

Desire for Word in Autobiography

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DESIRE FOR WORD IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The literary genre of autobiography has been a subject of interest to me for quite some time and critical texts on the nature of self-story telling have influenced and formed my artistic approach. In the following I would like to demonstrate how theoretical considerations on the textual self-expression have directed my thinking when painting and how the desire for narrative could be captured by written word and painted image in the form of autobiographical reflection.

The genre of autobiography in literature has a long tradition echoing the origins in the Christian confessional rituals, where the linguistic act of uttering the inner narrative and memory have been central to turning into one's inner self. Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (written between AD 397 and AD 398) has been generally considered as the first important tribute to the genre. His extended meditation on the soul as an architectural space initiated the idea of the *inner gaze* which has been important for psychoanalysis since, where the concepts of memory, inner time and language play a major role.

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The French philosopher and writer Jean Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions* (1782-1789) emphasized the importance of the emotional as objective to legitimate identity reflection and his *Confessions* are widely seen as the first modern autobiography, where God is no more present but what counts is the individual unique self-expression. Jean Paul Sartre's autobiography *Words* (1963) scrutinized the romantic ideal of *natural goodness* and showed the pointless vacuum of existence, where the activity of writing itself becomes the essence of the autobiographical. It is not about the meaning of the story as a documentary account of one's history, but rather about the process of writing, about the challenge of confronting the meaningless void of being.

Desire for Word

To put it in a nutshell, nowhere does it appear more clearly that man's desire finds its meaning in the desire of the other, not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other.

-Jacques Lacan. *The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Anthony Wilden. Page 31

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The desire for writing is a precondition for creating autobiographical texts. The desire for the written word could be considered as the wish for self-reflection in autobiography. Self-reflection mirrors the word, where the word produces meaning. In turn the desire for the written possibly produces expectations and illusions that the writing is able to fulfil the desire for once desire is expressed in word there is an expectation that this expression is been successful and that the desire will vanish. Thus through the process of naming things the quality of desire is constantly converting so that the desired self-narrative changes in future through uttering it in presence. If

desire is not expressed happily it delays the narrative and the process of writing becomes an exhaustive and desperate wish to push the real inner narrative into the word. The problem arises when one realizes that the happy uttering of desire is not only the product of the sincerity but partly the pleasure of creating a self-image in front of the reader. The fictional character of autobiography undermines the possibility of a proper and true self-reflection and disorientates the linear narrative into fragmentary impressions as in Roland Barthes's *The Mourning Diary* (1977-1979). Thus an inner narrative is problematic for how can one trace the essence of desire and how can the desire take an adequate objective shape? How do we trace the etymology of the desire and how do we know that the form of a word is an appropriate cultural signifier in autobiographical texts for expressing the desire for the inner narrative to appear in palpable form?

Augustine's desire to write *Confessions* originated within innermost longing for God and the struggle of overcoming the doubt whereas Rousseau's *Confessions* was a project of paranoid self-justification in front of his contemporaries. Sartre divided his autobiography into two parts, "Reading" and "Writing" and pointed out that reading and writ-

ing should be considered as an act as such detached from the meaning of the text. In the first part of *Words* Sartre describes how he as a child came to enjoy reading and how the books were admirable objects to play with:

I began my life as I shall no doubt end it: among books. In my grandfather's study, they were everywhere; it was forbidden to dust them except once a year, before the October term. Even before I could read, I already revered these raised stones; upright or leaning, wedged together like bricks on the library shelves or nobly spaced like avenues of dolmens, I felt that our family prosperity depended on them.

-Jean Paul Sartre. *Words*. Trans. Irene Clephane. Page 28

According to Patrick Riley young Sartre was inaugurated in reading by playing the role of the good and keen boy who has given into acting out a grown up activity of reading and which was nurtured by the gaze of the other namely his grandfather's applause (Patrick Riley, *Character and Conversion in Autobiography*, 2004, page 143). Later he understands the vanity of his imposture and is scared of the nothingness and emptiness of the family role he was acting out. He realizes that the reading as such was related to his emotional re-

lationship to his grandfather and that the activity of reading became kind of mimicry of grown up world to gain attention and praise from the grandfather (cf. *ibid.*, page

144). Once Sartre becomes conscious of this and that grandfathers wish was an egoistic projection of a child as prodigy-once Sartre sees the comedy of the situation - he collapses but regains the strength through a new visionary project namely that of becoming an author himself. The authorship in the form of writing gives Sartre the freedom of creating and naming his own world. Sartre's desire for the written word is rooted in the will of liberating oneself from the falseness of wishful identities that were attached to his identity by the society. Sartre realizes the subjective etymology of his desire for word but nonetheless *writes*, because what else can you do (*ibid.*, page 151)? One cannot return to the "natural goodness" of the self as Jean Jacques Rousseau suggested. Rousseau was similarly trapped in the complex nature of play acting when writing his autobiography. He was caught in the role of self-justification and desperately tried to express the inner conflict between the "natural goodness" of the self and the corrupted social self. Romantic ideas of the return to the innocence was a mirage, because for the civilized societies the project of returning to the wild

natural could not be natural per se but highly artificial. One finds oneself irreversibly in the world of culture, but is given freedom to make choices and has to take responsibility for what one does with words.

6 When Sartre wrote his autobiography *Words* about how writing happened to be his religion and that it becomes the process of *anchoring* the self within mythology of authorship, Augustine poeticized the contemplation of the inner gaze where one is meant to *anchor* oneself within faith. Saint Augustine's inner conflict was similarly motivated by the false self, when he was master of words, a specialist of rhetorics but realized the destructive and fraud nature of rhetorics such as acting out and as a mechanism of gaining power by virtue of argument. Rousseau felt likewise alienated from his "natural goodness" situated amidst the "demoralizing" culture. Thus the desire to write is produced by the conflict between the gaze of the other; the society and between yearning after "a degree zero".

Act of painting

When I think about the influences, in how far reading texts of autobiographical nature has helped me to understand my inner desire to create images I must admit that reading has given me reasonable critical doubt about the act of painting my personal inner narratives and has forced me to take more responsibilities about creating images. The desire for the image has been an unconscious motivation to me for a long time now and has forced me into self-reflection. Self-reflection has become a way of repairing my inner emotional traumata as well as an ethical duty in front of the social. But since the inner self and the social self cannot be divided but overlap within, it is very challenging to find the right “words”. The attempt of searching for *words* has become for me the cutting edge to paint. In the context of the autobiographical, the struggle to *talk* has developed into the *meaning of painting*.

I also assume that the image making as well as the language of a written word is the realm of cultural historical con-

struction and one is inevitably forced to speak the language of that construct. If the individual interacting with image and the word is rooted in various cultural traditions and one realizes that image is just an image not the thing itself, the following questions arise: how does one trace the meaning beyond the image and what is it actually that provokes the desire for meaning?

My own artistic approach deals with the desire for meaning beyond the image and with different ways in which it can be illuminated. I try to tone my gaze within abstract spheres and painting in reality serves as a model that resonates the immaterial quality of desire for autobiographical narration. Painting turns into form which supposedly makes visible the invisible inner structure of desire. Thus it is my aim to trace and unleash the root of my desire for image through the process of placing a demanding childish desire within the sign of snowman (see *Words*, 2010, oil and acrylic on canvas, 170x210) and releasing the suspense of the meaning attached to the signified desire as the snowman by the act of painting. Consequently I appropriate painting as a way of writing, where the insisting childish mythological desire is realized and converted through the awareness of the structural character of language.

The mythological childish is polarized against conscious reasonable by placing the desire for snowman as a necessary trigger for image making within the subject of cultural construction. The desire for snowman is a romantic desire to return to the innocent gaze of a child, to a natural and unconfused way of seeing that would be free of doubt. Rousseau wrote *Confessions* through a naive perspective in that way trying to liberate himself from the presence of the culture of reason which he thought corrupts the goodness of true heart. Nevertheless, it was also a strategy of gaining the sympathy of the reader by idealizing the emotional expression which in life is never free from the reason. Therefore, his *Confessions* are aesthetically very interesting but ethically questionable. Regarding the painterly means of expression, I try to handle my desire for snowman by slowed down pronunciation of a seemingly expressive brush strokes (as the lower constituting circle of major element on the right in *Words*, 2010) in that manner registering the emotional character of the childish desire for snowman, but also the awareness of the cultural structural which obscures the tension of the expressive emotional. The pronunciation of the emotional modified by the analytical involves the process of testing and comparing: confronting the child-

ish insisting with reasonable results in weightless levitation of meaning as if dissolving between the conflict of pre-historical “natural good” and the cultural artificial. “The degree zero” of meaning occurs out of silence rather of a satisfying response. Thus the expected answer giver snowman is *mum* and unmasks the desire for its meaning as absurd and using Lacan’s terminology the *empty word* is further *filled* anew with novel meaning by experiencing the Truth within the Real.

I specify painting as a way of writing and documenting the fictional gap between the desire and the resulted word- image, between the incorporeal intention of desire and the form (I use term word-image for I consider my images oscillating between the *seeable* and the *readable*). The literal is partly present through familiar letters (L) and is juxtaposed with the painterly articulation. The letter L and number 8 are familiar signs of the traditional literary and mathematical vocabulary whereas the snowman as the *main word* suggests pictorial painterly representation but nonetheless shares structural similarities with the sign of the 8. Thus the painterly abstraction of the snowman reverberates with the number 8, which I do not apply symbolically, but rather as a pure form that re-subject the mean-



Words, 2010, 170x210, acrylic and oil on canvas

ing of the snowman. Namely two cultural signs of the 8 and the snowman share architectonic likeness, but have come into the world of culture through diverse historical derivations. Therefore the elements on the picture plane screen the innate resemblance whether by a stroke of a brush or outlined form. For example, the apart fallen stick in the left lower part of the painting *Words* may suggest the meaning of a broken snowman's wooden arm, but might be read as well as a broken letter L. By *reading* the image in this manner the doubt may arise whether the snowman is a snowman at all or a constellation of planets as well. Henceforth the primary progression of the search for the meaning of the stick is no longer relevant either. This is the grammar of the pun and that of the silhouette. Signs of light silhouettes of brush strokes, letters and numbers constitute the image as a model on a black "chalkboard", which presents the traces of the process of releasing desire by a specific formula.

The childish desire for snowman as a mere symbol is converted through nominal study of language as fiction. The autobiographical narrative of desiring the snowman is stripped by non-linear and abstract representation which indicates the contradictory nature of the autobiographical sincerity.

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