



Popular Autobiography in Early Modern Europe: many questions, a few answers¹

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Abstract: This article deals with diverse aspects of what may be called a “second autobiographical revolution” –the rise of autobiography to the status of most favored source among historians. This new situation of privilege is due in large measure to the tendency to attribute to these sources the all too little discussed condition of “witness”. Following some remarks on the work of Marc Bloch, a historian who devoted distinctive attention to the question of witness, it examines the specific case of artisans who wrote autobiographical texts during the early modern era. To that end it summarizes several strategies for the study of these documents, particularly those contextual approaches aimed at reconstructing the wide range of motivations of artisan autobiographers.

Key words: autobiography; popular autobiography; witness; historiography; source; individual; ego-document; context; artisan; intentionality; Marc Bloch; Miquel Parets; Icarus; Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Resumen: Este estudio trata diversos aspectos de lo que se podría llamar una “segunda revolución autobiográfica”, es decir, el aumento en popularidad de las autobiografías y otros documentos personales como fuentes para el análisis histórico. Esta nueva situación de privilegio se debe en gran medida a la tendencia a atribuir a estas fuentes la condición de “testimonio”, concepto que todavía no ha sido objeto de revisión crítica. Después de algunos comentarios sobre la obra de Marc Bloch, historiador que destacó por la atención que dedicó a esta cuestión, trata el caso específico de los artesanos que escribieron textos autobiográficos durante la Edad Media. Resume algunas estrategias para el estudio de estos documentos, y en particular las aproximaciones con-

¹ This text is a revised version of a paper I delivered at the conference “Au plus près du secret des coeurs? Nouvelles lectures historiques des écrits du for privé”, held at the Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne on June 6-7, 2002. I am grateful to the organizers, Profs. Jean-Pierre Bardet and François-Joseph Ruggiu, for the opportunity to participate in this interesting encounter, and for their generous permission to publish this version in *Memoria y Civilización*.



textualistas cuyo fin es la reconstrucción de la amplia gama de motivaciones de los artesanos autobiógrafos.

Palabras clave: autobiografía; autobiografía popular; testimonio; historiografía; fuente; individuo; ego-documento; contexto; artesano; intencionalidad; Marc Bloch; Miquel Parets; Ícaro; Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

I would like to begin by contrasting two autobiographical revolutions. The first is that commonly referred to by historians of literature and philosophy as the “rise of autobiography.” By this they mean the highly visible increase, beginning in the Renaissance, in the writing (and reading) of texts written in the first person, and focusing on the personal experience of the author. The change involved was not just quantitative. The expansion in the number of such works was also accompanied by a qualitative transformation, by which these texts gave literary expression to a new attitude of individualism and conscious, subjective self-awareness. The standard histories date this first autobiographical revolution to the later Middle Ages and above all sixteenth century, the era of Montaigne, Cellini, Cardano, and Teresa of Avila, to name only the best known protagonists. However, it is also generally agreed that this revolution did not reach full consolidation— in the form of the modern, developed genre of autobiography proper— until the eighteenth century, with the works first of Rousseau, and then of Goethe.

This is a story well known to all of you, and I need not dwell on it. I mention it in order to introduce the real subject of my talk, what might be called the “second autobiographical revolution” of the later twentieth century. The same sense of effervescence, of the flourishing of a particular way of writing in which the author is the central subject of his or her own text, has a close if chronologically distant parallel in the recent resurgence of autobiography not only as one of the most widely-read forms of writing, but also as a source used —indeed, privileged— by historians. Or to put it more crudely: the first autobiographical revolution took place in history, the second in historiography.



Predictably, this latter transformation has been read in different keys. One interpretation depicts it as part of a more general trend of representation overtaking reality among historians' priorities of study. The broader changes favoring autobiography as a source have been variously labelled (and on occasion libelled) as microhistory, post-modernism, the revival of narrative –all part and parcel of a reversal of the “Rankean revolution” that established the academic discipline of history in the early nineteenth century, and which endowed it not only with rules of procedure, but also with firm hierarchies of subject matter and sources.²

A different, less judgmental way of presenting this change has been to see it as one segment of a discipline-wide shift in the subjects and themes of historical analysis, away from the broad and largely impersonal approaches characteristic of recent social and economic history in particular, toward more subjective and individualized foci of attention within a thematically expanded history newly sensitive to political and cultural issues. Here I trust I may be permitted an autobiographical reference of my own. My experience suggests that what has happened has less to do with subjectivity replacing objectivity as the main dish at the banquet of history, although some substitutions along these lines have obviously been made in the menu. Rather, when I began to study history back in the Jurassic Era of the 1970s, autobiography as a source met with diffidence not because it was “subjective”, but because it was seen as referring *only* to individual instead of collective experience. Autobiography was never completely rejected, but it was nevertheless considered a minor source, not to be preferred over documents and texts that were more –this is the keyword– “representative”. In other words, its principal problem was that

² At least one prominent nineteenth-century historian turned to autobiographical sources out of disillusionment with what he saw as the narrowness of Ranke's focus. For the conversion of Lord Acton “from the Venice of Ranke to the Venice of Henry James”, see John PEMBLE, *Venice Rediscovered*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995, pp. 84-86.



it spoke to the particular, at a moment when historians felt obliged by office to deal with the general.

Be that as it may, what can hardly be questioned is the extent and reach of this transformation. If one looks now at the few explicit justifications of the use of autobiographical sources written a generation or so ago –one particularly well known example is Fritz Redlich's article published in 1975³– one immediately gets a sense of the distance that has been travelled, and how much our discipline has changed in the past two or three decades. Who now would even mouth the former objections to the use of autobiographies as historical sources? That earlier statements condemning (or ignoring) them as “subjective” or “individual” and thus likely to give intentionally misleading accounts of “objective” and “collective” realities now sound so archaic does indeed suggest that nothing less than a revolution has taken place.

Obviously much water has flowed under the bridge, and nowadays autobiography occupies, for better or worse, a position of privilege within the hierarchy of sources. The present-day “triumph of autobiography”, however, does not mean that we historians have a much deeper understanding of the origins, purposes, and workings of first-person writing. Ironically, the second autobiographical revolution has been accompanied by little systematic reflection by historians and other scholars on the potential of, and limitations inherent to, the use of autobiographical texts as sources. This in itself may not be all that surprising; after all, it is the longstanding tendency of historians to avoid theoretical reflections. What *is* surprising is that this relatively sudden boom in the fortunes of autobiographies as historical sources – a shift from a traditional disciplinary attitude of mistrust to their pre-

³ F. REDLICH, “Autobiographies as Sources for Social History,” *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 62 (3), 1975, pp. 380-390. Much of the same terminology can be found in the near-contemporary plaidoyer of Kenneth BARKIN, “Autobiography and History,” *Societas*, 6 (2), 1976, pp. 83-108.



sent position of most favored source⁴— should have attracted so little attention, and occasioned so little comment. Changes of such magnitude deserve better than this, and many would doubtless agree that the situation urges us to step back a bit, and to undertake a critical examination of the promise as well as the problems involved in our preference for personal documents as modes of access to the past. This, at least, is what I assumed the organizers of this conference had in mind when they invited us to reflect on these general questions.

I confess to not having much of an idea of what an ideal order of such reflections would look like. I do think that one very useful starting point would be precisely to review the history of the recourse to autobiographical sources on the part of historians, something about which we know all too little.⁵ Another desideratum would be to organize in a single venue the more significant theoretical observations on the use of personal documents as historical sources. This would mean, among other things, returning to some familiar historiographic milestones in search of a perspective from which to measure the contributions, actual and anticipated, of first-person sources to both disciplinary and demotic understandings of the past. Especially important here would be the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, to name just one particularly prescient advocate of the use of autobiographies as a means of stressing the individual and the particular in order to combat monolithic and uniform conceptions of life in both past and present.⁶

⁴ Note how autobiographies come to the rescue of the historian who, after surveying all other sources, persists in seeking to “peek behind” key events in Hans MEDICK, “Historical Event and Contemporary Experience: the Capture and Destruction of Magdeburg in 1631”, *History Workshop Journal*, 52, 2001, pp. 23-48, especially pp. 38-42.

⁵ Although see the important contribution by Laura MARCUS in her *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1994, pp. 135-178.

⁶ See W. DILTHEY, *Pattern and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society*, ed. and trans. H.P. RICKMAN, New York, Harper, 1961, p. 85.



Other figures associated with a specifically cultural approach to history—Karl Lamprecht, or Johan Huizinga—would also be of obvious interest in this connection, as would historians such as Jacob Burckhardt who, while rarely preaching overtly in favor of autobiography, nevertheless taught by example by using it quietly but persistently in their research and writing. Finally, one especially fruitful line of approach, it seems to me, would be to focus on the single quality of first-person sources that has proved most attractive to generations of historians, that is, the notion of witness. A close and considered examination of the changing fortunes of witness in historical writing, especially over the long run, might “problematize,” to use a fashionable term, any predictable reading of the increasing acceptance of autobiography as a source.

Once again, it is surprising that we historians have thought and written so little on a matter that we all regard as so important: the way in which we think of our sources as witnesses, or bearing witness, to events, persons, whatever from the past. Needless to say, witness has been a central concern of the writing of history since its very beginning. It is, for example, implicit in the original Greek notion of history as investigation based upon direct observation, and is evoked repeatedly and at crucial junctures in the two great founding works of our discipline, Herodotus' widely-ranging “inquiry” into “human achievements” and “great and marvelous deeds”, and Thucydides' more focused narrative of the Peloponnesian War. The growing present-day interest in witness as a concept is thus perhaps best seen as the most recent resurgence of a longstanding preoccupation by historians with a concept central to our understanding of our discipline.

I have neither the time nor the expertise needed to undertake such an exploration.⁷ One can all the same envision several ways in which

⁷ I offer some very lean reflections in my “The Dilemmas of Popular Autobiography,” in K. VON GREYERZ, H. MEDICK, and P. VEIT, eds., *Von der dargestellten Person zum erinnerten Ich: Europäische Selbstzeugnisse als*



it might be done: for example, in the form of a traditional *Begriffsgeschichte*, one which would have to reach beyond historiography to catch the many resonances and uses of the term in law, religion, and other fields. Another alternative would be to focus closely on specific moments of intense play with, or scrutiny of, the notion in historical writing. I would think the latter would be of heightened interest to you, as any such history of the history of witness would have to have as one of its protagonists a French historian. I am referring, of course, to Marc Bloch.

From what little I know of Bloch's writings, he showed no special predilection for autobiographies as sources. He was, however, clearly intrigued, and perhaps even somewhat obsessed by the question of "witness". This was in part thanks to his lifelong preoccupation with sources, which he saw as the key to any assessment of historical analysis. It therefore comes as no surprise to find that both sources in general, and witness in particular, occupy a central place in his unfinished review of the fundamental questions of historical thought and practice, his *Apologie pour l'histoire*. In this well-known work, written under the extremely trying circumstances of the 1940s, Bloch examined a number of issues that had long played a central role in his evolving views of the discipline of history. Indeed, some of the passages on witness in this book incorporate portions of his earliest systematic reflection on the question, a graduation address he delivered in Amiens in 1914.⁸ Yet in between these two bookend pieces—that is, his first and final works—Bloch repeatedly evoked witness as a category, or condition, of historical sources. Especially well known is the courtroom metaphor he developed to characterize the relation between

historische Quellen, 1500-1850, Köln, Böhlau 2001, pp. 431-8. I hope to return to the subject of witness in a more systematic fashion in a future work.

⁸ "Critique historique et critique du témoignage", *Annales E.S.C.*, 5, 1950, pp. 1-8. Lucien Febvre, in his brief introductory note, evokes the opportunity this text provides to "étudier les transformations de détail d'une pensée qui, pour l'essentiel, était fixée déjà en 1914".



the historian and his or her documents. Combatting the popular notion that the historian's task is essentially the passive one of locating existing facts in the written record, Bloch argued that historians construct knowledge through active engagement with their sources. In a famous passage in a 1928 address on comparative history, Bloch affirmed that

A document is a witness; and like most witnesses, it does not say much except under cross-examination. The real difficulty lays in putting the right questions.⁹

Yet there was another side to this activist view of the historian's provoking the quality of witness in sources, one of basic epistemological caution. Bloch repeatedly cautioned against automatic trust in eyewitness testimony, and to this end he once again presented the historian as an interrogator:

The historian... knows that his witnesses can lie or be mistaken. But he is primarily interested in making them speak so that he may understand them... experience shows that there are no witnesses whose statements are equally reliable on all subjects and under all cir-

⁹ Marc BLOCH, "A Contribution towards a Comparative History of European Societies," in his *Land and Work in Medieval Europe: Selected Papers*, trans. J. E. ANDERSON, New York, Routledge & K. Paul, 1969 (orig. ed. 1928), p. 48. He developed this observation more fully in the 1940s. In *The Historian's Craft*, trans. P. PUTNAM and intro. J. STRAYER, New York, Knopf, 1953, pp. 64-5, he wrote that "from the moment when we are no longer resigned to purely and simply recording the words of our witnesses, from the moment we decide to force them to speak, even against their will, cross-examination becomes more necessary than ever. Indeed, it is the prime necessity of well-conducted historical research... even those texts or archaeological documents which seem the clearest and the most accommodating will speak only when they are properly questioned... Mere passive observation, even supposing such a thing were possible, has never contributed anything productive to any science."



cumstances. There is no reliable witness in the absolute sense. There is only more or less reliable testimony.¹⁰

In other words, witness is a quality within sources that historians, through reasoned and persistent questioning, summon into existence. In so doing, they assume a heavy responsibility, an ethical commitment to the rules of procedure known as the “historical method,” a set of disciplinary practices wedding careful training, a minimal yet not excessive skepticism, and a certain good faith on the part of the historian. And when the times require it, the historian himself must shoulder the burden of witness, a burden for which his professional training has already prepared him.

Bloch's interest in the interrelated questions of sources, testimony, and evidence had strong roots in his own personal experience, including his participation as an infantry officer in both world wars. This experience directly occasioned two texts. The best known of these was his famous denunciation of the handling of the war of 1940, *L'Étrange Défaite*, in which Bloch assumed simultaneously the roles of “witness, prosecutor, accused, and final judge”.¹¹ The other was his diary of his front-line service in 1914-15, his *Souvenirs de Guerre*.¹²

¹⁰ *The Historian's Craft...*, pp. 90 and 101.

¹¹ As noted in Massimo MASTROGREGORI, *El manuscrito interrumpido de Marc Bloch: Apología para la historia o el oficio de historiador*, Mexico, 1998; orig. ed. 1995, p. 52. For some general remarks on Bloch's conception of witness and judgment in history, see Olivier DUMOULIN, *Marc Bloch*, Paris, Presses de la Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, 2000, pp. 277-288.

¹² I have read the English edition by Carole FINK, *Memoirs of War, 1914-15*, Cambridge, 1988 (orig. ed. 1969). See now Marc BLOCH, *Écrits de guerre, 1914-1918*, ed. E. BLOCH and intro. S. AUDOIN-ROUZEAU, Paris, Armand Colin, 1997, which adds to Bloch's two *carnets* or journals, administrative documents related to his military service, as well as the text of his 1921 essay on rumors in wartime (see note 16 below).



Proper consideration of the relations between Bloch's own wartimes experiences and his historical writing would require, among other things, a thorough contextualization of both. It is important to recall in this regard that despite the singularity of Bloch's interest in the subject, he was far from alone in calling attention to the question of witness at this particular juncture. It was in fact the first of the world wars that gave rise to some of the earliest and most detailed systematic reflection on autobiographical writings as historical sources. I am thinking in particular of the works of Jean-Norton Cru, the author of a very important study for our purposes, *Témoins. Essai d'analyse et de critique des souvenirs de combattants édités en France de 1915 à 1928*, published in 1929 and whose findings he summarized a year later in a much shorter study, recently reedited as *Du témoignage*.¹³

It hardly comes as a surprise that the First World War should be the object of a study of this sort, as that conflict had brought about a literal explosion in first-person writing.¹⁴ Once again, as with such

¹³ Cru's *Témoins* was originally published by Les Étincelles, Paris, 1929, and has been reprinted by the Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1993. *Du témoignage* was recently brought back into print by Allia, Paris, in 1997. Cru is mentioned in Jay WINTER's *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 184 and 263.

¹⁴ Among the many recent works on the diaries and memoirs of the First World War, see: Stéphane AUDOIN-ROUZEAU, *14-18, les combattants des tranchées: à travers leurs journaux*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1986; Antonio GIBELLI, *L'Officina della guerra: La Grande Guerra e le trasformazioni del mondo mentale*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1991; and A. BECKER (ed.), *Journaux des combattants et civils de la France du Nord dans la Grande Guerre* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq, 1998). For a more general overview of citizen-soldiers' autobiographical writing, see Samuel Lynn HYNES, *The Soldier's Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*, New York, A. Lane, 1997. In many respects the first modern war to produce such mass personal documentation was the American Civil War; for the value of these texts as historical sources,



revolutions, this was not just a matter of increasing numbers of texts. Mass, citizen armies meant not only an expansion in the size of the corpus of autobiographies. Authorial identity was also transformed, into something which took on special relevance for historians. The new, largely middle-class autobiographers differed from earlier generations of soldiers in being far more literate and accustomed to writing, qualities which predisposed them more readily to the autobiographical act. Moreover, their ranks embraced a considerably broader socio-professional reach, and included—for the very first time, I think—an impressive number of historians. The direct participation of the latter in the war meant, among other things, that much of their later reflection on the question of witness would inevitably take on a deeply personal tone.¹⁵ This was certainly the case for Bloch, who explicitly linked specific aspects and themes of his later historical studies to his own experience of warfare, most famously in his essay on rumors during wartime, a pioneering work in the history of mentalities.¹⁶

Bloch's premature death deprived him of the opportunity of organizing any “final” views on the subject of witness. His last two books were, to be sure, written as a sort of testament. However, both the form and content of his observations, as well as his more general dislike of historiographic “systems”, suggest that for him witness was

see James M. MCPHERSON, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought the Civil War*, New York, Oxford University Press 1996.

¹⁵ See Fritz Richard STERN, “Historians and the Great War: Private Experience and Public Explication”, in his *Einstein's German World* (London, Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 2000; orig. ed. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 199-222.

¹⁶ “Réflexions d'un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre”, originally published in 1921, and now in Marc BLOCH, *Histoire et historiens*, ed. Etienne BLOCH, Paris, A. Colin, 1995, pp. 147-66. Carlo Ginzburg was one of the first historians to draw attention to the connection between Bloch's war experiences and his historical writing; see his introduction to the Italian translation (Turin, 1973) of Bloch's *Les rois thaumaturges*.



not a matter to be brought to closure in any definitive way. It would be more accurate to view it as one of several *problématiques* that occupied a central, permanent place in his evolving reflections on the craft of history, a craft that, as he never tired of insisting, took on coherence not through abstract prescriptions, but through practice. Witness provided Bloch a foothold from which to interrogate his work and that of others; it was, in a sense, a permanently open question, and one without definitive answers.

Having raised the general (yet far from abstract) issue of witness, and quickly reviewed some of the musings of the modern historian most deeply engaged in it, I think it best now to turn in different direction, and to say a few words about my own modest contribution to the subject of our debate on autobiographies as historical sources.

Several years ago I published an overly-long book titled *The Flight of Icarus: Artisan Autobiography in Early Modern Europe*.¹⁷ In this survey of popular personal documents, I used a deliberately broad and imprecise definition of autobiography, inspired by the work of Dutch and other northern European historians on what have been called “ego-documents”.¹⁸ This is admittedly a catch-all category, including

¹⁷ Stanford University Press, 1998. A shortened version will be published in Spanish by Siglo XXI in 2002, under the title *El vuelo de Ícaro*.

¹⁸ The term “ego-documents” was coined by the Dutch historian Jacob Presser, and is now most closely identified with the work of Rudolf M. DEKKER. For an introduction to the concept, see the latter’s “Ego-Documents in the Netherlands, 1500-1814,” *Dutch Crossing. A Journal of Low Countries Studies*, 39, Dec. 1989, pp. 61-72. Dekker develops his observations on autobiographical writings as historical sources more fully in his *Childhood, Memory and Autobiography in Holland: From the Golden Age to Romanticism*, Basingstoke, Hamps, 1999. See also Dekker’s web site at www.egodocument.net, which contains a thorough bibliography and excellent outside links. I have attempted a brief survey of Spanish texts using this approach in “Spanish Autobiography in the Early Modern Era,” in Winfried SCHULZE, ed., *Ego-Dokumente: Annäherung an den Menschen in der*



not only autobiographies proper, but also diaries, family books, some chronicles (especially those with more personal references in them), and certain types of letters and travel accounts, as well as spiritual autobiographies and diaries. As far as the other half of my subject, the “popular” part of popular or artisan autobiography, I sought to locate its authors socially in an equally imprecise place of origin, the “popular” classes, defined in a purposely vague way as those commoners beneath the level of the commercial middle class.

There are admittedly disadvantages to such a blunderbuss approach. Above all, one can all too easily lose sight of the specificity of certain forms of writing, and how one genre of personal text differs significantly from another. However, the gains promised to be greater, for by casting so wide a net one could reasonably hope to examine a much broader and more varied ensemble of texts. Especially intriguing, and epistemologically revealing, was the possibility of studying the experience of writing among persons for whom writing was not a standard social expectation.

For all this talk of breadth, my study also had an individual focus: a master tanner from Barcelona named Miquel Parets (1610-1661). Parets was an ordinary man from the seventeenth century whose only extraordinary act, it seems, was the fact that he wrote a chronicle. Or rather, a mixture of chronicle, family book, and personal memoir. My research began with a deceptively simple question: why? Why did a tanner write a chronicle? Why did an individual who seemed undistinguished in every respect do such a socially and culturally distinctive thing as try to convert himself into a chronicler, a writer, an author? I tried to answer this question –a literally naive question admittedly of limited interest in itself, yet perhaps possessing a wider exemplary value– by undertaking two related lines of contextual research. The first was to study the biographical and social context, that

Geschichte, Berlin, Akademie, 1996, pp. 59-71; Spanish version in *Historia-16*, 18 (209), September 1993, pp. 96-105.



is, to try to reconstruct Parets's life and immediate social milieu, through standard biographical research, followed by a microhistorical investigation of the spheres of his sociability: family, neighbors, fellow workers, parishioners, and the like. That one might even dream of carrying out a study of this sort owes much to the unusual richness of the local documentation, in particular the municipal and especially notarial papers of Barcelona.

I also tried to examine what might be called Parets's textual context, by looking at similar documents written by similar persons, first elsewhere in Catalonia and Spain, and then expanding out to Europe as a whole. My initial orientation into this task was facilitated by the studies being done elsewhere at that moment on popular autobiographies. Three works were of particular importance: Alain Lottin's pioneering book on Pierre-Ignace Chavatte, a journeyman textile worker from Lille; Daniel Roche's edition and study of the "journal" of the Parisian glassworker Jacques-Louis Ménétra, arguably the most interesting of all these texts; and finally Paul Seaver's brief but elegant work on the London Puritan turner Nehemiah Wallington.¹⁹ But I also began to sniff around on my own. When I found not one but *three* master tanners in the city of Le Puy en Velay also writing in the seventeenth century, and writing the same sort of mixture of urban chronicle and family book as did Parets, I became convinced that there was a great deal to learn from incorporating this parallel perspective in my study. With this end in mind I searched for other personal documents by artisans, farmers, and workers. I thus wound up cobbling together a fairly arbitrary ensemble of some 230 texts, which I listed in a lengthy appendix to my book.

¹⁹ Alain LOTTIN, *Chavatte, ouvrier lillois: un contemporain de Louis XIV* Paris, Flammarion, 1979; Jacques Louis MÉNÉTRA, *Journal de ma vie*, ed. D. ROCHE, Paris, Montalba, 1982; and Paul S. SEAVER, *Wallington's World: A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1985.



After all this searching, what did I find? I reached few conclusions, but I did my best to raise and discuss a number of questions in my book. Three in particular strike me of particular relevance to the concerns of this conference. The first involves the relations between social position or background and the experience of authorship during the early modern period.

Once again, my book does not offer a strong argument. Rather, it seeks to explore a particularly complex position from which writing, and particularly self-writing, was undertaken. That is, it represents an attempt to approach culture from its social end, by linking the socio-professional position of popular writers to a personal, even existential situation of dilemma. To that end I wound up emphasizing the ambiguity and ambivalences surrounding the experience of popular autobiographers, and how these ambivalences found direct or indirect expression in their texts. In trying to describe these ambivalences I adopted the metaphor of Icarus, or to be more precise, I emphasized its appropriateness as a symbol of the enterprise of popular self-writers.

Icarus seemed especially appropriate for two reasons. First, it was precisely at this moment in western culture that a sea-change took place in the evaluation of Icarus, a transformation from a mythical figure traditionally read negatively, in moralistic terms, as having received just punishment for his excessive pride and disobedience, to one evaluated more positively for his daring, and for his striving to achievement and fame.²⁰ I argued that both these qualities –fear of trepass on the one hand, and audacity and pride on the other– were present in act of authorship on the part of popular autobiographers.

²⁰ Here I incurred one of many strong debts to the work of Carlo GINZBURG. See in particular his “The High and the Low: The Theme of Forbidden Knowledge in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries”, in his *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. J. and A. TEDESCHI, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, pp. 60-76, especially pp. 64-66.



Their simultaneous presence moreover helps explain the close connections between the cultural practice of self-writing, and the social experience of individual and collective mobility that often underlay it.

The other reason for turning to Icarus as a symbol of this situation of dilemma had to do with Parets himself. I was struck the first time I read his chronicle by the fact that in one passage Parets referred to himself as Icarus. Closer examination, however, turned up a different story. In the Catalan original of Parets's text no such reference appeared. Rather, it was an interpolation, inserted by the anonymous translator of the tanner's chronicle into Castilian, the version that had been published and thus was more readily available to myself and other historians. Icarus was, if you accept the paradox, a self-image imposed from outside. His presence was the product of an interpretation of Parets's endeavor by an unknown and –it can hardly be doubted– socially superior intermediary.

My repeated references to dilemma introduce a second issue raised by the study of these texts: what one might call the contradiction of their political origins and valence. At first glance, in terms of contemporary cultural expectations these artisan authors were outsiders. But in social and political terms, they were both outsiders and insiders. That is, while they obviously occupied subordinate positions in virtually all hierarchies, they did not lack certain rights and forms of recognition. (These were largely gender specific, as men were never outsiders to the extent that women of all social ranks were). Not coincidentally, most of these male authors were citizens, and it is in terms of citizenship and the limited but effective participation in above all local politics to which it gave rise, that one can look for important clues to my central question: why these texts were written in the first place. I in fact wound up arguing that autobiography –purportedly the most private type of writing– was in fact often very public in character. Many authors saw this supposedly private and familial writing as a means of intervening in debate within a wide range of (invariably local) public spheres. Precisely because of their sense of entitlement, of belonging to the city, they undertook “personal” writing as an act of citizenship.



Finally, I would like to think that my findings also have some implications for the more general history of autobiography. In particular, I hoped –and still hope– that they might contribute to reinforcing the dialogue between history and literature, a dialogue harder than ever to elude thanks to what has been called the linguistic turn in history, and to what is emerging as a broadly-based historicist turn in literary studies. In other words, I hope that a student of western literature who reads this book may learn something from it, and three things in particular:

a. The simple yet significant fact that there were many more popular autobiographies than we would have guessed. This is important not only as a corrective to the early work of Philippe Lejeune and others, who have insisted on the socially restricted nature of autobiographical writing.²¹ That we now know that the social range of this authorship was broader than previously thought leads us back to the perennial problem of popular literacy, and the actual extent and presence of the cultural skills of reading and writing –including self-writing– in the sphere of popular culture.

b. It may now be time to reread some key texts –especially Rousseau's *Confessions*– in light of this little acknowledged variant of outsider writing. My wish is less to redo the canon, than to reread the canon in terms of other, hitherto largely ignored vernacular literary traditions. Rousseau's consistent depiction of himself as an outsider may seem less striking –and certainly less anomalous– when one considers its possible affinities with, or even roots in, this other broad

²¹ Philippe LEJEUNE --arguably the leading student of autobiography within literary studies-- had in an essay originally published in 1980 doubted that something like popular autobiography could exist; see his *On Autobiography*, ed. P.J. EAKIN and trans. K. LEARY, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pp. 198-204. I should note that since then his views have changed, and that he has in fact devoted much attention to “non-traditional” authors of autobiographical texts.



lineage of autobiographical writing by outsiders. That such outsiders definitely included women is a notion that undoubtedly would have horrified Rousseau.

c. Finally, my insistence on the why of autobiography –that is, looking to motives and purposes as an important, although far from exclusive interpretive key– may strike the reader at first sight as the typical historian's naïveté in matters of literary analysis. In fact, when I started my project a long time ago, I had the forlorn feeling that *only* a historian would pose such primitive questions. Looking around the world of literary studies these days, however, one senses that the times they are a'changing. Clearly the literary field itself has experienced a sort of return of the repressed, with renewed attention paid to questions of authorial identity and intentionality. This is part and parcel of a broadly-based rejection of recent impersonalizing approaches that discarded such issues in favor of focusing exclusively on textual matters. In this sense, then, my work may contribute to a new rapprochement between historians and literary historians and critics, two communities whose members had relatively little to do with each other in the immediate past.

To conclude: just like the artisan autobiographers, I have faced the task of addressing you with a mixture of fear and hope. My fear has been that I have put your patience too much to the test by dwelling on my own work. My hope has been that these remarks may serve as a stimulus for further exploration by all of us of a fascinating yet at the same time unsettling question: how we as historians may best interpret and use these highly complex individual sources to better our collective understanding of the worlds their authors inhabited, and which some of them actually hoped to change by converting themselves from artisans into authors and, in so doing, into the authors of themselves.