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## SCHOLARSHIP AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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**T**ALKING about one's self is always bad form, and both scholars and gentlemen normally avoid it. But my topic leads me to make some autobiographical remarks, and I hope that any vanity they might seem to imply may be forgiven for the sake of my argument about the nature of scholarship.

Thirty-three years ago, when I was twenty years old, I had the most illuminating single experience of my life. It occurred on a pine-covered hill in the French province of Alsace, near the German border. The date was October, 1944. The American Army, in which I was a callow lieutenant of Infantry trained at Fort Benning, had been fighting on the Continent all summer. My Infantry Company was entering the line—we still gave it that 1916 name a war later—for the first time, replacing a unit exhausted after fighting for weeks up the Rhone Valley from Southern France. We were to relieve this unit at night, in the standard way of such reliefs. And in the standard way of such reliefs, my company was cleverly and severely shelled while making the relief. When the shelling finally stopped—this was at midnight—we realized that, although very near the place we should be, we were, until daylight, hopelessly lost. The order came down to stop where we were and to lie down among the trees and get some sleep. We would finish the relief at very first light. Scattered over an area of several hundred yards, the two hundred and fifty of us lay down where we were in a darkness so thick we could see nothing at all. Despite the anxiety created by our

first shelling, we slept soundly. I woke with the dawn, and what I saw all around me then were numerous things that miraculously I'd not tripped over in the darkness. The things, now revealed for the first time by the light in the pine woods, were scores of dead German boys in greenish-gray uniforms. They had been killed a day or two before by the company we were relieving. If darkness had hidden them from all of us, dawn disclosed them with white faces like marble, still clutching their machine-pistols and rifles in their seventeen-year-old hands, fixed forever in the positions in which they fell. Michelangelo could have made something beautiful of these rigid, white-faced forms, and they were beautiful, in a way. But I made something different out of the scene. At that moment my adolescent illusions fell away. From that moment I perceived that much of what most accurately characterizes the twentieth century is too awful ever to be spoken about. I saw that our most important experiences never get registered. I saw that it is only the busyness of the life we contrive for ourselves that protects us from being haunted. From that moment of first light in the pine woods, I knew that someday I would have to tell people about that scene in some way. It was a scene less apocalyptic than wrenchingly pathetic, and it was shabbily ironic as well: it sorted so ill with modern popular assumptions about our improvements in public health, social welfare, and social justice. To turn guiltless boys into cold marble seemed at the time to do them an interesting injustice, and the conviction that something was wrong somewhere grew on me. The war finally ended, I returned to the United States, finished college, went on to graduate school, studied English Literature, and entered upon a regular career of university teaching and scholarship.

That word *scholarship* has an imposing sound to most people, who tend to think of a *scholar* as a person totally engaged in ascertaining objective truth, repressing the needs of his individual personality to arrive at knowledge which can be impersonally known and judged. And this popular conception of what a scholar does has a lot of truth to it—no real scholar tells lies, falsifies his evidence, indulges in sophistry, or locks into letterpress a version of The Thing That Is Not.

*Research* is a word even more impressive and forbidding than *scholarship*. It connotes the objective, impersonal discipline of the laboratory. Just speak the word *research* and you can't help seeing the white lab coat, the Bunsen burner dimly illuminating the periodic

table of the elements on the wall—all suggesting the fine logic of the syllogism and the mathematical formula, all implying that knowledge is the fruit of data systematically and dispassionately collected.

For it is a claim of scholarship that it works largely by the empirical method—that is, it is said to gather data and withhold interpretation until the data are all accumulated. But in actual practice, scholarship seldom works that way: that is the method by which it validates itself to outsiders. The Columbia University sociologist Robert Nisbet has suggested what scholarship is by defining every act of scholarship as “A rape, followed by a seduction.” He means, of course, that the scholar often seizes the meaning first, and seizes it in a sudden, irrational, disorderly, and even violent way. Only when the scholar senses the point of his research does he begin to search for his data. The accumulated data may shape the interpretation, but I think Nisbet is right in pointing to the dominance in so-called scholarly activity of the initial perception and in suggesting its essential violence and, if you will, lawlessness.

Thus to a degree all works of scholarship, certainly in the humanities and social sciences, are like acts of autobiography. I think of certain landmarks like F. O. Matthiessen’s great book *American Renaissance* (1941), a study of classic nineteenth-century American writers which is actually a moving personal registration of the author’s own faith in American liberalism in a world then at desperate war. I think of Northrop Frye’s great critical study of William Blake, *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), ostensibly about an English poet but actually the record of Frye’s own quest for some unifying intellectual and emotional structure which might hold in coherence the fragmented elements of modern perception. Even Thorstein Veblen’s *The Higher Learning in America* (1916), a classic sociological study of the governance of American universities, is the emanation of Veblen’s spectacular personal quarrel with President William Rainey Harper of the University of Chicago. In a similar way, scholarly biographies constitute implicit acts of autobiography: the scholar chooses a subject with whom his personality can be content, or in whom his personality can become fulfilled. It is the same even with scholars who make editions of older writers: very different kinds of people choose to edit the solid and pious Samuel Johnson from those who choose to edit the extravagant William Blake.

I know that my own scholarly work has had distinct autobiographical meaning. Before *The Great War and Modern Memory*,

my books on both traditional poetic theory and the conservative tradition in the literature of the English eighteenth century were expressions of my uneasiness verging on dismay at being set down in a modern world without theological, metaphysical, or even empirical principles of stability and thus without apparent sources for ethical imperatives. But if my earlier scholarly books and essays have been disguised autobiographical effusions, *The Great War and Modern Memory* is the most autobiographical of all, as you will gather from my image of the marble-faced boys and all it implies.

That image and that moment of illumination tugged at me for thirty years while I taught and prepared my classes and did my research—and kept silent about the most important thing I had to say. Hearing in 1968 of the vast archive of First World War diaries, letters, and memoirs collected by the Imperial War Museum in London, I began to perceive that perhaps I could use this documentary material about one war to register my psychological experience of another, to deploy it so that it could disclose what I knew in my bones but had neither desire nor ability to speak about openly. With this hope, I spent the summer of 1971 in London turning over this vast and touching archive, and as I did so I realized that a traumatic loss of innocence by a young American in the Second World War was a replay of the same experience over fifty years before. In short, I realized that this material would do to make my point. I was now well into the “seduction” stage of the research, filling in the necessary details of political, military, and social history I’d need to provide a context for my interpretation of the memoirs and personal documents.

But now I felt I should get to know the very earth where all this took place, so I toured the battlefields of the Somme, where in the sunset I saw the zig-zags of the old trenches hinted on the surface of the hills. I climbed down into the old mine-craters, and through the Somme mud one day and in a pouring Somme rain, I climbed as my great war men had done to the top of the sinister Butte of Warlencourt. I rambled through scrubby woods and picked up from the bottom of old trenches bits of barbed wire, pieces of Machonochie and bully-beef tins, and rounds of corroded small-arms ammunition. While I was either reading or note-taking or visiting military cemeteries or clambering about over the silent battlefields in France, I knew that I was hurling myself so single-mindedly into this project that I might never get out. Obsession began to threaten, and as I

tried to live deep in my imagination the trench experience of 1916, my strange marble boys of 1944 were always in my mind. I sometimes ended a day's work trembling with excitement and terror, and sometimes depression drove me from my notes and sent me on long walks. When it came to writing the book, I was aware that I was doing four things at once. I was interpreting the trench experience of 1914-1918; I was considering its reflection in acts of poetry and prose, both then and later; I was coming to grips with the marble boys of 1944; and finally, I was saying something about my own experience that I could say in no other way.

Now, in relation to the last point, the question naturally arises, why don't scholars simply write their autobiographies, and have done with it? The answer I'd propose is that like artists, they remain faithful to the medium they love. Just as the painter's medium is line and color and the poet's metaphor and cadence, the scholar's medium is objective data, verifiable facts, the feel for history, and dialectic of social and moral cause and effect, and the logic of argument and prose organization. But like the painter or the poet, the scholar refracts his personal vision by passing it through this medium. And in passing it through, he detaches that vision from him, objectifies it, transmits it to others, and, if he is lucky, purges himself of it. When he has done that, he is ready for a new perception, a new obsession, and a new book.