

HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
INTERNATIONAL OFFICE

Director

DAVID D. HENRY

Assistant to Director

MRS. ALICE B. HALL

7th Floor  
75 Mt. Auburn St.  
Cambridge 38, Massachusetts

April 2, 1965

Mr. Jerome Peignot  
Rue de Grenelle 38  
Paris, France

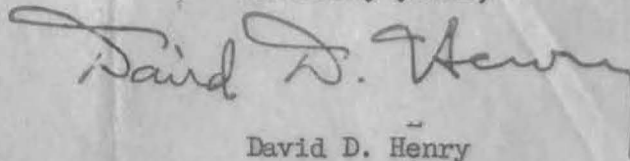
Dear Mr. Peignot,

We have learned that you will shortly be joining the University community here at Harvard, and we look forward to seeing you.

To enable you to apply for an Exchange Visitor visa now, we are enclosing a Certificate of Eligibility. Before handing this form to the appropriate United States consular or embassy official in your country, you should complete items 3, 4, and 5 on the front of the form, and the items on the back. Please read carefully the regulations concerning this type of visa described in item 7.

As soon as possible after your arrival at Harvard please be sure to report to this office with your passport, and the entry permit issued to you by the Immigration officer at your port of entry. We will then be able to complete the necessary formalities required by the United States Department of State, and give you information and assistance which we hope will make your stay here enjoyable.

Sincerely yours,



David D. Henry

c/ Henry A. Kissinger, Executive Director, International Seminar, 6 Divinity Avenue.

## Essay on the Phenomenon of Character

With respect to certain great autobiographical writers --

Tell me who you read and I will tell you who you are. Asked one day by the Revue Tel Quel about criticism, I jumped at the chance which was offered to me to speak of something which I had been thinking about for a long time: "I could never be a literary critic, because I am incapable of judging books that are foreign to me, of even reading a book simply because it was just published." Reading comes from the heart. One has, or not, a date with a certain book -- suddenly, in the street, it strikes you at the moment when you least expect it: "What! Haven't you read Tacite, Retz, or Saint-Simon?" so there and then one must read Tacite, Retz, or Saint-Simon. Already reading has begun to be a delight. To a great extent the talent of a reader is like the one of the writer himself: it consists in accepting fate, accepting oneself. So, ~~in~~repentant reader, I'm proud of never having read a bad book. How could I have? Not having been destined to meet up with it, I haven't even had the temptation to open it. How do I know books before having opened them? In my fingers, the texture of a cover is enough for me, sometimes even less: a certain idea based on nothing and nevertheless imperious. Moreover, there is a slow, very slow, movement inside of us. We have to learn to follow its meanders, turnings, and often its evanescence. That is why I had to await the canonical age of 38 to begin to read Montaigne. I don't regret it. I have every reason to think that if I forced myself before time I would not have enjoyed my reading of him as much as I have done. I haven't yet, and far from it, read all of Dostoevsky. I feel no shame. I am only an encyclopedia of ignorance with blanks. Even the greatest books are only read at a given time. While this postulate seems to be nothing, it, however, makes one reconsider entirely the laws that regulate the teaching of literature. Actually there's no way of teaching literature because everyone of us has his own rhythm. Barely teaching can awaken us to this unpunished vice of reading.

Thus, what one undergoes in reading is very much the same in writing. Undergoing it comes to the same as saving, that to open one book more than another is a way of revealing oneself, of manifesting a truth within and which is expressed through the channel of certain pens better than others. Even before we open them, the books we shall read are ourselves.

I have mentioned Montaigne, Retz, and Saint-Simon. Before going further, I must mention that the thickness of the work with which we have a rendezvous should not be an argument for postponing our "conversation." Everything persuades me to think the contrary. True reader, one hates to dally over trifles. Only the good, meaty morsels you can sink your teeth into tempt you. To read is to gorge oneself with reading; otherwise, you're not reading. Children and adolescents know this. They read with the acrid odor of the carpet in their throats, crouched on the floor, giving no thought to the aches, pins and needles they get that way. Speaking about aches and pains later one cannot read without taking instinctively a pen to express all one's feelings. The notes we take in reading express the overflow of our infatuation. Thus, the portraits which I have prepared from several great writer, all autobiographers or memorialists,

have helped me to rid myself of certain anxieties. In telling the story of their lives, I was able to express what in my life was threatening to suffocate me. In fact, writing about these great men was for me a way of pursuing my reading, drawing out of it all the essence, taking all the honey, making it mine.

The writers I read help me to express myself in two ways: once, through what they say, once, through what I say about them. Which is to say that each portrait I've painted has become mine only gradually.

And, each time, great was my amazement in ascertaining that I had managed to elucidate them so well, to such a depth! For example, if I identified myself with Saint-Simon, I managed to find also in my circle of acquaintances equivalents for the principal actors in the Memoirs. As for me, all through my reading my father was Louis XIV, my step-mother Madame de Maintenon, one of my step-brothers the Duke of Maine. Having entered my family through the subterfuge of a divorce, as a false prince in the republic of letters, where only the talent which he lacked should have permitted him to make a place for himself, wasn't he too doubly a bastard? Thus, living the Memoirs under the skin of the author, I've had the sense of understanding them perfectly, of discovering the motives and, on the subject of such or such an event, of providing original explanations. You have to live in the books you read, in the exaltation of reading them, making them explode, giving them wings. For this reason, even for me reading aloud is a good thing, all the more because it is an opportunity par excellence for coming still closer to the author finding ourselves transported to the very moment he is describing and we are deciphering. All good reading is, unconsciously, reading aloud. The good writers, furthermore, write as they speak. Speaking well, how could they avoid writing? To write is, always, to purr a little. Write as one speaks? But one doesn't speak as one writes? What, then? Then, the essential thing is to have a tone that lies between the way one speaks and the way one should to write. Personally, I am a man of the past. For me, the present doesn't exist, in literary material still less than elsewhere; one could not describe it if it were not already of the past.

Thus, being a man of the past, I am forced to assume the consequences, of which the first, which sums them all, is the inescapable use of the subjunctive, of the imperfect tense of the subjunctive, the pet aversion par excellence of good-hearted writers. There is no verbal tense which removes you further from your interlocutors and puts a strain on you, like this one. And yet, using a language, shouldn't it be necessary to bend to its rules, to all its rules, even when they are against your sympathies. As paradoxically as this ~~situation~~ situation may appear, it is not without issue. For once, the happy medium is not easy to find. Writing is, a battle on the frontiers of the language, an attempt to put into it ~~all~~ what wants to come out if it. Only, a tone can circumvent these apparently insurmountable difficulties. All good writing is something like a miracle. Writing is, with words, arriving to the results of music: rendering to silence it's great value. In terms of tone, one could not find a better example than Celine. He annihilates all the accepted rules to impose others of irresistible force. Every great writer creates a language parallel to the one from which it derives. Every language moves in the wake of its writers.



Thus, as you see, my readings have always provided opportunities for reinforcing my narcissism. "Read the great masters," writes Flaubert, to one of his friends; "try to capture their methods, to come close to their soul", and you will come away from your studies with fascinations which will wake you joyful. You will be like Moses descending from Sinai. He had rays around his face from having contemplated God." Reading restores confidence in oneself. Suddenly, we live within ourselves again.

Literature of that time is autobiographic or not. Sartre abandoned his Chemins de la Liberte half way through because, as he exclaims himself, he did not see the necessity of endorsing a fictive personality of 1942, when in 1965 the concepts of psychology and psychoanalysis are such that never will one be able to gather more information about somebody, and therefore describe him, better than for oneself. Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir write autobiographic literature. Writing is, with words, arriving to the results of music: rendering to silence its great value. The new novel is a form of autobiography, and everything including journalism has been affected by the spirit of the diarists. As a matter of fact in the press, we find only: "How I made the trip around the world on my hands," "How I had a baby," "How I made love," "How I didn't do it".... The authors of the new novel are autobiographic journalists. The only trouble with them is that they take themselves seriously. In fact, they are mystery writers that ignore it. Their books are admirable detective stories. Robbe Grillet's books all have a detective plot, and the way in which the author treats his subject makes one suspect a clue in the smallest cigarette-butt floating along the jetty. (I'm thinking of Voyeur.) There's no shame in being the author of detective novels. Simenon is one, and he's inspired. Still less disgrace if you succeed in reviving the glare. But, the shame consists in trying to pass oneself for what he is not. When they endeavor to analyze the reasons of the heart, often assuming the role of scenarists, the authors of the new novel founder in their sophistication. Marienbad isn't tangible. Thus, often, contemporary writers are journalists, just giving reports on themselves. Journalists they are but more reporting on their interior universe than the outside world. For them as for good journalists, the profession consists in accepting the truth as it presents itself and in giving evidence as faithfully as possible. The talent comes down to accepting themselves as they are, admitting their own ideas and concepts and propagating them. Genius is only a higher degree of humility. Curiously, what we seek and what stuns us, occurs as if we were refusing to see it as if the truth we tracked was obscene. Knowing ourselves is at the same time a source of courage and beauty. Among writer-journalists, the greatest, in my opinion, is Henry Miller. The form of literature for which he has opted, far from having isolated him, makes him an apostle. Miller is also there to carry some of our mistakes.

How can one get out of that sore spot that is to have to exist? How Miller, facing life? Three steps in life mean already two in the clouds. I was speaking a while ago of La Mise a Mort of Aragon. To say the truth, more than he gives himself to autobiography, he describes the passage of "I" to fiction, to lies, that he brings to life through the intervention of his own reflection in the mirror. After all as we are double, triple---why couldn't we be another. Another, aren't we all the time one?

I have spoken of journalism. I should have evocated first the diarists. At the beginning (I think of Journal d'un bourgeois de Paris sous Charles VI, and Samuel Pepys, and Boswell) the journal did not have the intimate character so insistent today despite the glare of publicity. Then really it was a question of describing one's life in terms of anecdotes rather than the deep motives which explain it. At that time, writers' journals were much closer to history than the works of the diarists. Conversely, today and for several decades now, the intimate journal has acquired the keys to the kingdom. In losing its intimate character or, rather, in seeking to keep it while making an appeal to the greatest number of readers, the journal has become a literary genre of the same status as the epistolary genre, which it replaces. You can develop intimacy to the point where you verge into poetry. The diarist who isn't a poet is on the way to becoming one. This is the case with Michaux who, starting with a diarist's attitude, today has succeeded in ridding himself of the prison of this chrysalis only in order to reveal his poetic genius. Between a diarist and a poet, there is finally only in this last one somewhat more severeness, as regards to the passages which need filtering. A poet is a diarist who does not intend to descend below a certain level. For him, aesthetic criteria are also ethical and moral. Often, his method differs from the diarists only because, instead of writing his journal from day to day, he keeps it, sometimes minute by minute. A poet is a man who rapes time even in its last entrenchments. Joyce understood that, when he tried in Ulysses, with all the parentheses which comprise that assault on time, to describe the thoughts of three men reunited in a room during the course of half a day. Ulysses is nothing but one gigantic parenthesis. Although all his life he was prevented from writing a book "oriented", as he said, much more toward the future than his past, with his Cahiers. Valery has, none the less, written the journal of his mind. These notebooks of Valery are the applied spontaneous concepts of the conscious mind.

For the rest, for those, I want to say, who have been willing to acknowledge that the journal is a literary genre like any other; for them, there is scarcely any hesitation: they had to write their journals with a view to publication. This is the case of Jules Renard, whose journal is not in the least intimate, except for its rambling rhythm (after all, the essential factor) with which ideas and images, he could not place elsewhere, came to mind. He codified them in his journal. Renard did not set down the date of his passages or his aphorisms, but, most often just a star. Thus we are justified in placing the aphorist's attitude between the attitude of a diarist per se like Renard and that of a poet like Michaux. This is at the same time diarist of the poet. For a diarist, the aphorism is primarily poetic, and only secondarily witty. For a writer, using his journal, the passage expressing his themes, in the crucible of his journal, can be an excellent means of reference for evaluating these themes and giving them his own dimensions. In other words, the passage placed on trial as a fragment in the journal stands for the author himself. He has to prove anew that he's right. All good writing is unconsciously an abstract from an intimate journal. In effect, all this amounts to saying that the true system of reference is sincerity. Let us recall a fragment from Poe's Marginalia. In it, he defies anybody to write a small volume under the title



"My Heart Stripped," that would realize sincerity and the title. Why, according to him, is it impossible to write such a book? He says that the greatest difficulty lies in the act of writing. No one would dare write it. No one would know how to write it, even if he dared to. The paper would shrivel and burn to nothing with the slightest contact with his flaming pen. Such a feat Baudelaire tried in a book precisely entitled "Mon coeur mis a nu." But, it's evident that this book is much too literary to claim to meet Poe's challenge. "At first," writes Marie Bashkirtseff, "I wrote for a long time without thinking that I would be read; then, it was just because I hoped to be read that I endeavored to be absolutely sincere." Then, she believed that she was sincere, but was she, truly? Psychoanalysis has shown us that often in defending ourselves we hide the truth from ourselves. Is not the analyst's function to root the truth out of us? Remember that Gide, despite his remonstrances, deceived us, omitting from the journal published regularly during his lifetime his quarrels with his wife. They were revealed only after his death.

It seems that the best way, in which the writer can escape the dilemma of telling all the world what is meant to be known only to himself, paradoxical as this may seem, consists in trying to make his intimate journal coincide with another journal, not at all intimate. The working out of the latter, as if for posthumous publication, would be an ideal way of sifting the truth. To what extent can you express your heart in a journal? With what brio Francois Mauriac has shown us! He has kept his log in "L'Express" regularly, during the last few years! Our political reactions and choices -- are they not an integral part of our private lives? Don't we reveal a part of the self in expressing our ideas concerning the political events of our times? Mauriac expressed his ideas on this subject when he wrote, "I think of journalism as a kind of journal, intimate in some degree, a transposition, for the use of the public at large, of the emotions and daily sorrows aroused in us by reality. Not everyone can be Chateaubriand or General de Gaulle, which is to say, speaking for myself, not everyone can make History with a capital "H".

Intermediate between the diarist attitude and the one of the journalistic New Style which I have been describing, I place Charles du Bos and Samuel Butler who are quite different from one another.

Some can be found who tried to fight the autobiographical current of that movement. Drawn in among these <sup>was Druon</sup> who in the giant frescoes of his Grandes Familles, tried to write La Comedie Humaine. He did not even succeed in rewriting Les Fatua. Furthermore, he did not understand Balzac himself, who despite what is usually said, is an autobiographical writer (the chef d'oeuvre inconnu proves it), who was able to raise autobiography to the level of objective writing.

Only after writing it did he think of the title of the "Comedie Humaine."

In all autobiographer's lives, a moment suddenly came when they discovered a way of writing about other people, even when writing about themselves.

In spite of whatever can be said the whole of Proust's work is autobiographical.

I consider authors who create characters to be autobiographers. Such is de Retz and especially Saint-Simon, who in introducing themselves into personalities of people they described, became entirely identified with them. By nature, writers are beings who search for themselves, discover themselves all the time yet don't even know who they are: whether they are their double or the double of their double.

Since Proust, the turning in of writers upon themselves has been on the increase. In trying to analyze this movement I have tried to find the source of this phenomenon. I could just as well have gone back to the very springs of thought since thought itself is in its essence autobiographical. I preferred to stick to expressed reality, I mean to the first text which is supposed to be autobiographical. My first intention was to look among poets. But my searches led me to the opposite side, among philosophies: to Maine de Bizau, who is at the same time the first among diarists and the greatest analyst, perhaps even the theoretician of autobiography.

Nobody should be surprised that this self-analysis has caused in autobiographers as well as philosophical students of self-consciousness a splintering of the personality. Among the philosophers this is reflected in the writing of works in the Treatise of Despair. It is quite normal that this kind of existence (being an autobiographer means to choose a kind of life still more than a determined kind of writing) which incites suicide (this happened to Leine) or leads you directly to folly (seen in the madness of Rousseau's persecution complex, the dizzy fear of living which exists despite one's obligation to go on living.)

Is there any need to make clear that this state of mind makes a balanced love life impossible. An autobiographer is somebody who observes his own love so closely that it cannot even grow. Can love be faced, anyway? Personally, I don't believe it. Further, I believe that love can only be lived in some kind of blindness or unconsciousness, and that this blurred condition is necessary for its blossom.

It is amazing that in spite of the principle which sustained it, Bizan's work did not lead the author to the abyss, nor did his conceptions lead him to a morbid pessimism. Bizan's courage stands in the distance between his work and himself. In choosing this dangerous analysis of himself, he made a decision which in itself elaborates a moral.

We are facing here not only the attitude of the diarist, but the springs of modern existentialism, it is

As a matter of fact, the study of consciousness which leads to the study of effort itself, a study which began on a Bergsonian background, started existentialism. This trend of narcissists which consists in affecting a personality of a split personality leads to some kind of a diava.

Whether they search for themselves, flee away from themselves, or live too much locked in themselves, it is a drama all the same. "Hell is other people," Sartre said. Perhaps, but hell can be oneself too. What is existentialism but narcissism driven to its logical consequences, right up to panic. Of course, sooner or later, existentialism leads to action, but for any narcissist the action becomes tragic. For him, it is impossible to lose himself in action. A narcissist is always Hamlet-like and since he must act he is torn within himself. Maine de Bizan who studied the "feeling of effort" in its metaphysical consequences understood this quite well. The "feeling of effort" of Bizan is not very far from Sartre's quotation: "We are what we did." We are no longer dealing here with a metaphysics of mores but with metaphysics of acts. I talked about pessimism, Sartre is full of it. His whole work can be explained by the trouble the author had with his heritage which he cannot assume or either get rid of. The whole work of Sartre is a variation of the theme of heritage. Les Mots is the last step of it. This book confirms this remark obviously. There is enough there to give you a bad conscience and from bad conscience to the deepest pessimism the distance is short. But his distance, fortunately, has not been covered yet by Sartre. Autobiography was the only way for existentialism.

It is no more a question of politic engagement, but of total engagement of the whole personality.



As if he followed Bizan (whose work as far as I know, he did not speak of) determined to work out a system of ethics. This for what it is worth; at least it had the great merit of saving Sartre himself from the inner disaster into which almost inevitably his metaphysics were plunging him. In Sartre's hands this code of ethics was rapidly transformed into a sociology. This in turn became the main concern of "involved" writers and philosophers. There was a time when the most vital part of Merleau-Ponty's work (and he was one of our greatest philosophers) consisted of a comparative study of the wages of American and Russian workers, bearing in mind the changing cost of living in their respective countries. It still remains to be proved that existentialism was not merely a doctrine of despair. Personally I have never believed that it was. Indeed, if I feel that in so far as it precipitated an awakening of conscience, it possesses a remarkable power of exaltation. But to accept existentialism as a moral code one has to be able to resist it. Existentialism is a variation on the theme of stoicism and before being stoical one has to be a stoic.

If the self-analysis in which he indulges is, for the author, too fraught with anguish, for those who read these introspective works it is a source, if not of actual distress (such as the Journal d'Amiel is capable of provoking), at least of very real uneasiness. This is because as he describes his own spiritual disease -- and we are never so much ourselves as in our defects and faults -- the autobiographical writer whom we are reading does but recount our own. If this were not so no one would ever have taken him to be an artist. But it is also true that, while they reveal their own natures, diarists go beyond this and in so doing present us with a conception of mankind in general. From the time when the writer knows himself, lives with himself and thus increases in stature day by day, he achieves dignity and handles transcendental values. No, there is no doubt but that existentialism is a halt on the road to despair.

It was only afterwards that I too realised there was something which linked all these writers, whom I have just been trying to describe, together. From Retz down to Miller they all talked about themselves. Just because one talks about oneself does not mean that one has less to say to others. Rather the reverse. Indeed there is in <sup>this</sup> apparently paradoxical way of conversing with one's fellowmen a miraculous ground for understanding. In fact I am beginning to wonder whether this sort of relationship is not true communion. Let us therefore try to analyse what goes on in the mind of a writer who uses himself as a guinea-pig.

Self-satisfaction can be more or less commendable. Less commendable is that which turns to vulgarity, for example, in the behaviour of boys on the beach who instead of admiring themselves exclusively, flex their muscles to impress the girls. This is an example of self-love perverted, turning outwards instead of pivoting on itself. Thus the Narcissus who exploits his narcissistic tendencies to seduce women betrays moments of weakness of doubt of failure in his self-love. There are nevertheless, narcissists who make love; Maramba showed this clearly in his admirable book on Don Juan and Don Juanism. According to him, Don Juan himself is narcissistic. To love, is, in fact, to love oneself first of all and love itself is but the confrontation of two solitudes, the one in face of the other; the exaltation of his self-love. There can be no doubt without there being, in the heart of each protagonist, an intense feeling of solitude. Kirkegaard was aware of this. His *Traite de Seduction* is in fact that of a narcissist in love with a *Coelia* in whom he admires himself. It is interesting to analyse the case of Henry Miller too, in that we find a man who is at once narcissistic and highly sexed and for whom the word 'vulgarity' has no meaning. Never has it been so interesting to analyse narcissism as in his manifestations of it which apparently deny its existence.



Never has it been so interesting to analyse narcissism as in his manifestations of it which apparently deny its existence. But in fact with his sexuality and especially his literary exploitation of it, Miller does but sharpen his narcissism and attains the level of poetry. One feels strongly that the more a man like Miller yields of himself the more he gains of himself. His women are made to participate in his self-revelry.

I have talked about literary narcissism. The love which writers have for themselves is the worst, or rather the keenest of all and their sheet of paper the most ardent of mirrors. It was Pissaro who said: "Work is a wonderful regulator of physical and mental health. I forget all sadness and bitterness, I am even unaware of their existence in the joy of working. Suffering only has a hold over the lazy." Art is a proof of health. The exaltation which it produces allows us both to be fully aware of ourselves and to come to terms with the world even when we express the most dismal pessimism. In describing the world we become reconciled with it. Here we might point out once more that the moral systems proposed by diarists and autobiographical writers are only valid for the writers themselves.

But now let us take a look at one Narcissus in action. The wait and see tactics of General de Gaulle bear a singular resemblance to a type of narcissism. Watching him in action one is quickly convinced that he is a man dazzled by the working of his own mind. One cannot reproach him for this. Not only is mental narcissism the only really valid kind, but -- since one would not have this tendency if one's mental faculties were deficient -- it is even highly commendable. De Gaulle then sees his ideas before expressing them. He knows how to maintain a certain distance between what he intends to think and what he thinks. This distance is intelligence itself. Moreover, when one has a work behind one, a literary work that is, and memoirs at that, one has every excuse in the world for pontificating. His literary output has made a king of de Gaulle, it is through his works that he shines. He makes history because he has written history. The world is the paper where he perfects his paragraphs. Did Orpheus seek to seduce Eurydice with his lyre or was he revelling in his own adored voice? In fact, how could he dream of seducing anyone with his songs if he did not delight in them himself in the first place. Orpheus is merely another face of Narcissus. However, the majority of writers have found that writing affords them the best solution. But it often happens that this subterfuge that they have adopted tends to confound them rather than save them. In that case the mirror in which they admire themselves becomes a veritable furnace where they burn themselves and are consumed. For then, since their work keeps their faults constantly in front of them, the act of writing only aggravates their shame and suffering. Offered as sacrifices they are seeking truth -- they are quietly destroyed. Narcissism has its heroes and martyrs. "If we are to write about ourselves," said Leiris, "it is better not to cheat. I mean, rather than depicting ourselves through our stories, talk about what is most individual in us. Paradoxically, the more one is oneself the greater chance one has of reaching universal truths." By using oneself as a guinea-pig there does in fact come a point when one is forced to overflow on to others. Of course, the egoism of the writer is a love which embraces the whole of mankind. Kirkegaard put this forcefully when he said: "Deep within myself we are other people."

There are writers who have succeeded in using and neutralizing the more harmful sequels to their love for themselves, which would have inevitably compromised the life of those who exploited it. They have cooled it and drowned it either in Philosophy with a capital 'P'-for example, Maine de Biran, or in literature with a capital 'L' as did Joyce. Biran literally coddled himself in his philosophy. (We have to wait for Marx and Marxists before philosophy is not based on an aesthetic and the philosopher not an artist of thought and even then, there are those I am sure who find poetry in "Das Kapital."). Blinded by the myths to which they have successfully given birth, these men eventually forget that they themselves are the pitiful guinea-pigs which allowed them to elaborate their mythology.

Good or bad narcissism, doubtless, but it is a difficult thing to judge. Are we not always, in these matters, faced with a question of temperament? Does not each man love himself in his own fashion? For example, one is not necessarily obliged to blame Rousseau on the pretext that the great attention he paid himself encouraged him in his journalistic tendencies. Doubtless the excessive use he made of his Christian name -- typical of one in love with himself -- puts him in the category of the sentimentalist. But was he even capable of another kind of love? In fact, and all the more so, since Rousseau was after all a writer, and therefore elevated himself, it would be a mistake to criticise too hastily the love he bears himself.

One of the typical characteristics of diarists, writers of memoirs and autobiographers is the mania they have of projecting their own sensibility in front of them, of hurling it at the reader's head only to use it later as a source of protection. There can be no doubt that in doing this they have, more or less, some hidden desire to hurt themselves and consequently to achieve an even sharper awareness of their own existence. Just as much as Rousseau, Retz, Saint-Simon and Voltaire often behave like women. There is nothing to prove that in delighting in his own intelligence Voltaire gives free rein to the highest form of his narcissism. For him one could say that intelligence cannot not spring from narcissism. He too readily confuses awareness of self and intelligence. He makes a neat turn and that's it. When one loves oneself it really is being satisfied with a little. This is very evident in the memoirs of Cardinal de Retz which in a striking way are an apology for and an excellent illustration of both intelligence and, if not of malice, at least of aggressiveness.

With the help of his cassock and even more of his cape ( what a trump card for narcissist to be able to say that he is a bishop-- Julien Sorel had realised this-- or even a cardinal) Retz defined his attitudes to the point where he could only have loved himself in rancour and wrath. Malice is a preserver like vinegar of gherkins. It is true that anger can enhance and men who love themselves rightly treat it as a furnace in which to kindle the love they bear themselves. Wickedness puts into relief and sharpens profiles, makes them clear cut like those of a medallion. Because he loved himself Constant wanted to be wicked. Unfortunately for his love he did not manage it. He did not succeed because above all his narcissism constantly brought him back to the point of doubting himself. He cannot not play, no longer knows where he is or whether he is himself or his double. Thus it is that, because from a distance, it seems the most flattering guise for him to adopt, wickedness appealed to him. He makes it his choice and delights in it. But this did not express his fundamental nature which was basically a changing one. When he describes his changing moods Benjamin is really describing himself. And moreover he could never be really wicked because for that, like Jean-Jacques, his Christian name hindered him.



Therefore, "noblesse oblige." I can find no example of a style of living and a style itself not being one and the same thing. How can one construct solid phrases if, at the same time, one is incapable of looking at oneself for more than five minutes in a mirror? There is a danger for some writers to allow themselves to be carried away by their honour. The latter is an integral part of the words they trace.

There is no doubt that the fact that autobiographical literature has taken first place coincides with a new burst of individualism. Nor is there any doubt that this individualism is the prerogative of the Western world and in Europe, of France especially. However, it would be a mistake to criticize these men who, as we have just seen, although amongst the greatest of their time, were nevertheless in a certain way, somewhat unbalanced. Work is perhaps a sign of health; but it must also be said that one has to work to acquire this health and when one writes it is because in some way or another something is wrong. Writing is in itself so difficult an act that it cannot not be anti-natural. Authors who do not play upon the difficulty they have in expressing themselves precisely in order to overcome this difficulty are rare. On the other hand one must retain the possibility of having difficulty in writing. If it were to become a second nature it would no longer be worth trying to do it. Thus one feels a certain regret that Simone de Beauvoir should no longer experience the same difficulty in writing which she mentioned in "La Force de l'Age." Despite the fact that he writes a lot one has the impression that Sartre does still come across these difficulties. Doubtless there has to be a struggle, and we must not be beaten, but neither should we win too easily. It is obvious here that we are faced with an almost insoluble problem. To be convinced of this one has only to read the intimate diaries of great writers who, like Gide for example right to his death, complain that they do not know how to write or to look at their manuscripts full of crossings-out.

The Memoirs of General de Gaulle are a real battlefield. And why, in a part of the world where liberty is so highly praised should one so often be astonished that people do not blame it for the proliferation of autobiographical writing? Are they not one of the most natural aspects in the light of which individualism is manifest? Is not an autobiographical story the most excellent proof of liberty? In fact the majority of criticism levelled at autobiographical writers is based on moral terms. They are accused of not being creative, of merely registering a characteristic lack of shame. Apart from the fact that I do not see why talking about oneself should not give rise to art, I must also point out that what is seen to be a lack of shame by those who do not write is considered an act of courage by others. Finally as an autobiographer myself, time and again I have had occasion to remark that the only difference between myself and others was that I confessed to being preoccupied with myself; those about me were, too, but without saying so.

Whether he be from East or from the West, Russian or American, the procedure of a writer is, however we look at it, that of a man alone who, because he thinks deeply, cannot do otherwise than see himself as source of reflexion. The finest of Dostoevsky's novels is indubitably "The Idiot"; Tolstoi's "The Death of Ivan Ilitch." More or less transposed, in both cases, the development is autobiographical. The danger for the writer -- and it is a real one -- lies in not being able to live his life without at the same time imagining the literary substance he could draw from what he is in the act of experiencing. This was the stumbling block of Sollers

in "Park." Young contemporary literature in France suffers from this malady. If I use the word malady it is not for literary reasons, for many writers are successful (I am thinking particularly of works inspired by Paludes, Gide's best book, also The Traitor by Gortz) but because many writers have difficulty in not succumbing to this double life, lived and literary. Far from being therapeutic this self-analysis tends to endanger the psychological balance of those who indulge in it. If they do become ill their psychiatrist's task is all the more difficult because he has to deal with men who already psychoanalyze themselves professionally all the time. I said young literature. In fact the younger one is, in France, the greater the tendency to write one's Memoirs. Retz, Saint-Simon, de Gaulle only began theirs after forty. There is no miracle about this. I mean it is also true that if, often, the autobiographical writings of these old men are their best works (many thought this of Panese with his Metier de Vivre) the autobiographical texts of our youngsters are not perhaps the best of their writings. And yet, one is never so close to truth as at their age. Nor would failure in their case necessarily imply a fault in the construction of their books. In fact autobiographical works should respond to an instinctive logic rather than to a built-in one. After a few whiskies they are ready to be transmitted like a radio program rather than having been constructed. Indeed the mistake made by a large number of young writers is to try to apply the laws of the construction of the novel to writings which have nothing in common with the novel. In this they are abetted by their publishers who, for want of a new expression to define these writings, persist in wanting to see the word "novel" on the covers of their books. It is perhaps also because the publishers think -- and their young writers with them -- that this word alone goes half way to linking their works to the novel tradition. And why this obsession with the novel! AS if the novel form were a universal panacea, the ideal system of reference to which one must necessarily pay tribute. Doubtless there are those who have managed to raise their autobiographical writings to the level of the novel, (Berg for example in his admirable Sylvia and his more recent Rachel ), but Berg is an old man and this fact cannot be held to be indispensable to the elaboration of a work of art.

It is not surprising that love should be the central theme of these books whether they be romance or not. Nothing leads to reflection more than love, especially if it is unsuccessful. Failure in love is an excellent breeding ground for the stirrings of awareness.

It was Moliere who said "I would talk to you of love if I knew what it was to love." Love is the weak point in our armour through which passes literature. As Jean Cocteau said: "The thing people most reproach you with is yourself. Don't listen to them. Learn to sing your own genealogical tree." Without love this song is not possible. And who better than a young man to sing it?

This habit of sticking close to reality and truth, narrowly dependent on time itself and the actual moment as it is lived -- such is the significant trend which is establishing the basis of contemporary literature. Time has already taken its place in mathematics with Einstein and it led to the space graph; in philosophy it gave rise to the notion of "deviation" as a philosophical postulate. Time is now penetrating the field of literature where it is beginning to make volatile all hitherto accepted data and to shatter the novel to smithereens. In the form of the past, time was already present in A La Recherche du Temps Perdu.



Now, it appears more obviously. The present is, for instance, the real hero of the Modification, the outstanding book of Butor. The importance of time is increasing in literature. It is making literature more and more human.

At this level of my reasoning, mathematics, philosophy and literature join together. Though unable to solve any equation of the second degree, I nevertheless enjoyed Einstein's wonderful book, The World As I See It. A writer is the opposite of a philosopher. A writer is someone who writes because he has nothing else to say except exactly what he is actually saying. How many persons cannot write just because they have too many ideas. Each idea raises the next idea which prevents the first one to be used.

Once, a little time before his death, I was lucky enough to meet Paul Valery and to show him some of my first pieces of writing. He gave them back after one month saying, "You will succeed, because you have not much to say." On the spot, I was very sorry. Ten years later, I found the same idea in the Cahiers of Paul Valery. "A writer," he says, "is a man who is attached to what he says, because he has nothing else to say." Einstein was more precise when he said, "You know, ideas are very scarce." The poetry made by philosophers is scarcely good. On the contrary, they care for high mathematics. This is what happened to Valery who was quite interested in neurology and in the knowledge of brains in general, where psychoanalysis is opposed to neurology.

But, everybody is not capable of maintaining the distinction between the processes of his own thought and reality. The autobiographical works of Leiris which made of him an ethnologist more than a writer, led him to suicide. It is true that he is not the only writer who committed suicide; Drieu la Rochelle, Pavese, others succeeded in killing themselves when Leiris did not. This attitude led them all to a pessimism which concerns writers only.

So far as I am concerned, it seems to me that an autobiographical writer can find his own protection in his own writing. By this I mean that art itself is salvation.

Personally I write something about myself only when I have discovered the style for it. That way there is a middle between me and what I express, and this riddle is my very own idea of what writing is, that is to say poetry, because one way or another, everything which is written should be poetry. For me this riddle is style: as everybody knows the style is the man. One should live in order to write and not write in order to live.

The style, the most important problem of French writers, even when they don't want to, freezes the confidence of diarists. But as you don't walk in the street in pyjamas, in a diary (and we have just seen that it has become a literary genre like any other) we cannot write a text in a bad style. Style is a question of education.

The style is an art of living. It influences the general behavior. Writing is in itself a sort of education. By the mean of style the diary of a writer is for himself just as for the future readers, a treatise of ethics. Anyway, most diarists are also moralists.