

# TEACH LITERATURE? IMPOSSIBLE. AUTOBIOGRAPHY? LIES!

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## **Part One: Intellectual Trajectory**

It is rather terrifying to be asked to sketch one's "intellectual trajectory" when one isn't at all sure that there ever was such a thing. After all, "trajectory" implies a goal towards which one streaks, and the "intellectual" suggests that one's conscious *mind* is somehow responsible for this rapid, deliberate, and directed movement. Now perhaps if, instead of "intellectual trajectory" one could speak of, say, my intellectual . . . ooze? I might be able to operate in that context. For several years now in this series we have been witnessing the flights of the *eagles* of our profession, and today I fear that we shall see here rather the progress of a *snail*—but maybe it's not quite that bad: let's say the progress of a *slow loris*.

Books and reading were certainly a major part of my childhood and youth, but it wasn't exactly literature. My father was one of the pastors of a large, unaffiliated, evangelical "Bible" church in Chicago. We all spent most of Sunday and at least one weekday evening at the church, and at home we lived in obedience to its strict teachings. As the name "Bible church" suggests, the message and the doctrine of such a church consisted of what could be read in the "books" of the Bible, as God, more or less directly and actively helped the preacher interpret that Bible. By and large the interpretation was "literal," and we believed that God had seen to it that every word, which He had dictated through its writers, had come down to us twentieth-century American middle-westerners accurately and authoritatively.

The first literature I knew, then, was Biblical. It was read, in our milieu, in the wonderful "King James Version," so that if I eventually acquired little religion from it, I learned at least some excellent English and began to have an idea of the pleasures of prose. What's more, that Bible was read very attentively—and it *was* subject to interpretation. Mind you: this literal interpretation was only occasionally poetical or allegorical. No, the Bible "meant what it said." Usually. Example: we were Protestants and we didn't approve of what those non-Protestant so-called Christians maintained. *They* (the Catholics) thought that when Jesus said at the Last Supper "This is my body" and "This is my blood," he was instituting the Eucharist, and the bread and the wine *became* his body and blood. At communion services my father had a ready explanation for why this was not true: "When I take a photograph out of my wallet and tell my friend, 'This is my mother,' I *obviously* don't mean that it *is* my mother—but rather her picture." Obviously, in the case of "This is my body and blood," that Jesus was also speaking metaphorically, was my father's point. But what, then (I would much later ask myself), had happened to literal interpretation?

However that may be, reading with attention and care and seeking honestly to understand the meaning of a text was a habit by the time I began to receive some real teaching. Now, both of my parents were relatively uneducated, as were most of their friends. My mother had gone to work after eighth grade. (Though to be fair to my mother, she also *loved* to read Dickens, and that may well be the origin of her love for *words*.) My father finished high school in the Chicago suburb where he grew up, and his high school offered a supplementary “enrichment” year, which he also took. But about the time of his graduation he was “saved,” as they said, and turned his back upon the world and its evils and temptations. Those latter included, for my father, higher education, and therefore, unlike his brother and sisters, he refused his parents’ intention to send him to college and went directly into the Bible Church Ministry. (He, too, was a word person, however: though he didn’t read very much, he always did the crossword puzzle in the morning paper.)

My older sister, who was to become a missionary, did go to college. For her and her church friends, also thinking of higher education, there were two evangelical Christian possibilities: the intellectual one, in the Chicago suburbs was Wheaton College, and the other one was Bob Jones College. She chose Bob Jones. When it was my turn, I followed the suggestion of my piano teacher at the neighborhood (then) Junior College and went to North Park College. My math teacher at North Park talked me into going to Northwestern University for a bachelor’s degree, and Bernard Weinberg, my very charismatic French literature teacher at Northwestern, talked me into also taking a one-year Master’s at Northwestern and then saw to it that I got a Fulbright to go to France. And in that way I was pushed into the early stages of my “trajectory,” if that’s what it was, by well-meaning others. My American Fulbright friends in France were all planning to go to graduate school when they returned home, and so I imitated them and came, in 1958, to Yale, where I have been ever since. My “trajectory,” you could say, was a “follow the prodding and move” kind of operation.

### **Part Two: *How Can You Teach Literature?***

You can’t.

You can teach literary history

    literary theory

    literary forms

    literary criticism,

and you *can* teach the Appreciation of literature

    and even (probably) the *Writing* of literature,

and you can teach foreign literature (how to understand its references, points of view, and so on).

But you can’t teach “literature.” Literature is something that is perceived, assimilated, felt, loved or hated or dismissed by the mind and emotions of a hearer or reader. You can try to *sell* it, but you *can’t* teach it.

What, then, could a teacher of literature (as I was to become, for forty years) do?

Like a horse to water, you can lead students to literature, but you can't make them *like* it. Therefore your first duty is your syllabus. You can present what you are convinced is *good* literature to your students and urge them to read it. Most of them (at least at Yale) will read it, if not necessarily by the time you hoped they would. In many cases you will have the joy of seeing them transformed by it, as you once were. This is why literature departments have "canon wars," because it is a fact of literature that the texts that please and rejoice many readers change over time: even the most popular go out of fashion, and if they're really good, they frequently come back into fashion. "Classic" French literature presents a fascinating case of this, and I have lived through one of these shifts. If you've ever studied any French literature you know that in the age of Louis XIV (the seventeenth century) there were two authors of French tragedy who rapidly came to be understood as great writers of tragedy: Corneille and Racine. But oddly, in their own time, and since, their relative reputations go back and forth. When I was in college, Racine was clearly the favorite. When I got to Yale some of my professors were clearly on the side of Corneille. Today Corneille is once again generally considered to be much less interesting than Racine. This is all related to, of all things, politics and clinical psychology. In ages hot for psychotherapy, Racine's your tragedian. In the heroic age of the Second World War, for the Americans, like the French, Corneille was your man. Everybody in this room has probably noticed that there are moments when for us Shakespeare seems really important, and other times when we tend not to think very much about him.

Of course, as a "scholar" of French literature, I like all the great French writers (or pretty close). But I have learned over the years that I can "sell" some of them at some times, and I have to find others at other times. How we all loved Camus and Beckett in the 1960s! Beckett is still with us, but Camus, at least for us poetic types, is pretty much gone from the front lines. Sartre has become a bit of a historical curiosity, at least in French literature, if not French philosophy, and Voltaire? Well, we've heard from the generation of our grandparents that they found him very witty. (A much sadder fact is that there isn't very much coming from the French publishers these days that rouses us Americans the way Racine, Voltaire, Sartre and Camus once used to, but I'm not going to get into *that* today.)

I taught in my later years a course in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century French novel in English translation. I learned, much to my very great sadness, that I simply couldn't "sell" the wonderful novels of Mauriac, with their underlying message of God's invisibility *and* ready grace. I learned that Marguerite Duras, with her strange presentation of various psychological anguishes appealed strongly to many students. I wish I had known then about today's popular novelist Michel Houellebecq, with his outrageous contemporary tales of sex, lusts, panic, and boredom: *that* I'm sure I could have sold.

And so, with some magic intuition and a *lot* of luck, you can indicate literary titles to your students. You can also make some suggestions to them about how to think about their reading: you *can* teach literary background. You can inform them that Balzac was writing in a period when in France the old social, economic, and Catholic order had come to be fairly thoroughly enfeebled, to be replaced by an order in which money and physical well-being were coming to be prized. You can show them how Proust, without using the language of psychotherapy being developed in his time, himself analyzed his characters in a way quite compatible with Freudianism. I learned that, though you can't "teach literature," you can indeed lead students to join in the pleasant company of those who share a broad field of literary references. I learned that sharing my own *joy* was possible, often surprisingly easy, and perhaps even meaningful.

My "intellectual trajectory" in this regard, therefore, looks something like this:

1 In my Chicago city high school days I was proud when I understood and perhaps even remembered the *plot* of a work of literature.

2 In college I came under the influence of what one of my fellow students called a "form contact critic" of the "Chicago school": I read a lot of serious literature, French, English, and American, and I learned to judge literature's quality and excellence by determining whether or not it fully met the expectations attributed to its literary form. I also began to learn what those expectations were.

3 At 1958 Yale, the French graduate program taught me the importance of seeking to understand how a piece of literature came into existence: to look for its context, history, and originality—and how that "coming" into existence shaped in turn its historical meaning and interpretation—a meaning and interpretation that is not necessarily ours today.

4 At Yale at various points later, I gradually began to understand (and the process is still going on) that all of the above is important, interesting, and a good basis for understanding lots and lots of still *other* ways of looking at the literary object. (I also learned to be very suspicious of newer ways of looking at literature that rejected out-of-hand, rather than *assimilated*, the old ones.)

Where am I now, in my ripe old age? Perhaps at the beginning of an understanding that the reading and appreciation of literature is a way of life—and the way of life I'm glad to be living.

### **Part Three: *Autobiography Revisited***

Gradually, during my teaching career, I taught fewer of the classic texts of the French eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and concentrated less on novels than on autobiographical texts. This represented a coming to terms with the fact that I had spent the better part of my scholarly career exploring the works of three French autobiographers (who also wrote novels and other works): the strange late eighteenth-century writer Restif de la Bretonne, the famous early nineteenth-century traveler, writer, and statesman Chateaubriand (better known now for having bequeathed his name to an

excellent cut of beefsteak), and the contemporary “gay writer” (though he rejects the expression), Renaud Camus. Their autobiographies, plus one now much in view, that of Barack Obama, lie at the base of what remains for me to say today.

It is a common perception that autobiographies are full of lies and must be mistrusted. This is not always true, and “lies” is perhaps (in some cases) an exaggeration – but if I have learned one thing it is that autobiographies **MUST**, indeed, be mistrusted. Lying implies an intention on the part of the autobiographer to deceive the reader, and it is clear that such an intention not infrequently **IS** to be found. But **NO** autobiography is totally trustworthy, in the sense that we hope that, let’s say, thoroughly researched scholarly history is trustworthy (or almost): it is an impossibility that the human mind produce its own history without failures of memory, prejudices, and fond beliefs, to mention only a few of the traps that will catch even those who had intended to write “the truth.” I have written about a third of my own autobiography, and I am very conscious of how my desire to give form to my account has affected its accuracy: this is, among other things, a “professional deformation” resulting from my years as a professor of literature. I want to write comprehensibly and persuasively, I want to obey commonly accepted literary requirements for shape and coherence, I want my prose to be ironic and parodic and to show that, even though I am writing my autobiography, I don’t *really* take myself all that seriously. And in addition to these stylistic and formal bases for inaccuracy, there are also the frequently much less intentional errors, stemming from false memory, wish fulfillment, and poor observation, among other causes. Not to mention the fact that autobiography is almost always written in prose, and prose is almost necessarily linear, like age! But **NOT** like life: our lives *physically* (I think) are lived linearly, but the life of our minds is constantly moving backwards and forwards – **AND** sideways.

My four autobiographical examples today are about as different from each other – and from me – as it is possible to be. Restif de la Bretonne, was a Burgundian from a landowning peasant family and one of fourteen children; as a youth he apprenticed in the local town as a typesetter and then, like so many of the French peasants of the day, went off to ply his trade in Paris. There he was fixated on women, particularly if they wore high-heeled shoes. He lived in a gritty world of prostitutes and madams, and he was physically extraordinarily dirty in his person: the smell of him was appalling, we learn from contemporary accounts. He lived occasionally with his wife – whom he loathed – and more often without her in a series of tawdry rented rooms in the filthy center of eighteenth-century Paris. He never lost his ambition, however, and after many years of typesetting other people’s books he decided that there was no reason he couldn’t write his own, and so he did, typesetting some of them himself. By the time of his death at age 72 he had some 200 volumes in print, of essays, novels, social projects, and, in particular, his masterpiece, his autobiography, *Monsieur Nicolas*, 8 volumes in length in its original eighteenth-century printing.

Chateaubriand, a minor aristocrat from Brittany, born in 1768 and living his adult life during the French Revolution and the restoration of the monarchy that followed,

always in the political opposition, regardless of the government, frequently a private citizen and several times an important officer of the government, often poor and occasionally wealthy, adored by women, including at least one very celebrated beauty of the age: Chateaubriand first became famous in 1802 as the writer of *Le Génie du christianisme* [*The Genius (or Spirit) of Christianity*], a wildly successful polemic book that tries to prove, via comparisons between aspects of Greco-Roman culture and modern European culture, that Christianity is better than non-Christianity, mostly because it is more humane and favors better art. The book had the good sense to be published just at the moment that Napoleon signed an agreement with the Pope that restored the Roman Catholic Church to an official status in France. The most famous part of *Le Génie*, oddly, was a melancholy short story included in the section “*Poétique du christianisme* [The Poetics of Christianity]”: entitled with the name of its first-person narrator. The story of *René* is arguably the most influential literary text published in France during the first thirty years of the nineteenth century. Chateaubriand went on to write other stories, other polemics, and histories, but his masterpiece, constructed over most of the later part of his long life, was his autobiography, the *Mémoires d’outre-tombe* [*Memoirs from beyond the grave*], published upon his death in 1848.

For some time starting in the early 1990s, I have been striving to finish a general and introductory study of the contemporary French writer, Renaud Camus (no relation to the much better known Albert Camus). Renaud Camus is prodigiously prolific, having by now published more than 75 volumes, many of them hundreds of pages long, since his first in 1975. He has two very faithful publishers in Paris, but has never found much of a readership: he figures that he may have as many as 300 readers, but not many more than that. (I am one of the 300.) His work includes novels, prose poems, and essays, and most of his work is autobiographical in nature; the largest portion to date is made up of 21 volumes of his annual diary, each published several years after its writing. For me one of his most remarkable books is his autobiography, a very strange text in 999 numbered parts, entitled *P.A.*, French for “petite annonce” or what we would call “personal ad.” The ad in question is included in the 414-page volume, under the number 44: it says that he seeks a male lover (“smart, nice, perhaps with a mustache, or hairy, or muscle-y, or all three”) to come live with him in his country château.

My fourth example many of you have probably read: it is Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father*. Composed early in Obama’s career, it tells of his childhood in Hawaii and Indonesia, of his college years at Occidental College and Columbia University, and of his work in Chicago as a community organizer in the black housing projects before he went off to Law School at Harvard. It describes the discovery of his black roots in a lengthy visit to Kenya, where he met his large African family and learned about how and why his father had come to be seen as so important in his homeland.

These four writers – a poor, displaced peasant; an aristocrat in post-aristocratic France; a gay man; an African-American – are all outsiders, two of them famous, and

two of them generally unknown. Actually I believe that most autobiographers are outsiders: after all, if you are a writer and choose to write about yourself rather than the world out there, you are more or less automatically an outsider. The good thing is that outsiders have the outsider's advantage: they are used to seeing things from the outside, and that can include themselves. Autobiographers, at their best, see – and *show* – themselves from the outside as well as the inside.

Modern autobiography in Europe is often considered to have begun with the famous eighteenth-century *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It is a book that I highly admire, a brilliant example of the “I am hated because I have been misunderstood, and I here thereby set the record straight” kind of autobiography. My late wife, Betty, the smartest person I ever met with one exception, hated Rousseau's book so passionately (because of the complaisant way that Rousseau admired himself in it) that I have scratched the *Confessions* from my list today. Restif's and Chateaubriand's autobiographies are, however, unimaginable without Rousseau's. Camus's important respects stems directly from Chateaubriand's. Rousseau and Chateaubriand influenced considerably the literary tradition in which we would be right to consider Barack Obama's story. In speaking of the four autobiographers I have selected I want to talk, first, about what is especially impressive in what they talk about and in the way they go about doing so. I will keep in mind what one important student of autobiography called long ago “Design and Truth in Autobiography.” Finally, I want to give you some considerations on why at least some of us are drawn to this kind of writing and why it has become for me the key to my “intellectual trajectory.”

Restif de la Bretonne writes copiously about things we simply would not know much about, were it not for him: what it is like to be a peasant child in eighteenth-century rural France, what it is like to be an impoverished member of the Paris laboring classes in the latter half of the century. What it is like at that time to have no money, no real “identity,” and yet undergo powerful sexual urges that must be satisfied. What it is like to spy on other people for your own titillation, and what one sees while so doing. He describes the working-class *and* erotic underside of both the countryside, on one hand, and Paris, on the other: such a portrayal is something that will become a major literary and journalistic enterprise less than a century later (with writers like George Sand or Zola), but in the last quarter of the eighteenth century it was quite a novelty. “[This is] a novel about a peasant written by a peasant,” exclaims one of the major Paris literary journals in 1776, about *The Perverted Peasant*, Restif's best novel. When Restif first began writing his novels, he imitated the rather time-worn subjects and manner of the novelists of the time he had read (or set in type), but when he suddenly realized that he could and would like to write about his *own* experience and that of the members of his family, suddenly he became a genuine original. His best discovery, though, didn't come till somewhat later, however: that he could write, not *novels* about himself and his contemporaries, but his own *biography*, and, to a lesser extent, theirs as well. In his (frankly fictionalized) biographies and his (partly

fictionalized) autobiography he writes about sex, including sexual perversions, he writes about families and their problems, he writes about social and community issues, like education and friendships and corruption, both personal and societal. He writes about work in a shop and about pastimes and amusements, and about what it is like to be desperately poor and yet attempting to survive in Paris during the chaotic French Revolution. His writing is direct, precise (if the sexual parts risk becoming too precise, he puts them partly in Latin), and prosaic in the best sense. He is like a good reporter: he writes what he sees and hears, and his witness is all the more valuable, both for the historical record and for the reader's instruction.

Restif's autobiography, *Monsieur Nicolas*, almost 2200 pages long in a modern edition, is very uneven and is supplemented by a number of things we may prefer to dismiss as junk. But at its best, it is wonderful. His description of tending his family's flocks in nearby fields while their shepherd is off on a pilgrimage to Mont-Saint-Michel is a evocative and emotional wonder, sharp in detail and passionate. In a much later passage he describes walking the Paris streets at night, particularly on the Ile Saint-Louis, looking in lighted windows, ogling passing women, and then scratching, with a key or a special iron tool made for the purpose, brief Latin "inscriptions" of what he has accomplished or seen or *felt* that day on the stones of the island's parapets. We can see such "inscriptions" as a kind of icon of the autobiographer, who has a pressing need to commemorate *in writing* both the women he has loved (or has imagined or imagined loving) and his own happiness or misery on a certain, precise date. The fact that professionally *this* autobiographer was a typesetting printer has given to at least the very rare original version of *Monsieur Nicolas* a very particular feature: the writer/printer of his book managed to put to use his lack of adequate supplies of various type faces by using (for instance) certain larger or bolder typefaces for moments of particular importance in his life. I suppose we all do something like that if we keep diaries, but in a printed autobiography I believe it to be a relative rarity. (I have brought with me the one page of that rare first edition that I was lucky enough to be given by a Restif scholar and collector: you may wish to come take a look at it later.)

Chateaubriand is one of France's most accomplished stylists, and his deep poetic gifts are particularly manifest in his *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave*, not only in his extraordinarily rhythmized and evocative prose but also in the book's magnificent and solidly formed structure. He compares the building of his *Mémoires* to the building of one of those great Gothic cathedrals that had come back into fashion in his day: the solid structure and grandeur and complex symmetries of its parts contribute to the overwhelming effect of the whole. But he also tells a really good story! From a lonely and rather frightened childhood in an isolated medieval chateau, via his wanderings during the dangerous period of the French Revolution through what then existed of the United States, to the start of his career as a famous writer, to his royalist political career, to his passionate attachment to many women, especially the famous Madame Récamier, to his political and diplomatic career in the 1820's and early 30's, and finally

to reflections on various important personages he has known and his thoughts on where things are headed: such is the varied program of his memoirs.

I had been asked some years ago by the American publisher of small guide-like introductions to famous French writers to do an updating of their little book on Chateaubriand, but, shortly after I accepted to do so and began writing, the publisher of the series cancelled the series. I was rather relieved, since I had discovered in writing those first few pages that I really didn't want to write another book about Chateaubriand, and especially I didn't want to write a non-scholarly book about him. Fortunately I had in the preceding year or so gotten hooked on the writings of Renaud Camus, and that very same day I started off writing a general introduction to him and his work: this was somewhere in the early 1990s, and I'm still working on that Renaud Camus book! Camus is so prolific that, every time I decide to stop my presentation of his works he comes out with a new publication, usually hundreds of pages long, of a totally new and challenging sort that throws a completely different light on what I had just written about his previous writings.

Essentially all of Camus's books are autobiographical in nature, reflecting more or less precisely various facets of his life: we recognize that it is his life from the testimony of his published diaries that first appear in 1981, only six years after his first book—a novel – appeared. In all his books he tells us about what he thinks and feels, about what he likes to look at (like painting, architecture, landscapes, and city scapes), about dealings with his publishers, about French and European politics, about his extensive and frequent travels, and in particular about his homosexuality, frequently in considerable detail, and eventually including the gradual changes that age brings to his sex life. He also adds much social commentary, for example his elitist observations on the decline of the French educational system and bemoaning of what he sees as a sharp decline in the correct usage of the French language. Rather disappointingly for me he also traces the evolution of his reactionary, conservative political views. All of these topics and perspectives are represented as well in his extraordinary autobiography in 999 sections, entitled *P.A.* But that autobiography also features something quite special that the 999 sections make possible: constant and frequent cross-references that allow us at least some possibility of seeing how, non-linearly, his consciousness is operating.

Now *P.A.* does not follow the characteristic chronological order going from family, to birth-childhood-adolescence-maturity-career-decline-and approaching death. It does, however, follow a fairly logical order in its self-description. After beginning with the striking section addressed to the very moment of reading: "1. Don't read this book! don't read this book!" and a quick examination of whether or not the author should be accused of "nombriisme" (that is, gazing at his navel), *P.A.* moves rapidly to the perhaps shocking "personal ad," and then it follows with the usual subjects—his personal evolution, things he likes and doesn't like, his lovers over the years, his friends, his relations with the surrounding society—especially his constant money

troubles—to arrive, finally, practically at the very end, at the story of his family. The “experimental” aspect of *P.A.* is not in this list of fairly usual topics but rather in the *analytic* order of the book. I don’t understand, frankly, why exactly 999 sections (do they suggest maybe a life full of experience which is coming towards its end but not yet there?), but the point of having numbered sections seems to me clear: they greatly enhance the possibility of those cross-references.

*P.A.*, alas, is *not* easy to read. In the first place we have to decide how to read it: from page 1 to page 414, or from section 1 to section 999 plus the 24 notes at the end? Or do we read each section starting from section 1 *plus* the cross-references as they appear? And if we choose the latter (which is what I did), then we are faced with another awful problem: the sections—some short and some vast—do not always appear in numerical order, and finding them takes a lot of page turning. Furthermore, throughout most of the book a number of sections run in one or a few lines on the same page for many, many pages: this allows for a visual presentation of the way the mind frequently runs many scenarios simultaneously, but it also makes page-turning and continuity of reading extraordinarily difficult. (Feel free to come up later and look at this book, too.) I believe that what Camus is trying to accomplish in this complicated structure is to recognize that a chronologically organized narrative necessarily skews the true portrayal of a life as that portrayal is lived in the mind of the composing autobiographer. Moreover, autobiography has traditionally been written retrospectively, whereas life develops from the beginning to an end, without its most interested party having certain knowledge of anything in the future: *plans*, yes, but not *certainty*. This may be the biggest cause of autobiography’s inability to present its writer’s past with total accuracy. As much as she or he may try to place a selected time in the past “as it really was,” that described moment is permeated with the writer’s knowledge of that moment’s future becoming—indeed it was *selected* on the grounds of its future significance. Has not Camus chosen in *P.A.* a more intellectually honest way of at least *portraying* his life by setting out for us on these strange pages how his mind is working as he is composing his life for the reader?

It was during the recent presidential campaign that, like many other Americans, I became aware of Barack Obama’s books and, in particular, *Dreams from My Father*, which sounded to me like a book I would like—and I did. This early work of his is either NOT an autobiography or is a very strange kind of autobiography, since he wrote it when he was so young: “I’m thirty-three now,” Obama writes in his Introduction. A much more usual kind of statement at the beginning of an autobiography would be something like “I recently turned fifty.” (*I* started the first version of *my* autobiography at age 60, but as I’ve already tried to point out, I have always been slow.) Some would maintain that Obama’s youthful book is more a “memoir” of his beginnings than an “autobiography”; what intrigues me here, however, is how much it is a retrospective accounting of how he became the person who would become the person we now see regularly in the news and on TV. From his childhood self-

sufficiency and youthful egoism we watch him become aware of others and the *needs* of others; we see him learn to organize other workers around himself in the cause of social justice. When he finally gets to Kenya and confronts his extended family, their memories of the father he really never knew, and the realities of post-colonial Africa, we witness his new awareness of the awesome and also destructive force of European and American remodeling of an ancient *other* culture that risks losing precious human and social values that the new world seems to have little time for. In short, we watch him become aware that he is African *and* American and witness the awakening in him of a feeling that he has a particular, even unique responsibility to try to bring two incompatible ways of life into harmony in modern global society. One might say that, in contrast with my three earlier examples Obama here shows himself to be moving towards not more but less *self-ishness*.

You may have noticed that what I have – rather deviously – done in these remarks is present you with a version of *my* autobiography. “A man is what he reads.” (That’s either a quotation whose source I do not know, or it ought to be.) As the cuckoo is said to nest in other birds’ nests, I have here “trajected” in other writer’s trajectories. I have tried to tell you no lies. In telling you about Restif’s autobiography I have suggested that I, too, started in a very different place from where I ended up, and that I had at least some inner, if not very conscious, urge to get ahead in my own education, to get out of a futureless and (in my case) religious bind that I actually felt no attachment to, while at the same time moving from one kind of a “missionary milieu” to another profession – college teaching in the humanities – in which missionary zeal was just as much called for as the stamina and physical force of Restif’s peasant body was necessary for *his* long and productive life as a laborer, writer, and survivor in the challenging environment of revolutionary France. In telling you about Chateaubriand’s “memoirs” I have suggested that I am aware of “cathedral-building” in the management of my own career and of my perceived need to cast what I tell you of my past in rather dignified terms that implicitly suggest much more volition in my progress than I have in fact any right to suggest. In referring you to Renaud Camus I have certainly hinted at my own love of literature, architecture, painting, and travel, but I have most clearly – if indirectly – told you of my fascination with homosexuality that stems from and reveals my own homosexuality. Finally, in mentioning the Dreams from Barack Obama’s Father I have suggested to you that my own trajectory would have never been what it was – intellectually or in any other respect – were it not for my gradual understanding over my whole life, more and more, how my father’s honesty, determination, and caring for others more than for himself gradually worked to undercut my own egotism, carelessness, and selfishness. I have tried to be honest in what I have said to you, but I’m sure that you are happily aware that I have also urged you to mistrust at least some of what I’ve told you this afternoon.

AND: my “intellectual trajectory,” if that’s what it is, is perhaps not yet finished. I have yet to *understand* something that happened near the very end of my days “teach-

ing literature,” as it were. I “came out of the closet” in 1992, at age 60. Rather late, no doubt. I “came out” first to a few good friends (who told me that they already knew anyway) and then increasingly to more and more people, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. Yale did what Yale always does in such delicate circumstances: it (in the person of the Provost) named me member and then chairman of a newly established university committee overseeing the funding of Lesbian and Gay scholarship at Yale, and people at Yale who paid attention to such things had the relevant “ha, ha!” moment. I didn’t “come out” to my students, but they knew, either because they knew anyway or because I sometimes talked about the committee I chaired. But the astonishing thing was that my relationship to my students in class suddenly changed – for the better. I had always been thought of by students who were interested in the books and topics that interested me, as a tolerable, though rather boring, old-fashioned, and certainly not “with it” teacher. But suddenly we began to communicate, regularly, with each other, about our enthusiasms, likes and dislikes, doubts and fears, and other everyday concerns as they were related to the poems or books we were engaged with. It’s as though my former “closeted-ness” had *blocked* something in the way I connected to people – and perhaps especially students – whom I didn’t know very well, and that block had now disappeared. I’ve never read anything about such an unblocking nor heard anyone else talk about it, but I certainly would like to. Perhaps you can help me out!

Other questions spring up, too. From what source arises in us autobiography readers this nosy desire to know what other people have thought about their lives, their projects, their hopes and fears? It’s easy to see how such questioning of themselves might be therapeutic for the autobiographers, but might it also turn out to be therapeutic for their readers? Confession may “be good for the soul,” but can it also be good for the reader’s soul? And why has autobiographical literature become so extraordinarily popular nowadays? *And* what does any of this have to do with “Intellectual Trajectories” at the Koerner Center?