences is the fruit of his good character, symbolic of life rewarding those who do well. This moral theme is the meat and substance of Franklin’s public persona. While Franklin does make mention of four “Great Errata” in his life (spending someone else’s money, abandoning his fiancée, printing an ill-advised pamphlet, and attempting to seduce his best friend’s wife),¹⁴ the severity of his mistakes does not match up with the naming. An “errata” is usually understood as an error in

8 *Ibid.*, 9.

9 *Ibid.*, 7.

10 Benjamin Franklin. *Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography*, ed. J.A. Leo Lemay and P.M. Zall (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986): 59.

11 *Ibid.*, 10.

12 *Ibid.*, 36.

13 Yagoda, 71.

14 Franklin, 27, 34, 36.

printing or writing, like a typo. Naming your four greatest mistakes “errata” speaks to a certain frame of mind that wishes to downplay the drama of the errors, treating them like blips in the overall scheme of things. This type of thinking about mistakes is typical of autobiographies that live in the public sphere, which emphasize truth as that which has been true all along and places a premium on certainty, even if the evidence isn’t in complete agreement.

Though we might be tempted to criticize this manner of writing as untruthful, I want to cleave more closely to Nietzsche’s proposal that history must be used in service in life. In that sense, Franklin’s focus on the interplay of virtue and reward in his life is what matters; even if he has to tell himself fictions about his own character, his belief in those fictions gives him the conviction to live on. As Franklin says, “I formed at sea [the *Plan*] for regulating my future conduct in life. It is the more remarkable, as being form’d when I was so young, and yet being pretty faithfully adhered to quite thro’ to old age.”¹⁵

The focus of *Factory of Facts*, on the other hand, is exploration of the anxiety that comes with *not* having all of the facts in complete agreement. This is apparent from the very first chapter, in which Sante provides nine different accounts of who he is and how his family came to leave Belgium. This first chapter, called “Resume,” provokes the reader to ask about the certainty of their own origins and was especially poignant to me as a first-generation American. I have no proof, in the way of usual proof, of how my family came to America, and my understanding, like Sante’s, is built primarily on speculation and eavesdropping—other people’s stories. There is a yearning to know how where I came from roots itself in who I am. Sante’s uncertainty unmoors any expectation that his autobiography will act within the public sphere. In this case, “when the private face of existence assumes more importance...it is a question of another truth. The act of memory is carried out for itself, and recalling the past satisfies a more or less anguished disquiet of the mind anxious to recover and redeem lost time in fixing it forever.”¹⁶ Sante makes no attempt to hide his ongoing interpretations; one might even say that, as a person searching for identity, the entire interpretative effort *is* the theme, the true story of his life. Sante writes:

“I had inherited Belgian culture as a package of fragments...This collection of elements, of wildly uneven size and impact, accounted for perhaps three-quarters of my personality, or at least my self-definition, even in late childhood. My rebellion was a complex matter...I began a project to reinvent myself, acknowledge no bonds or ties or background, pass myself off as entirely self-made.”¹⁷

At this point, Sante bears strong resemblance to Franklin in the way that Sante’s rebellion takes the form of attempting to create an entirely independent self.

However, Sante’s engagement with the difficulties of history and unhistory go deeper as he struggles intensely with “the question to what degree life requires the service of history”¹⁸:

“continuing to believe that I had just made myself up out of whole cloth was self-flattering but hollow...Like it or not, each of us is *made*, less by blood or genes than by a process that is largely accidental, the impact of [experience] Every human being is an

15 *Ibid.*, 40.

16 Gusdorf, 37.

17 Luc Sante. *The Factory of Facts* (New York: Vintage Departures, 1998): 30–31.

18 Nietzsche, 9.

archaeological site...the archaeological detective who can trace their passage in detail does not exist and never will...I can't in any way be conclusive about what made me. All I can do is to reconstruct the site, and imagine the factory at work."¹⁹

At this moment, Sante commits himself to a moment-by-moment engagement with history, setting aside the desire to achieve certainty through thematization and thereby creating a more genuine depiction of "the state of the soul."²⁰

Through the examples of Franklin and Sante, we see that process of rationalization is far from being autobiography's original sin. The absence of the unhistorical acts of forgetting and interpretation that accompany the act of rationalization in autobiography would neuter the genre: "An autobiography cannot be a pure such and such a day at such and such an hour, I went to such and such a place...A record of this kind, no matter how minutely exact, would be no more than a caricature of real life; in such a case, rigorous precision would add up to the same thing as the subtlest deception."²¹ When in service of life, rationalization is transformed into autobiography's original virtue, and with it, man finally becomes "an interesting animal!"²²

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19 Sante, 32–34.

20 Gusdorf, 37.

21 *Ibid.*, 42.

22 Nietzsche, xx.

