CHAPTER I

Introduction: The Autobiographies of the 'Thirties Generation: A Perspective
Arriving at a specific definition of autobiography as a literary genre is quite a task, for there are various questions to be answered first. Is autobiography literature? If it is 'literature,' what place does it occupy among writings coming under the category? Again, is it fiction or fact? If it is fact, how does it differ from history? These and numerous other questions are to be answered before one arrives at an adequate definition, or a description, of the form.

To call autobiography 'literature' might sound too summary, for the question requires some further probing. What distinguishes one form of literature from another is, as Northrop Frye puts it, the "radical of presentation," and the shape, texture, mode of narration, all these elements go to determine the form. The reader may face no perplexities in distinguishing a drama from an epic, for instance, or a lyric from a work of fiction. But he may not be quite certain when he comes to a work which


will come under the category called "autobiography." On the one hand, the reader may be tempted to place it in proximity with non-fictional forms like history or biography, thinking that it is nothing but a narration of the factual events which took place in the life of an individual. On the other hand, he may be drawn to place it in the section called 'fiction.'\(^3\) This perplexing nature of autobiography is an inherent quality of the genre, for it falls very much on the border-line between fact and fiction, and does not lend itself to precise categorization.

Autobiography is not a new genre emerging in the literary field. It has always existed along with its closely allied forms like the diary, the journal, letter-writing and the memoir.\(^4\) Like other forms of literature, it has had its ebb and flow in accordance with the need and demand and its popularity in a particular age. For instance, autobiography in the days of antiquity existed in the form of self-aggrandizement, self-glorification and self-propaganda.\(^5\) During the medieval period it existed in the form of confessions, and in the modern period,

\(^3\) Ibid., p.307.


it is guided by newer aims, of self-realization, self-evaluation, self-exploration or self-examination.

The emergence and extinction of other literary genres have affected autobiography. For instance, with the "obsolescence" of the literary epistle, autobiography takes up some of the qualities earlier associated with the epistle, viz., the spontaneity and intimacy that is allowed in this form. Again, it may be noted that the emergence of the lyric form in the nineteenth century has major consequences for autobiography. Moreover, the advantage of extra-literariness that autobiography has over its other allied forms has been recognized in recent years. The form has undergone radical changes in the twentieth century, and this is evidenced from a consideration of the motivation that now governs an autobiographer, his manner of handling his task, and the difficulties that he meets with in his undertaking.

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Recent critics and theoreticians of English autobiography seem to agree on one point: that the eighteenth century forms a line of demarcation between

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the autobiography as it was cultivated up to the medieval times on the one hand, and modern autobiography on the other. It is interesting to go into the complex determining factors that cause this shift from the confessional mode to the modern mode of self-narration. The autobiographies that appeared earlier up to the medieval period, leading finally to Augustine's *Confessions*, have a religious basis, because the chief motive of the autobiographer was confession. This almost ritualistic


c) Roy Pascal calls the period beginning Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782) to Goethe's *Poetry and Truth* (last Vol., 1831) as "decisive in the history of autobiography," because he finds amongst autobiographers "a devoted and detached concern with their intimate selves" *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, p.50.

act of confession led the autobiographer to examine his self and ascertain his possibilities of entering into closer ties with the presence known as God. His concern was to evaluate his deeds and find out his chances of attaining salvation. This preoccupation with the question of one's religious worthiness is quite in keeping with the general temper of the period.

St. Augustine's *Confessions* (ca. 400), St. Teresa's The Life (1563-5), John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* (1666), for instance, represent the confessional mode. It may here be noted, however, that St. Augustine's autobiography follows the Christian tradition of confession, but with a difference. St. Augustine's work demonstrates signs of a shift — from a religious to a secular frame. Nearly all throughout his autobiography, he calls upon God to bear witness to his deeds. All the same, it becomes evident, that he is also keen on drawing the attention of his readers to his practical worldly affairs. This is perhaps so, because the chief purpose of his autobiography is to trace the "history of his own soul,"9 which he feels may also serve as an example to men as to how an ex-sinner ultimately is drawn towards God.

Commonplace incidents like boyhood pranks (e.g., stealing of pears for no good reason but to taste them a bit and throw them at hogs (Confessions pp. 25-26), complaints of a school boy (inability to grasp his studies, neglecting it and being punished for it (pp. 9-10), a frank account of the vile practices he indulges in, with the advancement into manhood (p. 50), his gradual realization of his own weaknesses and his determination to abandon his waywardness (pp. 118-119), finally his conversion to Christianity along with his friend Alypius (pp. 170-172), and his decision to devote his life to God — are all means to an end in the Confessions. St. Augustine reviews his past, and describes in detail such incidents and events as will throw particular light on his spiritual growth. This results in a fusion of the religious and secular concerns. The religious purpose necessitates a secular frame in St. Augustine's autobiography. The secular frame that he introduces into the realm of autobiography was yet to establish itself in the coming years.

The change in motivation of the 18th century and later autobiographers, and later, seems to set in because of the changing concept of man and the concept of the relationship man has with God and with the universe. What the autobiographers of the 18th century did was to demonstrate that they no longer dwelt in a universe bound
by the frame provided by Christian belief, based on certain theological assumptions. This new sense of independent reliance on the self marks a shift which was to find expression later in the autobiographical writings of the romantics. Man's preference for the concrete rather than the abstract, the particular rather than the general, and the deductive rather than the inductive methods of reasoning, is manifest in autobiographies of the period starting with the 18th century.

Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782), Gibbon's *Autobiography* (1827), Goethe's *Poetry and Truth* (1812-31), and Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1805) represent the initial phase in the history of modern autobiography. Each one of these autobiographers narrates his self-history in his own uniquely individual manner. Rousseau, for instance, makes an open declaration of his uniqueness: "I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. If I am not better, at least I am different."  

Shumaker makes an apt remark about this new shift in men's gaze from heaven to earth, when he says that men's eyes were finally "brought down from concepts shining in Heaven to the data of earthly experience; and the adventures of individual living, like everything else that could be observed, then became materials for a new synthesis" - *English Autobiography*, pp.29-30.


Gibbon's originality in *Autobiography* lies in the way he asserts that in tracing the history of his own self, he felt he was destined to trace the history of the Roman Empire. He explains: "The review of my moral and literary career is the most interesting to myself and to the public; and I may expatiate, without reproach, on my private deeds since they have produced the public writings which can alone entitle me to the esteem and friendship of my readers." Goethe anticipates modern autobiography as he gives an account of how he became a poet. Moreover, he also demonstrates how he brought about a fusion between the self and the world. This aspect of the interaction between the inner and outer worlds, forms one of the basic themes of modern autobiographers, including those belonging to the 'thirties generation.

Wordsworth, in his own way, represents the modern outlook. Rousseau and Wordsworth may be here singled out as arch-autobiographers of the 19th century. Their modernism is brought out in their egoism which "makes them the leading spokesmen for the character of a new age in literature." Rousseau's *Confessions* points forward to the modern autobiography in more than one

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respect. At the very outset of his autobiography, he says that he is setting before his fellow-men "the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature, and that man myself." He further goes on to declare that he will bring out frankly his "innermost self," whether good or bad. This approach on the part of the autobiographer to his task is in itself new. Rousseau knows that human beings are not infallible and that if any one else was to handle his own tale in as candid a manner as he does, he will be unable to say: "I was better than that man!"

Starting with this apologetic tone, Rousseau endeavours to delineate the history of his outer and inner selves. In due order, this Geneva-born citizen goes on to point out the influence of his native place as this perhaps accounts for his love of nature and his taste for solitude, which never left him even late in life. He recalls how he took to reading books from a tender age. Since Rousseau believes in the "supremacy of private experience," he candidly deals with his most intimate relationship with Mme Warrens or with Therese Le Vasseur. The episode of how he stole a "rose-coloured silver ribbon" from Countesse

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16 Ibid., p. 40.
17 Ibid., p. 43.
de Vercilles' house and how he lay the blame on a maid-servant, is significant from the point of view of the psychological insight it offers. Rousseau admits that the sense of guilt he experienced could only find an outlet in confessing his sin.

Here, it may be noted that Rousseau does not confess for the sake of being pardoned by God; he does it to find release from the built up tension that this theft occasioned. Rousseau's Confessions shows traces of modern autobiography in the sense that he is very conscious, as a modern man, of the evils of civilization. This indignation at the stupidity of civil institutions is aroused when he witnesses the injustice, inequality, and disorder in society, particularly when he takes up service as an ambassador's secretary in Venice. The third part of Confessions which contains a chapter named 'Hermitage' gives a picture of how Rousseau lived a simple and intellectual life, close to nature. The 'secular salvation' that he experiences here, is something he looks for, all his life. As he acknowledges: "... I had been good; from that moment I became virtuous, or, at least, intoxicated with virtue." The self-realization that

18 Rousseau's social dissension which finds mention in Confessions is later expressed in works like Discourse on Inequality, Émile, etc.

19 Quoted in Roy Pascal, Design and Truth in Autobiography, p.42.
comes to him is perhaps the chief end towards which more than one autobiographer tends in undertaking to delineate his own portrait.

Wordsworth's The Prelude, like Rousseau's Confessions, stands out as a unique work. Wordsworth gives this autobiographical work an epic dimension as he proceeds to analyse the way in which his imagination gives shape to his poetic aspirations. He tries to catalogue such features of his life as he feels will throw light on how his poetic mind developed. The craggy mountain-side (Racedown, and later on Esthwaite), where he spent his childhood and early period of life offered him enough opportunity to watch, observe and recollect in his own leisure hours the gorgeous picture of the grove, the stream and the vale. During his adult life later, when he goes to London, for instance, he very much misses the paradisal scenery of his childhood days. Life as it prevails here, in the city of London, baffles him:

"... how men lived

Even next-door neighbours, as we say, yet still
Strangers, and knowing not each other's names" 20

And he seeks consolation only in recapturing those lost moments of joy in his imagination.

Very much like Rousseau, Wordsworth at one stage, appears a social dissenter as may be traced in the following lines:

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Of that injustice which ... upon ourselves
By composition of Society
Ourselves entail. 21
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But there is a difference in Rousseau's and Wordsworth's approaches to the evils of society. Rousseau reacts in a defiant manner and prefers isolation and seeks refuge in nature. Wordsworth too tries to get closer to nature when he finds no pleasure in society. But as he does so he is drawn more to human beings than ever.

Rousseau and Wordsworth, therefore, may rightly be called arch-autobiographers representing the modern mode of self-narration. Both the autobiographers, though conscious of the presence of God and His world, do not make a fetish of it. They are more interested in the roles they would themselves assume, each in his own unique manner.

Eighteenth century then, forms the dividing line between religious and secular autobiographies. One might recall a very interesting remark made by Stephen Spender in "Confessions and Autobiography" about the confessional

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21 Ibid., p. 221.
mode of autobiographies. Spender points out that the inner lives of people are so complicated these days that open confession is not possible. "The antidote was once the Church. Today it is the vast machinery of psychological analysis and explanation." Spender comments on the fashion for psychoanalysis and how "intimate confessions of thousands of people have flooded the statistics of sociologists like Dr. Kinsey, one suspects that ours is an age where many people feel a need to confess the tensions of their inner lives."  

With Spender's remark in mind one might well consider that the modern autobiography is once again going back to the confessional mode but with a difference. It is in keeping with the growing needs of a new emergent concept of man—his individualism, his distance from the older ties of the Church and God. The need to confess and the narrator's ultimate sense of relief in being so engaged in his task of self-analysis, also speak of the changed connotation of the word 'confession.' For an autobiographer God is not the listener; he seeks his audience amongst men of the world, familiar with worldly affairs. St. Augustine calls his autobiography Confessions. The work offers us a


23 Ibid., p.72.
confession of human sins and also an acknowledgement of God's divine mercy. The reader is made to listen to matters of worldly affairs and at the same time knows that St. Augustine is calling upon God to listen to him, as is registered on almost every page of his work. Rousseau too calls his autobiography Confessions, but there is little of the religious element in his work. The stirrings of the secular autobiography are already to be found in St. Augustine's Confessions but the new mode establishes itself on firm ground only in the eighteenth century.

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Romanticism brings with it a new approach to the writing of autobiography, as also in other forms of literature like the novel, for instance. Among the several new features associated with it are: man's curiosity about his own self, a deeper knowledge of the human psyche that provides an explanation for the growing complexities of human personality, man's consciousness of the loss of selfhood, a feeling of alienation, a mental state caused by his 'wounded ego,' a feeling for the 'unity of being,' the restraints put on man's personal autonomy by society. These are all manifest in the expression of human personality through various forms of writing, including

24 These conclusions have been drawn after consulting
the autobiography, and they have contributed to the larger movement which is 'modernism.' Consequently, autobiographies of the twentieth century, share with works in other genres as well, some of these traits. The autobiographer of the present century keeps in step with his counterparts amongst novelists and poets, for apart from a tendency towards an inward probing, he also shows an urge to expand his scope to include events in the public realm, an urge which is characteristic of our age. The tendency is on the part of the writer to seek to transcend his own self and to


"What is certain is that man's private behaviour has been profoundly affected, both by the atmosphere of moral perplexity within which he lives and by the expansion of the public realm which characterizes our Age" - The Modern Age, Vol. 7, Of The Pelican Guide to English Literature. Ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1964), pp.17-18.

Lawrence Buell in his essay "Transcendentalist Self-Examination and Autobiographical Tradition," refers to the new tendency, which can be ascribed to transcendentalism, in American autobiography: "... the self became a more important entity for the transcendentalist than for any of their forbears." Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance (New Delhi: Eurasia Publishing House (P) Ltd., 1974) p.267. This is also true of English autobiographies of the present age, e.g., Edwin Muir's An Autobiography (1954).
attain "a secularization of spirituality." 27

The present-day autobiographer, as noted earlier, is at an advantage for he can borrow techniques from writers in other genres, an advantage hitherto unknown to autobiographers of the preceding ages. 28 From the novelist, for instance, the modern autobiographer has learnt to delineate his own self "shaped by imagination," 29 or again from the novelist, he has learnt to communicate at times his vital truth through falsification. 30

To think of autobiography then, in its modern context, one would do well to refer to a definition of autobiography given by Mazlish, for it appears to cover some of the main aspects of autobiography in the contemporary sense. Mazlish

27 "... our literature is concerned with salvation. No literature has ever been so intensely spiritual as ours. I do not venture to call it actually religious, but certainly it has the special intensity of concern with the spiritual life which Hegel noted when he spoke of the great modern phenomenon as the secularization of spirituality." Lionel Trilling, Beyond Culture; Essays on Literature and Learning, p. 8.

28 Elizabeth Bruss makes a reference to this aspect of autobiography when she observes: "autobiography has also appropriated forms and techniques from other types of discourse." The Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre, p. 9.

29 Patricia Meyer Spacks, Imagining a Self; autobiography and novel in eighteenth century England, p. 311.

30 Ibid., p. 311.
defines modern autobiography as "... a literary genre produced by romanticism, which offers us a picture from a specific present viewpoint of a coherent shaping of an individual past, reached by means of introspection and memory of a special sort, wherein the self is seen as a developing entity, changing by definable stages, and where knowledge of the self links with knowledge of the external world, and both together provide us with a deep and true grasp of reality." The definition throws light on the aim, scope and content of contemporary autobiography, in keeping with the overall changes in this genre.

Modern autobiographies differ in content, form and intention from autobiographies of the pre-Romantic period. A modern autobiographer, especially when he also happens to be a writer or a poet, presents not merely his life-history but he also does something more. He takes particular interest in presenting his own self as a product of a particular social and cultural milieu. And therefore in this sense an autobiography of the modern period is a sort of social documentation or an attempt to transform one's

individual story into a socio-cultural document. Events in the social, political and cultural spheres provide a constant backdrop against which the autobiographer presents his own story. The validity of the statement can be ascertained on examining contemporary autobiographies, for instance, those of Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, John Lehmann, Arthur Koestler and Robert Graves. For almost all the autobiographies in this range, the narrative line remains very much the same.

That these writers are the products of the same socio-cultural upbringing is evidenced from the very content of their life-histories. The keen sensitivity and sharp reaction of early twentieth century autobiographers to the various like-situations in life are recorded in their autobiographies. For instance, one common feature is "a sense of desolation, of uncertainty, of futility, of the groundlessness of aspiration" all around them. This feeling of course was the result of the state of affairs in Europe during the time. They were all aware of the corrupt liberal as well as conservative ideologies. And most of the intellectuals show the same discontent with such ideologies. The best solution available to them was

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to turn communist. For it seemed to provide a good solution to the burning issues of the day. In their self-history they find a good vehicle to expound their political commitments. Their works are a sort of apologia for them, where they justify their preference for the Communist Party. But, for them the attraction for the party was a passing phase. This may be judged from the disappointments they have expressed at finding the disparity between ideals and precepts, on the one hand, and active practice on the other, in this regard.

Another feature which is found recurrent in the works of contemporary autobiographers is their consciousness of the fact that the ideals instilled in them through their education in public schools hardly ever materialized. The character that this particular system professed to build was, as Louis MacNeice says, "all right on a short-term view but all wrong on a long." Apart from other faults of the public school system, C.Bay Lewis speaks of "a defect... which conferred too much responsibility too suddenly. Boys, who a year before had been subordinates, were given authority over their fellows and at the same time while they were learning how to exercise it, were expected to develop the self-discipline of the scholar; these two

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disciplines are very different in kind..."\(^{34}\) Stephen Spender also complains of the "public-school snobbishness"\(^{35}\) or the superiority complex that the public-school boys suffered from. The intellectuals of the period were all pained to see the social and political conditions, but were hopeful that some solution could be found to remove these evils. Almost all of them, in course of their self-narration, refer to problems like the economic slump, the agricultural depression, unemployment, injustice, loss of faith, a scramble for power that ultimately led the power-mongers to dominate over others, a feeling of being uprooted on being forced to give up one's native land (true, in case, for instance, of Edwin Muir, Herbert Read and John Lehmann). When these intellectuals looked about them, most of them turned to Communism, of course with a few exceptions like Beatrice Webb, whose approach is typical of that of a social investigator.\(^{36}\)

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\(^{36}\) It may be noted here, that amongst autobiographers there are a few exceptions like Beatrice Webb, whose approach to the prevailing evils of the time, is scientific. For instance the social investigator observes in her autobiography "... the low wages, long hours and insanitary conditions of the sweated industries, and the chronic under-employment at the docks - could, I thought, be mitigated, perhaps altogether prevented by appropriate legislative enactment and Trade Union pressure."/ Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship, Vol. II* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1938), p.439.
A contemporary autobiographer's strong reaction to political upheaval during the period, leads him to analyse in details at times, the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath, or the World War. The general temper may be gauged from the minute descriptions these writers give of these political events. John Lehmann pictures the situation well in his autobiography: "... I think every young writer began seriously to debate with himself how he could best be of use, by joining the Brigade, or driving an ambulance, or helping the active committees in England or France, or in some other way." An apocalyptic view of the approaching destruction and the end of civilization becomes a part of the consciousness of the age as reflected in the autobiographies of the early twentieth-century. John Lehmann, Louis MacNeice, Arthur Koestler, Robert Graves, amongst others, are all equally affected by the war. They try to recall such panic-striken pictures as of air-raids or of the deserted towns or of unemployed young men eagerly looking out for jobs.


38 A few extracts of modern autobiographers reveal their concern.

a) John Lehmann speaks of the aftermath of war by saying "superhuman strength" was required to "lift up the stone slab that pressed on it" - The Whispering Gallery, p.215.

b) Arthur Koestler speaks of large number of unemployed
A reading of contemporary autobiographies indicates that the self-historians are not only confined to outer events but they also demonstrate how these public events shake them to the very roots of their being. A forcible intrusion of social issues on private lives becomes evident in self-histories written by contemporaries. This idea is best expressed by Stephen Spender when he says that a feeling of being "hound by external events" constantly dogged him, and this proves true of others among his contemporaries.

In modern autobiography, an autobiographer's inner conflict or inner duality or division plays a significant part in his work. This is probably the result of the modern man's growing realization of himself as a social being and his awareness that he cannot dwell in a world during the time: "unemployment in Germany soared to the figure of seven million - one-third of the total number of wage-earners" - Arrow In The Blue: An Autobiography (London: Collins, 1952), p.210.

c) Louis MacNeice says about war; "I felt that I was not justified in supporting the war verbally unless I were prepared to suffer from it in the way the unprivileged must suffer" - The Strings are False, p.21.

d) Air-raid warnings are described at length by autobiographers of the period, e.g., John Lehmann in I Am My Brother, p.26; Louis MacNeice in Chap.35 of his autobiography; Robert Graves, Good-bye to All That (London: Garden City Press, 1929), p.273.

all by himself and alone. Nor is it desirable. Thus, in his narration, there is a constant effort made by the self-narrator to exhibit the interaction between himself and others. What particularly engages the attention of the modern autobiographer is the process which helps him maintain a balance between his own self and the world at large. He is interested in presenting the clash of private and public values that occurs in his life and he seeks to demonstrate how a reconciliation between the two values is achieved.

Autobiographers of the 'thirties particularly are intellectuals who cannot keep themselves out of the wider affairs of the day, and who yet long to be left alone in a world of their own. A modern autobiographer, therefore, looks back upon his past to find that in spite of the encroachment or invasion of private life by public events, he is able to survive and achieve an inner and outer harmony and ultimately attain a sense of wholeness.

(iii)

The general climate of modern thought, viz., an interest in the thought of Freud and Marx affects modern autobiography. Never before have the autobiographers shown so much concern with screening their inner and outer
selves as at present. Psychology proves a hand-maid to modern autobiographers, as it does for writers in other forms; it helps one to understand the complexities of the human mind, which up till now remained obscure and hidden. Lionel Trilling points out the changed attitude of the reading public who would like to get to the core of the inner being to understand the writer well. It is here that the autobiographer, if he is also a writer, finds himself at an advantage. In this connection, Trilling states: "... indeed almost the only good autobiographies are those of writers. The writer is more aware of what happens to him or goes on in him and often finds necessary or useful to be articulate about his inner states..." Realizing the importance of the knowledge of psychology and psycho-analysis today, an autobiographer should not "hold the reader at arm's


length,"42 by keeping away his innermost secrets, or else the autobiography fails to attract attention. Bruce Mazlish asserts the vital role that psychology plays in modern autobiography: "Autobiography before Freud, no matter how introspective, was still concerned only with the conscious mind."43 Autobiographers presented the readers with no entry passes to their unconscious minds which remained submerged under huge masses of iceberg. Psychology provides a break-through to this hitherto forbidden or unknown recesses of the mind and hence a better understanding of the self. As a result, some of the recent autobiographies would go to show how the contemporary autobiographer perhaps feels that his task remains incomplete unless he evaluates himself thoroughly - both his inner and outer being. He endeavours to get to the very core of his being in order to find out the intricacies that lie there.

Modern life is necessarily complex,44 and the autobiographer, once he undertakes to reflect upon the life he has lived, discovers the need to guard the delicate link

44 William Howarth aptly remarks in this context: "recent lives are necessarily more complex and their stories more challenging; that the content of a life shapes the form of its story, and not the other way around." - "Some Principles of Autobiography," New Literary History, Vol.5/(Winter, '1974), 363.
that binds his inner and outer worlds. A modern autobiographer takes particular care to demarcate various phases of his life. This movement from one phase to another, for instance, from childhood to adolescence to manhood, brings in its wake a sense of mental disquiet, which makes him aware of his 'divided self.' An autobiographer does not have inhibitions about referring to psycho-analytic treatment he undergoes in order to be restored to mental soundness or normalcy. Mazlish points out that "the discipline that claims today to speak most knowingly of the 'self' and especially of the 'sick' and 'divided self' in the process displacing the notion of the soul, altogether, is the science of psycho-analysis." A knowledge of psychology helps a modern autobiographer to distinguish between his actual and psychic reality, between his subjective and objective worlds; between reality and

45 See C.B. Cox's discussion on Freud's Civilization and its Discontents where he speaks of "sublimation of certain inner instincts or their total repression" caused by civilization (p.99) and also the "part played by social factors in individual development" and the relation between individual and society (p.188). The Twentieth-Century Mind: History, Ideas and Literature in Britain (1918-1945), Vol.II.

46 Amongst the contemporaries may be mentioned a few autobiographers who speak of their mental unsoundness for e.g. - Graham Greene (A Sort of Life, 1971), Louis MacNeice (The Strings are False, 1955), Arthur Koestler (Arrow in the Blue, 1952), etc.

Contemporary autobiographers often give an account of their dreams, which in some cases keep on recurring e.g. Louis MacNeice and Edwin Muir speak of such dreams which they ultimately got rid of by incorporating them in their poems. Edwin Muir, for instance, gives an account of the large number of his dreams, which he analysed later and this helped him to understand his self better. He too sought the help of a psychiatrist in order to be cured of his mental illness. Even a moment's reflection brings to one's mind such cases of autobiographers who have been able to save themselves and to guard themselves from being totally alienated from society, or from being estranged from their own selves or with others.

Another significant feature of modern autobiography, particularly during the 'thirties, is the influence of Marx. An autobiographer of this period, like his

48 (a) C.B. Cox says in The Twentieth-Century Mind, Vol.II: "This apparent success of socialism in the Soviet Union, coupled with the pilgrimages made there by left-wing intellectuals, at least partially explains the astonishing hold which Marxism had over British intellectuals during the 1930s." p.78.

(b) Amongst others, W.W. Robson in Modern English Literature refers to the influence of Marxism on literature (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), see p.126 or Ifor Evans refers to the same influence in A Short History of English Literature (see p.84); in Pelican Guide to English Literature, Vol.7, like references are made to the influence of Marxism (pp.35-34; 27-28; p.23 and p.25). David Daiches speaks of Marxism that came to aid youngsters in their diagnosis of the given situation in David Daiches, A Critical History of English Literature, Vol.IV, p.1136.
counterparts, is very much aware of the political machinery that keeps the wheels of the society moving. As an intellectual, an autobiographer, like the novelist or poet, for instance, felt that it was his duty to bear witness to the upheavals of the times and share these experiences with the common masses by joining the Communist Party, thus aligning themselves with the Marxist ideology. Most of the intellectuals of the period "resigned from the bourgeoisie want, or are supposed to want, to be at least honorary members of the working class or even to be completely merged." The autobiographer like other intellectuals knew that the problems that he would be tackling "were vast and, frightening," but at the same time he was aware that these were "formulable." A closer contact with Marxist ideology, as a party member, left the self-narrator disillusioned, for he found such disparity between ideals and actual practice. The conversion to Marxism as recorded in the autobiographies of the 'thirties generation particularly, had a solemn touch about it, as for instance, as seen in the case of Arthur Koestler, John Lehmann, Stephen Spender, Edwin Muir and C. Day Lewis. As soon as these autobiographers realized the corruption and hypocrisy that prevailed in the party, they

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50 W.W. Robson, Modern English Literature, p.126.
51 Ibid., p.126.
gave up their party membership. This loss of faith in the Party is recorded with a seriousness and a note of self-justification in their life-histories, which almost sounds like an apology. The God That Failed (1950) is a good document to show the pull the intellectuals felt towards the Communist Party, and their ultimate break with the party. Richard Crossman in his introduction points out how in the book "six intellectuals describe the journey into Communism, and the return." He further comments: "The only link, indeed, between these six very different personalities is that all of them - after tortured struggles of conscience - chose Communism because they had lost faith in democracy and were willing to sacrifice 'bourgeois liberties' in order to defeat Fascism. Their conversion, in fact, was rooted in despair - a despair of western values."53

In most of the autobiographies of the first half of the twentieth-century, these two influencing factors - viz. Freudianism and Marxism that went to shape the lives of the individuals, therefore find their due place in the self-narration.


53 Ibid., pp.9-10.
A modern autobiographer has the tendency to round off his work on a quiet note where he feels he has achieved salvation. It may be noted here that salvation for a modern autobiographer is 'secular salvation' or 'personal salvation.' For instance, when Beatrice Webb says of her social work: "I love work; that is my salvation," or again when Edwin Muir refers to the last days of his life, as a period that brings him inner peace, or when John Lehmann says at the end of his autobiography, Vol. II:

"... I felt full of energy, ambition and confidence as never before" — these are instances that exemplify how the utmost goal of the autobiographer is achieved when he enters a state of "wholeness" in so looking back to review his life. To recall John Lehmann's words which speak of his sense of achievement when he says: "I had a deep sense of fulfilment, as if I had come to the end of some symbolic journey, ..."

III (i)

One might now turn to the next question as to why autobiography finds efflorescence in the present age, or,

56 Ibid., p. 12.
to put it differently, though the eighteenth-century appears as an appropriate seed-time for the genre, why does it find a "luxuriant flowering" only in the twentieth-century? And one might add, why this revival in the genre, particularly during the 'thirties? With particular reference to the autobiographers of the 'thirties, one might assume that the general temper of the age is responsible for their undertaking to evaluate themselves against a set background of public events from which there was no escape.

The sensitive youngsters of the period, disillusioned and bewildered, tried to find some meaning out of all they witnessed and experienced. These writers feel that there is much intrusion or invasion on their private lives by public events. Most of these writers in their self-narrations particularly, represent how they faced these challenges posed by outer events. Samuel Hynes's explanation for the sudden flowering of the genre, especially during the first half of the twentieth-century is that these writers:

...looked back because the view ahead was disheartening and obscure; perhaps they felt a need to understand the route by which they

57 This is true, for instance, of Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, John Lehmann, Robert Graves, C.Day Lewis.
had reached this dark moment in history; and perhaps they sought to define the past in order to repudiate it.  

Kathleen Nott's explanation for the rise of the autobiography in the present century is:

"People want — and need — to know about people, because they need to know about themselves, to look over the wall into parallel circumstances and see that one must do so and not otherwise."

Lionel Trilling's view of the growing interest in the genre is also noteworthy:

"The impulse to write autobiography may be taken as virtually definitive of psychological changes to which the historians point ... His conception of his private and uniquely interesting individuality, together with his impulse to reveal his self, to demonstrate that in it which is to be admired and trusted, are, we may believe, his response to the newly available sense of an audience, of that public which society created."

Apart from these assumptions, another question arises: Is it for aesthetic reasons or for an ethical purpose that the writers turn to the form? That the autobiographers of the pre-modern period were led mainly by a religious urge, is a well established fact. They wrote their self-histories chiefly with the motive of evaluating themselves against ethical codes set up by religious institutions.

But perhaps the autobiographer today, is not so much drawn to evaluate himself against any ethical norms as he is drawn to write autobiography out of an aesthetic impulse. Elizabeth Bruss observes in this connection: "Pretensions to aesthetic worth were alien to English autobiography throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and rare even into the eighteenth." In the twentieth-century the impulse to write an autobiography becomes more clearly defined. The autobiographer is more interested in carving out an artistic image of himself rather than giving a bare narration of his life-history. The autobiographer is on the look out for a meaning and a pattern in life that is very much his own and best known only to himself. He is keen on making his life-history accessible to readers, so that his work stands out as an expression of a unique personality. He demonstrates in his autobiography how he has learnt the art of living in his own unique manner.

(ii)

An autobiography is a venture which people belonging to a large cross-section of life are tempted to undertake.\textsuperscript{62}


\textsuperscript{62} "As a general rule we do not want much encouragement to talk about ourselves..." This quotation of Conrad has been referred to by Bonamy Dobree in "Some Literary Autobiographies of the Present Age," \textit{Sewanee Review} (1956), p. 629, and also by H.N. Wether, ed. in \textit{The Curious Art of Autobiography: From Benvenuto Cellini to Rudyard Kipling} (London: Christopher Johnson, 1956), p. 218.
But when the autobiographer who presents his self-history, is again a poet, the work acquires a distinctive quality of its own. This is so, as Roy Pascal points out, because the poet-autobiographer has a special faculty: "Imagination, love of words and literary dexterity..." He goes on to observe: "What one can expect from the imaginative writer is an unusual skill in the evocation of scenes and characters, and more delicate self-observation, especially in respect to obscure inner urges, imaginings, to modes of perception and apprehension; one can expect too an artistic arrangement of the whole."63

To start with, one could think in general terms of the poet's chief intention - which is to convey to the reader some deep-felt experience that sticks on to his mind like burrs. What the poet is keen on doing, is to recollect such experiences which are stored in the innermost chamber of his mind and share these with others. The poet-autobiographer proposes to narrate these experiences objectively, even though he deals with materials that contain a lot of autobiographical elements in them. The poet deals with the same range of private or public themes in his poems, but this does not bring about his direct involvement. This is so because in composing

a poem the poet seems to be concentrating on experiences he wants to impart, and not on the self that speaks of them.

One of the central realizations on the part of the modern autobiographer is that the past that he wants to narrate cannot be explained or analysed, but it can only be "re-experienced in metaphors and symbols: in autobiography and poetry,"64 alike. This metaphoric creation of the self in autobiography and poetry helps one to understand both the inner and outer essence of one's self. The poet as well as the autobiographer are able to create metaphors for their respective experiences. Through their deft handling of their particular instances, they are able to reveal to the readers something that is universal. How the poet and the autobiographer handle their respective examples to turn their particular truth into universal truth is referred to by James Olney when he says:

"Art, both autobiographic and poetic, mediates between the transient world of sensation and feeling, of event and emotion, and a constant, stable realm of pattern and significance. The poet, in his passion for perceiving and holding formal patterns, transforms a myriad passing sensations into a single, apprehensible and meaningful artifact; and like the poet, the autobiographer who draws out of the flux of events a coherent pattern, or who creates a sufficient metaphor for experience, discovers in the particular, reveals to us the universal."65

65 Ibid., p.45.
But the two, the poet and the autobiographer, part company here. Unlike the poet who highlights his experiences, the poet-autobiographer's focus is on the creation of a 'self' that experiences various events, it is through the medium of this 'self' that he conveys his life-story.

William Howarth in his discussion "Autobiography as Poetry," speaks of the two artists, Rembrandt and Van Gogh, who kept on revising their self-portraits because in "both the artists the important element is uncertainty." They created a series of tentative pictures, "each more inconclusive than the last. The artists have neither preached nor performed; theirs is the poetic act of continuing self-study." Howarth likens the task of poet-autobiographers to these artists by pointing out that they can draw only tentative experimental self-portraits of themselves. They are "strongly critical of themselves and others, committed only to the right to change their ideas."

The pressure of sheer circumstances compelled a poet during the 'thirties to choose in his verse themes

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67 Ibid., 377.
68 Ibid., 377.
from all that he saw around him. The question is: why does a poet think of re-narrating in his autobiography things that have been covered in his poems? Perhaps, he feels a sort of satisfaction at the thought of re-chaptering all that he has felt and experienced in life, as though to reassure the reader as well as himself that whatever is re-rendered about his self in prose is to be taken in its totality along with his poetry. He perhaps feels that this re-rendering clears up some of the obscurities or ambiguities that his poetry is likely to contain. He makes up for whatever details are missing in his poems by deliberately attending to them in his autobiography. Since this particular genre has the advantage of allowing the narration

69 (a) C.D. Lewis in his book The Poetic Image speaks of the circumstances that compelled the poets to write poetry reflecting upon the times they lived in. He observes: "War rekindled the general imagination, not by turning everyone into a poet or poetry-lover overnight, but by compelling all to share a common experience ... That common experience created an impulse towards community ... The idea of war had been colouring his poetry and shaping his images before 1939, of course; but now war was a subject which spoke to him with all the authority of common suffering..." (London: Jonathan Cape, 1947), p.110.

(b) Samuel Hynes's remark in The Auden Generation about the war poets may be examined: "They offered a new tone, a new idea of imagery a new rhetoric. The tone was ironic, could be bitter or angry and could hate and condemn, but it avoided the upper register of emotions, the range of nobility and splendour and high tragedy. The imagery was the true naming of ugly things, nature violated and defaced, death without dignity, the wreakage of waste and war." pp.23-24.
to be rendered in the first person, the autobiographer is able to give a more frank and direct account of his tale, confident of an attentive listener. The vaguer 'self' or the impersonal 'I,' the persona, of the poem asserts himself with a fuller presence in the autobiography.

(iii)

A poet belonging to the 'thirties period is often basically a romantic, - Stephen Spender, for instance - who finds himself caught up in situations which compelled him to write poetry of a public order. This basic impulse was in a way thwarted and therefore finds expression in autobiography. The poet's religious convictions, political commitments, his divided self and his efforts to transcend his self to have a wider perspective of things - have all been expressed in his verse. What he does next in his autobiography is to recast his thoughts, revising and reconstructing them in prose. The reader's curiosity is naturally aroused to find that, what the poet-autobiographer does in his life-history is merely a residual act - a remoulding of the things already stated in his poetry. Though the poet-autobiographer restates things covered elsewhere in his poems, he perhaps feels that his personal side remains unstated in his poems, and hence that the
poems convey only part of the truth. In order to communicate the full truth of his experiences he takes recourse to autobiography and demonstrates how he "is engaged in a special way with the world." 70

Roy Pascal points out in his discussion that an autobiographer who is also a poet is both at an advantage and a disadvantage when he undertakes to present his self-history. The leading poets of the 'thirties, for instance, have been keen sensitive men. One has only to turn to their poems and find the rational manner in which intellectuals react to given situations. As John Lehmann observes: "They were aware that they were living in an age in which human affairs were getting increasingly out of control ... this danger also evoked the possibility of the rediscovery of great spiritual affirmations to counter it. They saw that what was needed was a restatement of faith: faith, if you like, in imaginative creation, but above all in the value of the individual and the reality of moral choice against man-made machines of organization and the crudity of material "Progress": against a world based on values of power only ..." 71 When a poet of the same generation writes an autobiography, he still retains the

revolutionary tone. But when he settles down to review his own life, as Lehmann says, he realizes that he is only restating his faith in his own self and in the choice that he has made against man-made machines and false power.

When Stephen Spender speaks of the general tendencies of literature during the 'thirties, he mentions how the themes of ideology and autobiography provide 'the thirties connection,' or the continuity of the 'thirties. The majority of his fellow-writers took to creative writing led by one ideology or the other. In undertaking to narrate their own tales, these writers perhaps wanted to maintain a "thirties connection" by proclaiming loudly to the world that they were all men of the same generation, and the very act of writing their own stories appears to be an act of protest, a "necessary act of catharsis." Surprisingly enough, Auden, an acknowledged leader of the poets of the 'thirties, refrains from writing his autobiography. The reason can perhaps be found in the advice he himself gave to C. Day Lewis on this point, saying that a poet should not attempt to write an autobiography. The 'thirties connection' seems to be...
absent in his case. Perhaps, by remaining impersonal in his poems, he was able to express himself the best. Or again, it is likely that he could not trust himself, for fear he might be led to narcissism, which would hamper the writing of an autobiography.  

The autobiographer tries to recover the time that has already slipped away. He finds that the only way to recover the lost time is to write his self-history which brings with it a sense of recapturing or reliving his past. This is what, for instance, autobiographers do in reporting about their childhood, as we shall see, for they believe in going back again and again to recover the earlier years of life, an act of the mind which brings them a sense of wholeness that the present does not offer.

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75 Auden states elsewhere: "The image of myself which I try to create in my own mind in order that I may love myself is different from the image which I try to create in the minds of others in order that they may love me." Henri Peyre quotes Auden in Literature and Sincerity (New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 1963), p. 323.

76 Burton Pike says in "Time in Autobiography": "And to redeem the time is one of the autobiographer's prime motives, perhaps the prime motive — perhaps indeed, the only real motive of the autobiographer." Comparative Literature, 28(1976), 240.