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Creative Autobiography

FROM SELF-KNOWLEDGE TO
THE TEACHING OF WRITING

Autobiographical writing has a long history. Many of the forms of autobiographical writing known nowadays were already cultivated in the ancient world.¹ Digital forms, blog-writing, Facebook-updates or digital autobiography augment an old type of narrative.² Autobiographical literature is by no means tied to paper and print,³ but burgeoned on all sorts of surfaces: stone, bronze plates, papyrus, pieces of pot, rolls of parchment, paper, magnetic tape and nowadays on all possible digital media. In different periods autobiographical writing has been cultivated for numerous different purposes – for self-knowledge, expression and artistic-aesthetic reasons, for analysing reality and one's own course of life, and for consolation and taking care of oneself.

1 Kosonen 2007, 11–12; Abbs 1998. Compare Misch 1907/1950ab; Gusdorf 1956/1980 and 1991ab; Bakhtin 1975/1979; Baslez et al. 1993.

2 On late modern autobiographical writing, see e.g. Lejeune 2005; Kujan-sivu & Saarenmaa 2007; Smith & Watson 2012. – On digital autobiography, see e.g. Lejeune 2000; Paasonen 2007; Juppi 2012.

3 E.g. Cope & Phillips 2006; Smith & Watson 2012.

In this article I first examine the idea and the phenomenon of autobiography. I consider what benefit can be accrued from a knowledge of the cultural history of autobiography writing for the teaching of creative writing. I then create a theoretical basis for the method I called creative autobiographical writing and present a closely comparable programme of British fictional autobiography. I move widely in the humanities: autobiographical and literature research, anthropology, cultural research, creative writing research and psychotherapeutic creativeness and writing research. Finally, I examine the conception that two European writers, Georges Perec (1936–1982) and W.G. Sebald (1944–2001), have of their own autobiographical writing.

THE DIVERSITY OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

In Europe both ancient and modern autobiographical writing⁴ has flourished in many different forms: diaries, notes and letters, poetry and essays, memoirs, confessions and autobiographies and the spiritual exercises of mystics – to mention but a few of the more well-known. Writing may be intended for

4 I use “autobiographical writing” in the wide cultural-anthropological meaning of Georg Misch (1907/1950ab). Misch’s concept covers a wider field than the “autobiography” of literary science (see Lejeune 1971/1998, 10; Lejeune 1975, 14; compare Kosonen 2009). – Other wide concepts are Foucault’s (1983) “writing about the self” (*écriture de soi*), Didier’s (1998) “writing about me” (*écriture de moi*), “personal writing” (e.g. Latvala, Peltonen & Saresma 2004). In a certain sense this could also be referred to as “self-sourced writing” or “writing in one’s own voice”, even “autofiction”, if it is loosely understood as “enriching” a literary text from the basis of one’s own experience (Doubrovsky 1988; compare Hunt 2000).

personal use (a personal diary or journal) or drafted with the intention of publication (confessions, memoirs, autobiography). Semi-public autobiographical forms of writing (for instance, letters) have often given rise to arguments and scandals and through them created new literary topoi (for instance, the lost letter topos). In modern autobiographical writing too, fuss linked to autobiographical writing belongs to the semi-public arena, in which the boundaries between private and public do not prevail in the general public understanding (autobiographical novel, text-message disputes, e-mail messages, Facebook and Twitter entries).

In different eras different sides of autobiographical writing have been emphasized. For example, in ancient and medieval Europe a many-sided culture of autobiographical writing that emphasized taking care of oneself and self-knowledge dominated. It did not, however, focus on individual or the genre of modern autobiography, which was unknown in antiquity.⁵ The modern autobiography tied to narrative and a realistic framework is in fact a late type of autobiographical writing, which came to the fore in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with individual expression and a modern culture that emphasized historical development.⁶ The new literary form – known as autobiography – was quickly loaded with expectations of reaching an understanding of individual self-knowledge, a person's behaviour, and even society's history.

However, the early practitioners of autobiography collided with a phenomenon that Heraclitus had already written about: the flow of time. A barrier to the achievement of total under-

5 Stock 2001, 8–23; Kosonen 2007.

6 Gusdorf 1956/1980; Lejeune 1975.

standing is the simple fact that the object under scrutiny (one-self, one's own past) does not stay in one place, but shifts and changes according to the situation. The pioneer of the genre, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, noticed already when writing *Les Confessions* (published 1782–1789) that the idea of reaching a history of one's own soul (l'histoire de l'âme) was no more than a beautiful theory. He realized that the writing of one's own autobiography meant 'only' continuous verbal striving to give expression to one's own unique self, which, however, flees this striving. For Rousseau it was difficult to accept the logical conclusion of the intellectual journey he had taken: autobiographical remembering is a lifelong process, to which only death can bring an end.⁷

From another point of view, however, intellect signifies the possibility to recreate the self by autobiographical writing. Rousseau was able to understand this concept, as the Neuchâtel -preface demonstrates. There he opens his mind to the polyphony of autobiography and the creative expressionism of autobiographical writing:

I will tell each thing as I feel it, as I see it, without refinement, without bother, without troubling myself about motley. By abandoning myself at the same time to both the remembrance of the received impression and to the present feeling, I will depict the state of my soul doubly, namely at the moment when the event happened to me and at the moment when I described it; my uneven and natural style, sometimes sharp, sometimes diffuse, sometimes

7 Rousseau describes his new understanding alternatively in terms of nostalgia and bitterness in the last part of his autobiographical writings, *The reveries of a lonely traveller* (2010 [1782]). – The same idea has created in the minds of some writers amusing parodies like *Tristram Shandy* and *Kater Murr*.

wise and sometimes foolish, sometimes serious and sometimes gay, will itself form a part of my story.⁸

Rousseau gives us to understand that the precise moment of writing and feelings of the moment influence the writing of autobiography and also the way in which he handles the past. There is no one unambiguous life truth, but there are always at the very least two truths, “depicted doubly”. On the one hand there are the events of a life history and on the other the shade or style at a given time. Rousseau was one of the first who understood that the striving for self-knowledge involved in the writing of autobiography was knotted together with self-expression.

Our own contemporary culture stresses quite similar expression in autobiographical writing and aspects of experience.⁹ For instance, in Finland, as elsewhere, the practice of writing one’s own life story in life-history and reminiscence groups has been popular for some time. Writing and development groups concentrating on the writing of autobiography have also been shown to have therapeutic value.¹⁰

8 Rousseau 1995, 589.

9 Eskola 1998; Eskola & Peltonen 1997; Saresma 2004, 2007.

10 In developmental therapy work autobiographical writing has its own meaning (e.g. Hynes & Hynes-Berry 1986, 186–188; Ihanus 2005; Linnainmaa 2009, 56–57). On life history groups in which creative writing and therapeutic aspects are combined see e.g. Enwald & Vainikkala-Kejonen & Vähäaho 2003; Reinikainen 2007; Hulmi 2010.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN CREATIVE WRITING

In the teaching of creative writing autobiography is present in many ways. The discussion that is now under way in this field is in itself an understanding that the writing of autobiography can also have more to give to the teaching of writing.

In Finland, for a long time the teaching of creative writing stressed mastery of the literary art in quality and the writing process. Emphasis on the autobiographical and the therapeutic in writing is something we have traditionally avoided.¹¹ Nowadays it is true that in creative writing guide- and textbooks a more accepting attitude is taken to a writer's own experiences. The importance of confronting the writer's internal world can also receive emphasis.¹² However, often the writer's own experiences are understood as forming only raw material or material the good writer must sooner or later learn to master in order to refine them into fiction, whether short or long.

Method writing, writing as training, writing of diaries and writing down dreams are all recommended for use in writing guides as practice in getting to know one's internal self. In the

- 11 According to Liisa Enwald (1991, 39), at the beginning of the 1990s Finnish creative writing culture was dominated by an aesthetic-formalist set of values, in which an unenthusiastic attitude was taken to autobiographical writing and its therapeutic value: "The more therapeutic a text was, the more tightly and intimately it was seen to be bound up with the writer's subjective pain and crises, whose direct reporting would not hold the interest of readers."
- 12 Indeed, methods of guiding and textbooks now answer different requirements. For general presentations of creative writing in which the own voice is emphasized, see e.g. Jääskeläinen 2002; Vainonen 2003; Tuominen 2013. Others examine the self and the own voice from a quite different perspective: e.g. Cameron 1996/1999; Suurla 1998; Svinhufvud 2007 – they too have their own methods.

teaching of creative writing, autobiographical writing is not, however, especially encouraged. It is hoped that sooner or later the writer will grow out of his or her self expression sphere and move in the direction of fiction. The ideal is a text in which we find and get the feel of the writer's own voice, the personal touch – as long as it is not an autobiographical text. As if writing autobiography has no other purpose than therapy.

In spring 2012 I got a living reminder of these conceptions when I held in Turku Open University a course that gathered together the results of creative writing basic studies, in which the students assessed the development of their own skill in writing.¹³ I could not help noticing the almost unanimous and ambivalent idea of autobiographical writing among students of various ages. Many students considered autobiographical writing an intermediate stage. They still envisioned that at some stage they would progress from this to real writing: perhaps fiction or fantasy with real creativity, or then non-fiction, facts. When outlining their dreams of the future, almost all of them said that they wanted to continue with their creative writing: not on any account, however, did they want to *settle* for autobiographical writing, but rather to *progress* to fiction. Side by side with this rather disparaging opinion existed a deep subjective understanding of the value of autobiographical writing as a basic quality stage and way of writing. Almost all of them had themselves experienced the writing of their own feelings and thoughts as an important part of their writing process, one which they explained that they would continue with later. It

13 I choose this course as an example of the dominating ambivalent attitude to autobiography in our culture. In question was a very good, open and thoughtful group, whose members I have subsequently been able to stay in contact with.

simply didn't occur to them that this was "autobiographical writing".

Autobiography is also more widely seen in our culture as a form of writing that has a lesser value than novel-writing.¹⁴ We think of autobiographical writing as writing about our own life directly, in which the memory presents the only problem and challenge – that is all. Many of us, however, know that no-one can mechanically reproduce his or her reality and memory. According to the modern understanding there is no cellar where we place our memories on tidy shelves in carefully arranged storage files, from which an assiduous servant can fetch the memory that we ask for at any time. We know that a lived past event is not there and will never return as such. According to the modern understanding, the current moment of remembering stamps in its entirety the lived and remembered. We remember what has happened from our present self, as a real feeling, thinking bodily person who lives and experiences in this moment of remembering.¹⁵ It is just this that makes change possible.

Creativity is at the root of autobiographical writing too. An autobiographical text is the outcome of a creative process just as a novel is. As noted, already for Rousseau autobiographical writing was a linguistic manifestation of his own individual and unique self and through that a continuous recreation of himself. Thus the writing of one's own autobiography is not simply a matter of imitating reality. Autobiography is a project both impossible and possible at the same time. I am always different,

14 It is precisely for this reason that Celia Hunt (2010, 234) refers to her own method as "fictive autobiography" writing.

15 Määttänen 1996.

and memories and the reality of life can never be reached in their entirety. But just because I am different at every moment, every time I write memoirs a new unknown side of myself can appear and through it I can create myself again.

One writer after another has understood precisely this possibility and written it down in his text.¹⁶ And increasing value from the self-knowledge of autobiographical writing is founded on just this possibility of creating oneself again. It can be used in different environments – in general when writing, in the teaching of autobiographical writing and, for example, in therapeutic writing therapy work.¹⁷

THE THEORETICAL BASIS: THE CREATION OF A KNOWING AND FEELING SELF IN WRITING

In recent decades there have been theoretical discussions that concern autobiographical culture in many ways and which appear in theorized handling of creative writing and its teaching. At the heart of the discussion have been such ideas as "subject", "identity" and "change".¹⁸ New human theories have postulated the existence of a feeling, thinking subject, living in a continuously changing stream of life - a subject that understands pre-linguistic and linguistic dimension and whose consciousness and identity are maintained by a sense of the self

16 For example, Maria Peura says that she has used writing in many ways to construct herself. Incomplete devotion (*Antamuksella keskeneräinen*, 2012) even gave rise to the impression of cultivating an ascetic self.

17 Hunt & Sampson 1998, 201; Hunt 2010.

18 László 2008, 116–128; Bertolini 2010, 160–167.

and the continuity of self. This sense of continuity is kept up, for instance, according to Antonio Damasio's neurophysiological understanding, by the autobiographical memory, a person's gradually growing understanding of past events and sensations and the feelings associated with them. Through autobiographical memory our identities or autobiographical selves can be sustained.¹⁹ On this basis a person can tell narratives of him- or herself and his or her life, and write his or her autobiography.

The philosopher and psychologist Kirsti Määttänen has also written about the continuity of feeling on the basis of ourselves. According to her, writing autobiography is a central element in creating a feeling of continuity and constructing our identities: "By telling their life-stories writers create a wholeness and a feeling of continuity in themselves and about themselves. Not only in order to turn backwards, but to outline their internal world from the perspective of its future that they are encountering in the stage of life at the point of time when they are writing".²⁰ Määttänen has researched identity and the experiencing of a feeling of continuity from a semiotic perspective that is based on both the dialogic baby dance theory and practice that she has developed and Charles Peirce's pragmatic philosophy.²¹

Both Damasio's and Määttänen's ideas of the self are processual, and both theories include a concept of identity that is relatively stable or permanent. Our memory cannot guarantee a permanent identity, but the guarantee of identity can instead

19 Damasio 2000, 195–233.

20 Määttänen 1993, 162.

21 See BDM Baby Dance Method * e.g. Määttänen 1993, 1996, 2002, 2003.

be a process of remembering, in the life of a living person *a repeatedly experienced and tested feeling of continuity*. It is no surprise that writing of autobiography – in the sense of both everyday personal narratives and written autobiography – has an essential role in the theories of these two writers. According to them it is precisely through autobiographical narratives that it is possible to tune and by so doing recreate our identities. In everyday exchanges we reinforce our feeling of continuity by relating narratives about ourselves and our deeds to ourselves and others. In the writing of, for example, Facebook posts about our own lives, we embark upon a more intense cultivation of a feeling of continuity. In the writing of autobiography we are already at the core of the problem of continuity: in our attempts to combine the experiences of our life into one coherent narrative, that narrative then appears to the readers as a integrated narrative, a string of pearls, or as individual fragments.²²

The processual self-understanding which covers both the concept of sense of core identity recurring in our body and the concept of the linguistic self – make a reasonable serviceable understanding of the writing self possible from the perspective of creative writing, which is experienced as abiding and continual, but which is constantly subject to change.

Autobiographical literature can provide a logical basis for new theories. So, some earlier autobiography writers already knew that our identities are not a fixed, certain and lasting block of self on which recollection is built, but rather a brittle living organism that changes with time. For example, in his autobiography Stendhal compared his identity to the peeling pieces of a crumbling fresco, on the basis of which his au-

22 Kosonen 2000.

toportrait was almost impossible to discern.²³ However, when cultivating his own autobiographical writing Stendhal showed that he understood the significance of autobiographical writing and reminiscence – for the self, for one’s own vivacity and continuity.

From today’s perspective one could say that when we are writing we are connected with our living and feeling self: it is precisely this remembering, for instance, autobiographical writing, that keeps us lively and vivid – in a feeling of living continuity. Everything lives and flows, as Kirsti Määttänen puts it: “Remembering, in a certain sense, is being alive: a living being. Although it is of course possible to set out purposefully to remember, this is a special case. In reality everyone is remembering all the time and unceasingly, whether they want to or not.”²⁴ Unchangeability and remaining in one place are nothing but illusions of the mind.

ONE’S OWN VOICE – SELF-INVESTIGATION AND THE ART OF WRITING

An interesting and productive process theory in the field of autobiographical writing is that of the British researcher into creative writing and writing instructor, Celia Hunt, emeritus reader in continuing education in creative writing at the University of Sussex. In her books and articles she has developed a

23 Stendhal 1890/1973, 187. For interpretation of this idea see Kosonen 2000, 21–22.

24 Määttänen 1996, 19.

theory of the writing self and the writing voice.²⁵ In her book *Therapeutic Dimensions of Autobiography in Creative Writing* (2000) she has assembled theory and practices into a teaching program intended to help students of creative writing in finding their own style. Hunt's exercises are intended for the teaching of creative writing, but in my opinion they can also serve the personal needs of students more generally.²⁶ In her book Celia Hunt describes case-specifically the internal growth of some of her writing students and their development with the writing exercises.

According to Hunt, training of writers is ultimately a question of teaching two skills: the art of writing and the ability to find one's own voice. Matters linked to techniques of writing, mastering the process and receiving criticism are usually understood well in teaching, but the teaching of skills linked to the development of one's own voice and style, according to her, is still in its infancy in Britain.²⁷ Speaking about the concept of "own voice", Celia Hunt refers to the writer's own feeling of self:

When a writer says that she has 'found her voice', it seems to me she is saying that she has developed a deep connection in her writing between her inner life and the words she places on the page. When the writing is working well, she is able to access her own rich, emotional material and to use it imaginatively on the page. The term 'writing voice', then, in this internal sense, is a metaphor for a style of writing which contains the author's sense of self.²⁸

25 See e.g. Hunt 2000; Hunt & Sampson 1998,21; Hunt 2013 (which I have read later, after having finished this article).

26 cf. Hunt 2013.

27 Hunt 2000, 16.

28 Hunt 2000, 16–17.

In itself the idea is not new. In Hunt's assessment echo the voices of researchers into the style of past times.²⁹ In addition many modern creative writing guides and textbooks handle the concept of one's own voice and its meaning in a similar holistic spirit. For instance, as I understand it, the Finnish writer and facilitator of writing Jyrki Vainonen follows a similar line in one of his articles, where he writes of the teacher's duty to direct the student back towards her- or himself, to the place where "the writer's own voice persistently echoes" as soon as the writer begins to hear it.³⁰ Vainonen considers this "ethics of presence" one of the long-established criteria and values of literary art.

The significance of Hunt's program is in her ability to create a practical wholeness on the basis of a prevailing theoretical understanding, which students and teachers of creative writing can test and experiment with. With Hunt's exercises the student has the opportunity to step inside his or her experiences and learn to present his/her internal experiences and feelings with sensitivity. The more realistic and harmonious link the writer is able to make with him or herself and his/her own emotional landscape, the better he or she is able to reach the internal world of the characters and narrative situations he or she has created. While increasing self-knowledge, the writer can

29 For example, Jean Starobinski's (1971/1980) understanding of style can be considered an image of a hand moved by the writer's internal spirit. Starobinski's idea is reminiscent of George Louis Buffon's and Jean Jacques Rousseau's understanding of style. According to Buffon's holistic "style is the person himself"-understanding, style does not merely "touch the ear" and "give work for the eye", but "moves the soul and the heart" by talking to the mind. Rousseau's understanding has already been mentioned in this article. See also Kosonen 2004, 348–349.

30 Vainonen 2003, 29.

create more moving fictional prose, in which characters can freely and credibly appear themselves “with their own voice”.³¹ Listening to one’s own inner self and searching for one’s voice (without necessarily finding it!) can open up a fresh possibility for the writer to write fiction.

The creating and conveying of an authentic lived and experienced emotional world is not easy. According to Celia Hunt the first step is to help the student writer to access his or her own emotions, to access feelings below the text surface and reach an understanding of the link between them. The idea is that in a safe enough group the student can progress to listening to and lyricising others’ emotions too. By opening a route and a link to his/her own mind and the mind and feelings of his/her created characters the writer can create touching and effective fiction. It can offer the reader a way into the character’s mind and give him or her the possibility to experience the characters’ feelings, just as if they were real people.³²

It is essential to understand that writing in one’s own voice is not a question of monophony: rather, the ‘own voice’ can and must resonate polyphonically.³³ At the same time the writer’s feeling of his/her own voice chosen from the many voices of the text is significant, as the Nobel-poet Seamus Heaney has written: “Finding a voice means that your words have the feel of you about them.”³⁴ Taking a Bakhtinesque approach, one could say that creative autobiographical writing can open the

31 Hunt 2000, 50–96. Compare Hunt & Sampson 1998, 21–34.

32 Hunt 2000, 17–18. Compare Marshall 1995.

33 Compare Kosonen 2009, 290.

34 Heaney 1980, 43; quotation Hunt 2000, 17; compare Hunt & Sampson 2006, 37.

way to dialogic or polyphonic writing. If, on the other hand, the link to the self and the internal self is missing from the writer, real dialogic tuning, not to mention the writing of good dialogue, is not possible.³⁵

The logical core of Hunt's autobiographical training programme is free and creative fiction. She herself assesses her writing programme as "fictive autobiography". It is a question of practice, in which the writer can lean on his or her own memories, but without being restricted to facts. Fictional autobiography diverges from the straightforward autobiographical account, which is dependent on relating and in which people and events are described or explained from the outside. In fictional autobiographical writing it is not enough simply to relate, but things and events and people are shown from the inside: "Thus, in a fictional rendering, instead of standing outside of a situation and relating it from a distance, the writer is required *to enter into the experience* and to represent it from the inside and *with feeling*."³⁶

In my understanding it is not possible to take quite such a black and white position between straight and fictional au-

35 Hunt 2000, 16–18. The cornerstone of this dialogue theory of Mikhail Bakhtin can be considered an understanding of the 'living word' created on the basis of Dostoyevsky's work, according to which meanings are constructed and received as a communal voice. In every word and phrase there is always a strange voice present, a hidden element. Only a dialogic participating attitude enables the identification of the strange voice and is able to come close to it as a meaningful position, as another point of view: "Only when it is internally dialogically tuned is my word able to associate closely with the strange word, but not, however, to merge into it, nor to swallow it, nor to diminish its meaning, but to preserve it as an independent word." (Bakhtin 1929/1991, 100). This position is also used in writing therapy work. (see Linnainmaa 2009, 61–67)

36 Hunt 2000, 92. Compare Hunt 2010, 233–235.

tobiographical literature. Celia Hunt wants to emphasise “fictional autobiographical literature” as a possibility to approach one’s internal self, but she does not say that all autobiography is *also* or already fictional precisely because autobiographical writing, like all other writing, is based on a creative process of signification. Nor is it ultimately a question in Hunt’s programme of crafting one’s own life, but of arriving into the self and the narrative, or of the art of creating oneself in a way that is comparable to the understanding of the pioneers of modern autobiography, Rousseau and Goethe, of creating life and one’s own identity in the process of reminiscence writing.³⁷

Nevertheless, emphasising fictiveness has its advantage. Fiction – more than autobiography that favours real events – allows the writer a safe distance from himself and his own life. Under the protection of fiction the writer can examine himself and his life, as well as safely externalizing problems linked to his own writing on paper, thus situating things and creatures in a place outside himself.

GEORGES PEREC – NOVELIST AND AUTOBIOGRAPHER

Literature history is full of autobiographical writers, people who toy with ideas and examine themselves and their lives obliquely or diagonally, playing with fact and fiction, experimenting with the real and the imaginary. One teaser is the French master of experimental writing, George Perec (1936–1982), whose autobiographical strategies I endeavoured to unmask in my PhD

37 Compare Eakin 1985.

thesis “Lives in words” (*Elämät sanoissa*, 2000). The French autobiography researcher Philippe Lejeune has dedicated a book to Perec’s indirectness:

The oblique. The deviation. The change of direction. The ruse. These are the genre of words employed by Georges Perec when speaking of his memory or his autobiographical writing. Impossible for him to take the well-worn route of the classic narratives, to set out with a reassuring “I am born”. But equally impossible not to take the route towards his own origin. It is ultimately reached by many side roads. It is a network, a labyrinth of displaced autobiographies: fantasies and childhood recollections, dreams, genealogical quests, memory exercises, everyday inventories, descriptions of places, explorations in collective memory, all coalescing in “attempts at description” of the indescribable and the “almost forgotten.”³⁸

According to Lejeune, George Perec’s image and identity as a writer were formed from an indirect or oblique view of himself and his own internal identity. There were certainly reasons for the avoidance of directness and keeping a distance. Georges Perec’s childhood was tragic. He became an orphan after losing his parents in the Second World War, his mother in the death camp of Auschwitz and his father who was accidentally shot on the last day of the war. During the war years the Jewish boy went into hiding with his relatives in a small mountain village on the Franco-Swiss border:

What marks this period especially is the absence of landmarks: these memories are scraps of life snatched from the void. No mooring. Nothing to anchor them or hold them down. Almost no way of ratifying them. No sequence in time, except as I have recon-

38 Lejeune 1991, text from the back cover.

structured it arbitrarily over the years: time went by. There were seasons. There was skiing and haymaking. No beginning, no end. There was no past, and for very many years there was no future either; things simply went on. You were there. It happened somewhere. [--] One time it was an aunt, next time it was another aunt. Or a grandmother. [--] The only thing you do know is that it went for years and then one day it stopped.³⁹

From his traumatic childhood experience George Perec fashioned – at the same time as he underwent psychoanalysis at the turn of the 1960s and ‘70s – his autobiography *W, or the Memory of Childhood* (*W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, 1975), in which he presented his life story as a narrative montage. In question are two different tales, the fictional tale depicting sport-mad W island and autobiographical chapters which overlap each other increasingly tightly as the book progresses without ever forming an indisputably continuous life story with a beginning, turning point and end.

When playing with words and meanings, dreams and memory, Perec builds from his literary product a creative network or [allotment] of autobiographical writing, in which he examines himself, his writing and his life as a writer:

I compare myself to a farm worker who cultivates several plots of land. In one he plants beet, in another alfalfa, in a third maize. Thus my book combines four different fields, four ways of questioning, in which, perhaps, the same question is ultimately posed, but posed from four different points of view, which always correspond to a different form of working with writing.⁴⁰

39 Perec 1975/2011, 68–69.

40 Perec 1985, 9–12. For an exploration of this picture, see Kosonen 2000, 223.

He succeeded in creating impressive literature, which people can read without knowing anything of the writer's life.

WRITING AUTOBIOGRAPHY W.G. SEBALD'S WAY

W.G. Sebald's essay-novel *Vertigo* (*Schwindel. Gefühle*, 1990) includes an episode in which the first person narrator describes a journey in autumn 1980. He had left nursing the hope that it would help him to get over a "difficult stage."⁴¹ Having arrived in Venice the narrator has his beard cut with a knife, wanders the streets of the labyrinthine city and drives a vaporetto. Later he sits in a bar on a promenade, reads newspapers, writes notes and leafs through Grillparzer's⁴² travel diary, whose descriptions of Venice's insignificant and dreadful Doge's palace suit his own negative feelings. The mood created by remembering the Palazzo leads the narrator to Casanova's autobiography⁴³ and he spends a while imagining Casanova's imprisonment in a burning hot cell under a lead roof, from which he managed to make an amazing escape. The strange coincidence – of the sort that Sebald likes describing – is that the narrator notices that he is sitting in a bar near the doge's palace on the last day of October, exactly the day of Casanova's escape.

41 In my section on *Vertigo* I make use of my own review of the book. (Kosonen 2012).

42 Franz Grillparzer (1791–1872) was an Austrian playwright known for his embittered withdrawal from literary circles.

43 The famous adventurer Giacomo Casanova (1725–1798) is known from his memoirs. Unfortunately, the only available Finnish translation was made from an incomplete and garbled manuscript.

It soon becomes clear that the Venice visit is beginning to remind the narrator of earlier recovery journeys and that with his pondering he is in serious danger of committing suicide. Having felt the special “white silence” of the Venice morning while lying in bed, dark imaginings and memories flood the narrator’s mind, to the extent that he stiffened as if he was dying. The situation is not helped by the fact that it is Halloween, All Saints’ Day, and finally the narrator sinks into total apathy. Then something begins to happen. As the body lies like a corpse on a mortuary slab the narrator’s mind begins to stir. He begins to imagine. Little by little his mind is filled with images of the nearby Venice cemetery island. They lead him to other places and other states of mind. From these Sebald draws inspiration for *Vertigo*:

On that first day of November in 1980, preoccupied as I was with my notes and the ever widening and contracting circles of my thoughts, I became enveloped by a sense of utter emptiness and never left my room. It seemed to me then that one could well end one’s life simply through thinking and retreating into one’s mind, for, although I had closed the windows and the room was warm, my limbs were growing progressively colder and stiffer with my lack of movement, so that when at length the waiter arrived with the red wine and sandwiches I had ordered, I felt as if I had already been interred or laid out for burial, silently grateful for the proffered libation, but no longer capable of consuming it. I imagined how it would be if I crossed the grey lagoon to the island of the departed, to Murano or further still to San Erasmo or to the Isola San Francesco del Deserto, among the marshes of St Catherine.⁴⁴

44 Sebald 2011, 63–64; [tr into Finnish by Oili Suominen].

One thing seems clear: when writing of the narrator's paralysis, of his sleeping on the mortuary slab, Sebald writes of imagination and creativity, thus opening up the present moment of emptiness, when it is possible to hear even the quietest voices and echoes that reverberate in that fleeting moment.

Many writers, from Virgil and Dante onwards, have described stopping as if going to their grave and the silence of the cemetery as a condition and prerequisite of their own imagining. Nor can modern writers escape it. Margaret Atwood too, in her essay "Negotating with the Dead" (2002) has depicted her writing as descending into the underworld. Only after venturing to descend among the dead has Atwood, according to her own words, the possibility to hear the voices of "the otherworld". These she can then bring into this world and arrange for us, the readers, the inhabitants of this world, who interpret the voices and play their music – each within the boundaries of our own possibilities.

In this so-called space between this and that other world Margaret Atwood writes in a way that corresponds to Sebald's, who does not write of melancholy or depression, those generally known states of mind, but what he calls vertigo (*Schwindel*), going through a unique experienced bodily feeling (*Gefühle*). When writing, Sebald allows his unconscious mind – his memories and experiences of Venice and other events he has lived through in the past — to wander in the guise of an essay writer side by side with the conscious self, the writer.

So, should we call the creator of this essay-novel who writes of living and being and through vertigo a novelist or a writer of autobiography? The question may influence the literary hair-splitter, as Sebald is unanimously regarded as a quality writer, in other words a novelist, who draws on his creative mind and imagination – not from his own life. And if he happens to

use material from his own life, as all writers understandably do to some extent, it can nevertheless be seen that he has the basic skill of a real writer: the ability to take a word out of its everyday vortex. He is the Writer, the Novelist, he has an imagination, he is an accomplished writer of fiction. Assessing Sebald as an autobiographical author feels wrong, naive and one-dimensional. Nor can his lively narrative in any way return to one voice – a suffering and melancholic self.

Sebald does not write about his life stage by stage in the fashion of the modern autobiographers. Nonetheless, the text full of experience and life, the autobiographical writing in the "spirit of truth",⁴⁵ makes it possible to include *Vertigo* among autobiographical works. The question is one of describing a difficult phase of life and the emotions associated with it through a way of writing that cannot resonate in the reader's mind without the words having a foundation in authentic and lived experience.⁴⁶ It is not a question of autobiography, but an autobiographical novel, or perhaps essay-novel.

It may be unarguable that Sebald uses his personal prose in his self-expression and artistic endeavours. For us, the readers, he makes art of the experiences of a certain stage of his life. The memories of Venice are there somewhere – who knows? – but while writing he has the ability and the daring to compose himself to listen to the voices of the past, put the critical and analytical mind of the professor of European literature aside for a moment and surrender to the voice of his creative and subconscious mind. After that he can return to the conscious

45 Lejeune 2005, 31. See also Kosonen, 2009, 288.

46 In his book *Everyone Can Write* (2000), Peter Elbow uses the term "felt sense" for this embodied knowledge, which is recognisable from the text as revealing the author's authentic, lived and experienced understanding.

and questioning mind to write again, to cultivate and give the finishing touches to publish the text and make it ready for reading, that is Vertigo, from whose pages I myself can recognize something of my own giddy feelings of existence.

THE FUTURE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

Autobiographical writing has much to offer in the teaching of creative writing. All the sides of autobiographical writing that I have mentioned in this article and numerous others besides can be used in teaching and guidance. A condition is a feeling for autobiographical writing and a real desire and ability to select its gems for modern language and the needs of current studies.

History should not be forgotten. The cultural history of autobiographical writing can proffer a great deal to the teaching of creative writing. The British researcher and defender of "deep autobiography", Peter Abbs, who has been dedicated to the subject, writes:

Most of us who now write autobiography, who keep introspective journals and diaries or who generally develop a deeply reflective disposition towards our own experience, belong to this tradition [= of western autobiographical culture]. It has forged the very language we use. We are part of its development, even if we turn critically on its methods and many of its assumptions. We can only deepen our reflective practices by envisaging our individual lives as a part of the same adventure, of that always unfinished project for human understanding and fulfilment, however broken and uncertain it may now seem.⁴⁷

47 Abbs 1998, 128.

In Finland creative writing studies have given an important promise of cultivating a culture of autobiography, in which autobiographical writing is encouraged and in which it is researched and taught. In many educational establishments, universities and polytechnics autobiographical writing has been adopted as a taught subject. In the Universities of Turku and of Jyväskylä it is an integral part of the teaching of writing.⁴⁸ The challenge of autobiographical writing has also been taken up by art colleges, technical art colleges and Drama schools, in which research and activity linked to autobiography is fairly eagerly practised.

My own hope is that autobiographical writing would become an accepted academic discipline for us too: a path to self-knowledge acknowledged by every student and teacher and a recognised source of all writing.

Translated by Philip Line

48 I also think the lively autobiography of Jyväskylä is based on the research projects lead by Emeritus Professor Katarina Eskola in the Modern Culture Centre, projects which are linked to autobiography. In the Narrative of a Writing teacher (*Kirjoittamisen opettajan kertomus*, 2011), the PhD of Nora Ekström, autobiography is linked to a constructive concept of teaching that offers a challenge in the teaching of creative writing. Knowledge cannot be bestowed from above, but things are achieved through practice, things are understood and the best way is to find a personal way of expressing and writing.

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