GIDE AND TEIRLINCK: THE FICTION OF REALITY AND THE REALITY OF FICTION

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The canonical list of the genres of literature is not eternal. By the 18th century some, such as maxims, character sketches and letters, had virtually disappeared, and others - political and legal oratory, lives of great men, advice to rulers on how to rule - had been reclassified out of literature into other fields. It will be noted that these are genres which presuppose a universal model of man, regarding even great figures of the past as types or examples rather than individuals. The romantic movement, on the other hand, saw every person as an individual, and so new genres were born which reflected this view, namely the intimate diary and the autobiography.

Now, no doubt two hundred years is not very long in the history of world literature, but it is curious that literary criticism has only recently paid attention to these new genres. For this lack of curiosity I see three possible reasons which may be relevant for the two authors I propose to discuss. One reason is perhaps the problem of classifying systematically the various forms of narrative about a person's life; but this is not hard to do. In biography the author and the subject are two different people. It is useful to classify works in which the emphasis is on events and other people as memoirs and to confine the term autobiography to works which concentrate on the personality of the author. A diary used to note states of mind (the intimate diary), and letters written with that purpose, are related to autobiography, but they are not retrospective, and an autobiography is. The essay and the self-portrait also form part of this group of genres, but they are purely analytical, whereas an autobiography is narrative. So is an autobiographical novel, but I reserve the distinction between that and autobiography proper for later in this paper. We may note also, as the final feature of autobiography, that nobody has written one in verse, the formal constraints of which might perhaps make the results of any such attempt seem too artificial.

In short, as Philippe Lejeune puts it, autobiography is

> the retrospective prose narrative someone writes about his own existence, when he stresses his individual life, and in particular the history of his personality[1].

We should give the words "narrative" and "history" their proper force here. They imply a conscious effort to structure the raw material fished out of the memory, to give it a shape suitable for the purpose

of the whole undertaking. And this purpose is to discover oneself. The work is "a recapitulative movement of synthesis of the self... autobiography... must above all try to show the profound unity of a life, its meaning, its direction"[2].

It will be apparent that autobiography is not easy to write. Now the second possible reason why critics have ignored the genre is that they may share the common misapprehension that anyone can talk about themselves. Actually I doubt this. To talk about what we said and did is not the same as self-analysis. We avoid that, because it causes us anguish.

And thirdly, perhaps critics despise autobiography because it is not fiction. If so, they are wrong. Or more precisely, one thing they presumably admire in fiction is its technique, and the autobiographer must apply these same techniques to his own undertaking. The meaning he sees in his life can only be made apparent to the reader by judicious choice and ordering of facts; indeed, the act of writing, choosing and ordering enables him to discover the "figure in the carpet" in himself.

Clearly, if one looks back over one's life in search of a pattern, seeking not only one's personality but the process by which it was formed, one gives pride of place to an interrogation of one's childhood. This in turn means that the adult author is questioning - and recreating - a different character with the same name, himself when young. Or as C. D. E. Tolton puts it in the case of Gide:

> A man named Andrè Gide lived a life which, in his role as an author by the name of Andrè Gide, he has recreated in a book where a narrator (also named Andrè Gide) tells the life of his younger self, the hero, who of course was also called Andrè Gide[3].

Lejeune analyses this complexity in the following manner. There is a distance between the author and the reader, who somehow has to be brought both to accept shocking confessions (usually sexual) and made to share indescribable moments of happiness and revelation. There is, perhaps surprisingly, a distance between the author and the narrator. It shows because the special difficulties of this type of narration are so great that they obtrude into text; I mean that at times the author pushes the narrator aside to talk about them. And there is a distance between the narrator and his young hero, which can be stressed with statements like "what a little prude I was", or on the contrary denied by remarks like "I still feel the same emotion as I did on that day", or bridged halfway by the use of humour (the hero is a figure of fun but at the same time admired or sympathised with)[4].

Such, at least, is the analysis of the autobiographical genre arrived at by Lejeune, and by Tolton who follows him. Since both

critics have written about Gide, it is perhaps not surprising that Gide's autobiography *Si le grain ne meurt* (known in English as If it die) fits the pattern we have described very well. For it is a narration, in prose, which recalls the narrator's childhood, and attempts to discover there the roots of a dilemma still central to Gide's life when he wrote the book: he is a pederast but he is married. In fact, he discovered he was one and got married anyway, to the young woman, his cousin, whom he had loved all through their adolescence, with a love that was intellectual and highly emotional but not physical at all.

To that extent, there is no distance between the child (the hero of the work) and the man (the narrator). Yet in a sense there is, because the hero's fear of sex is no longer shared by the liberated adult. But then again there is not, because Gide is not free of guilt about his liberation: it hurts his wife. Apart from this, Gide wishes to publicly confess his homosexuality, yet proclaim that it is not to be condemned - while at the same time persuading his reader that his sexual preference is not the only thing, or the most important thing, about him.

It is hardly surprising that *Si le grain ne meurt* is a highly complex work. Gide's readers are used to his simple novels (what he called *récits*, narratives) concentrating on one problem: the hero of one is a pederast by inclination but doesn't know it; the heroine of another is afraid of sex and so persuades the young man who loves her that he doesn't. The only novel Gide wrote and classified as one, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs (The Counterfeiters* or *The Coiners)*, is complex for a different reason, namely the multiplicity of characters and events, but each character is simple enough.

To handle his own story, on the other hand, Gide had to simplify the sequence of events while carrying forward simultaneously all the complexity of his hero's (and his own) character. As an example of how he simplifies the story line, we may mention that he portrays his father as kindly and indulgent, while his mother is always seen as strict and unyielding, the person responsible for the puritan in Gide. In his personal mythology, indeed, she seems to represent his superego, but the fact remains that his parents were more complex than that. Or again, Europe is the scene of his frustration and North Africa is that of his liberation, and therefore once he begins to speak of the latter, no detail is allowed to obtrude. This means, on one level, omission of whole blocks of experience, notably a three-month stay in Germany, of which he says not a word. On another level, it means changing small but significant details. Thus he tells us that when he went to North Africa, for the first time in his life he left his Bible at home. He doesn't add that he quickly wrote to his mother asking her to send it to him.

The simultaneous presence of opposite tendencies in Gide - pederasty and love for his wife, puritanism and the need for pleasure - is the continuous theme of *Si le grain ne meurt*. Lejeune has shown how this coexistence of contradictions in him is kept visible for the attentive and reflective reader in a whole series of key passages, which also comment on the significance of certain events in Gide's childhood and adolescence, foreshadowing the conclusion of the book, and relate the inner conflict of the hero to that of the narrator. Let us take one short passage which Lejeune has explicated[5], which is not too complex and illustrates some of these complications. It follows the description of the euphoric state Gide was in all one summer during his teens, having just been confirmed, being emotionally in love with his cousin, and for both reasons feeling filled with purity:

> What should I add? Oh, I would like to extenuate the ardour of that radiant memory! That is the deception of narrations of this kind: the most futile and vain events constantly take over, because they can be told. Alas, what can I tell here?... Oh heart too full of light! Oh heart uncaring about the shadows cast by that light, on the other side of my flesh. Perhaps, in imitation of the divine, my love for my cousin tolerated absence too easily. The most distinctive features of a character are formed and become pronounced before one is aware of them. But how could I have already understood the meaning of what was taking shape in me?

At first, in this passage, there is no sign that the narrator is distancing himself from his childhood naïvety. Gide expresses frustration at something else instead, namely that words cannot convey states such as he is trying to describe. Yet from the first line the attentive reader picks up false notes. "Extenuate" may mean "exhaust", a curious attitude, since one would expect the young Gide to want the state to last. Or he may mean "attenuate"; *extènuer* has that meaning in 17th-century French. The word "deception" seems to qualify the happiness as well as the imperfections of autobiography. *Encombré*, "cluttered", which I have rendered as "too full", contains *ombre*, "shadow"; and so we are led to the next idea, namely that light (happiness) casts shadow (ignorance of his sensuality). His belief that he is "saved" is an illusion. (Later on Gide will locate happiness in satisfaction of the senses, and the ignored darkness will be the hurt which this hedonism causes to loved ones.)

Then he says that his concern with purity hid for him the possible implications of not being physically attracted to his cousin. In self-defence against the charge of failure to know himself, he pleads that character is formed when one is too young to be self-aware. A whole future drama is hinted at here, since even when Gide wrote *Si le grain ne meurt* he had not resolved his guilt feelings at the suffering which his homosexuality, his inability to feel love and desire for the same person, had imposed on his wife. Thus the

reader has been led unawares, in the one paragraph, from religion to sensuality, and the meanings of light and dark, good and evil, have been reversed. Or more correctly, he has been made to accept that good and evil may be seen in either term of the opposed pairs; for Gide could not (or did not wish to) repress the "contraries" in him, to use Blake's term, and wished the reader to accept him as the apparently self-contradictory puritanical hedonist that he was.

I have said enough, I think, to show that this specimen of autobiography is carefully constructed, both in general plot and in the details of its writing. It seems, indeed, that one cannot narrate reality in such a way as to find its true meaning, without using the techniques of fiction, and to that extent letting fiction - i.e. something other than the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth - into one's narrative. This is the "fiction of reality" of my title. I turn now to the "reality of fiction", and thus take up the genre I did not list in Lejeune's classification of autobiographical genres by distinctive features.

In theory the distinction between the autobiographical novel and the autobiography proper is that the latter basically, or predominantly, gives us the facts, while the autobiographical novelist basically, or predominantly, invents a story based on those facts. Yet these adverbs are weasel words. The frontier is in fact undefined, and it is hard to establish on which side of the line on the map certain localities are in fact situated. What I want to do now is to try to establish the location of a novel by Herman Teirlinck called *Zelfportret, of het galgemaal.*[6]

I should first of all recall the salient facts of Teirlinck's full life, which lasted from 1879 to 1967. Described as one of the giants of contemporary Netherlandic literature and as the grand old man of the inter-war literary scene, he was at various times, in addition to writing, a furniture manufacturer, a civil servant, a journalist, an art teacher, Director of the national Institute of Decorative Arts in Brussels, and tutor and advisor to Leopold III. He left us poetry, short stories and essays, as well as a number of experimental plays; in many cases he also produced the latter, notably for the Vlaamsch Toneel, which he brought on a triumphant visit to Paris in 1927. His playwriting period extends from the 1920's to 1940, and thus represents a pause in his production of thirteen novels, of which *Zelfportret* is the last, the conclusion and culmination of his total work.

The central character of *Zelfportret* is a Brussels banker named Henri M. His personality is repulsive: he is not only vain, selfish and sadistic, but also weak and indecisive. The effects of this weakness are twofold. Firstly, he is not strong enough to kill his conscience, so he has to argue with it till he can quiet it, or more accurately win a postponement of proper examination of it to some indefinite future. This seems a working definition of hypocrisy. He

is not evil, says the novel, just false (p.23). Secondly, he has neither will nor courage, despite his copious declarations to the contrary, and therefore never acts decisively till he has no choice; for example, he drifts into love affairs and then has to break them off cruelly. However, one result of his second weakness is that this user of women is also used. He is put into the presidency of the bank, where his work is done for him; to this end he finds he has to make an honest woman of his predecessor's widow; and thereafter his servants and his brother-in-law manage to frustrate his attempted love affairs. He is close on seventy before he suddenly realises these things, at the same time as he realises that physical old age, mortality, is taking hold of him. The combination of sexual attractiveness and social graces, which he thought had brought him successfully through life, have in fact not been enough.

It will be apparent that Teirlinck has not drawn the main biographical framework of this novel from his own life. He was never a banker, and we may doubt if the other colourful events in the life of the main character - affairs, friends betrayed, a wife crippled and disfigured in the crash of a Jaguar sports car which also killed their son - are taken from his life, or anybody's life. That is not the class of autobiographical fact which we find in this novel.

With what, then, has Teirlinck given us what he announces in his title, namely a self-portrait? He has given us an answer, a means to appreciate his book, in a prefatory or more correctly dedicatory note addressed to Willem Pee:

> Under the deliberately disguised reality is the harsh implacable truth, just veiled enough to hide the penitent's shame...
>
> Under the safe mask one gropes one's way shamefacedly toward the depths, as, in the darkness of cunning, one is tempted to utter confessions.
>
> Thus the author fearlessly defends the truth of his self-criticism. It is trustworthy so far as a human being is capable of judging himself wisely and objectively. (p.7-8)

I take this to mean that Teirlinck, at seventy, has examined his conscience and admits to having all the weaknesses and selfishnesses in his soul that flesh is heir to, all the cowardly hypocrisies, all the creatures in our crawlspace (for a crawlspace under a house is what Dostoyevsky's title speaks of, though it is mistranslated as "underground"). Or more correctly, no doubt, he has pursued a lifelong self-examination and makes it the whole subject of his last work.

Zelfportret is an interesting kind of autobiographical novel because of its technique. For one thing, the title leads us to expect a first-person narrative. Instead, the text begins "You are lying there, Henri, as if on a stretcher." Who is using this "you" (it is the formal one)? There are works in which the character observes himself, even scolds himself, in the second person, but Henri seems incapable of anything so subtle as a false examination of conscience designed to avoid a real one. Besides, the narrator occasionally says "I", and if he were Henri, the character would be bordering on the schizophrenic. Imagine saying the following passage to oneself:

> I won't stone you, though you fully deserve it in the eyes of the average citizen (but could one find a citizen with a better moral balance?) I want to do my best to understand you, which is far more humane than condemning or condoning you. (p.27)

Other first-person voices speak: a woman he seduced when he was in his teens, a betrayed friend, a cast-off mistress. It is true that Henri remembers the incidents in question, in flashbacks, but not their words, for he cannot know the victims' viewpoints. (Indeed, in the case of the mistress, he never read the letters quoted.) Rather the other characters are witnesses called by the narrator to testify at this trial. But two of the witnesses cannot condemn Henri for what he did to them, blaming themselves at least as much as him; and the third condemns him only after the event. Only the narrator-I condemns Henri as he acts. At bottom it is the narrator who judges. His tone is bleak and terse, a statement of absolutes, whereas even the now clearsighted mistress's remarks are blunted by being presented as one person's analysis.

A second feature is related to the first: hardly a page goes by without a judgmental statement, condemning one or another aspect of Henri's personality, revealing the base motives for some act. One typical example will do:

> You are not a complete and utter liar. At bottom you are merciful and sensitive, with even a tendency to self-sacrifice. The fraud begins as soon as you have to act. (p.48)

In an autobiography so much sheer analysis would take the text close to another genre, namely the character sketch, while so much condemnation would be very strange and perhaps embarrassing in the first person, even in a highly confessional work. Rousseau's confessions are not a self-condemnation. Gide's self-criticism is given sparingly and, as we have seen, is inextricably bound up with self-justification, in a demonstration of his complexity. The contrast between Gide's discourse and that of the narrator of *Zelfportret* is striking, as our quotations from both texts show well enough.

None the less, Teirlinck's novel, while conservative in its technique as novels go today, is less conservative in technique than Gide's or anyone else's autobiography that I know of: different voices speak. Now, if it is possible to quote other voices in memoirs (politicians quote confidential cabinet minutes, for example), then it should be possible to do so in autobiography proper without breaking the mould of that genre. I could even imagine an autobiographer adopting a second-person narrative, whether for the purpose of more freely condemning his shortcomings, or for some other reason.

Conversely, however, it may be that autobiography can offer something to the novel. Teirlinck's work, no doubt, has no need of such a complex distancing as Gide uses; after all, Henri M. is a hypocrite with no redeeming feature save his conscience, and that is hardly an opponent of his will. But Gide himself used a similar kind of ambiguous narration in his *récits*, and it would no doubt be possible to juggle different and even contradictory statements simultaneously in a novel, as Gide has done in *Si le grain ne meurt*, without losing the readers. They are well used to unravelling hints and elliptical statements by now.

The opportunity thus exists, it seems to me, for fruitful interchange of technique between the two related genres of the autobiographical novel and autobiography proper.

NOTES

[1]Philippe Lejeune: *L'Autobiographie en France*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1971, p.14. All translations from the French in this paper are mine.

[2]*Ibid.*, p.19-20.

[3]C. D. E. Tolton: *André Gide and the art of autobiography*, Toronto: Macmillan Company of Canada, 1975, p.43.

[4]Lejeune, p.73-80.

[5]Philippe Lejeune: *Exercices d'ambiguïté, lectures de "Si le grain ne meurt" d'André Gide*, Paris: Lettres modernes, p.40-60. The Gide passage commented on is at p.500-1 in Gide's *Journal 1939-1949, Souvenirs*, Paris: Gallimard (Editions de la Pléiade), 1954. *Si le grain ne meurt* was written in 1919-20 and first published in complete form in a commercial edition in 1926.

[6]Herman Teirlinck: *Zelfportret of het galgemaal*, Brussels: Editions Manteau, 1955. I have seen only the translation by Germain Paulan (*Autoportrait, ou le dernier repas*), Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1971. My citations and translations are therefore from this French version.