

PASCHALIS M. KITROMILIDES

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS POLITICAL THEORY

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Salvo Mastellone, Nicola Matteucci

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Amministrazione

CASA EDITRICE LEO S. OLSCHKI

Casella postale 66, 50123 Firenze • Viuzzo del Pozzetto 8, 50126 Firenze

e-mail: periodici@olschki.it • Conto corrente postale 12.707.501

Tel. (+39) 055.65.30.684 • fax (+39) 055.65.30.214

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*Autobiography as Political Theory**

In the history of political thought it is not unusual to be able to gauge the deeper attitude or motivating perception informing a theorist's arguments through the medium of secondary texts, private testimonies or indirect commentaries. This explains the usefulness of editions of correspondence, which occupy such an important part of the corpus of texts making up the canon of political theory. Our regret in those many instances in which this kind of evidence is absent is a good indication of the value ascribed to forms of documentation which help in locating political arguments in a context of personal and intimate significance that might make interpretation more meaningful and revealing.

One such form of interpretative evidence in the canon of political thought is autobiographical writing. The substantive question in this case is how much trust can we have in such evidence? Can autobiography be taken seriously as a record of self-revelation and self-disclosure or is it just another form of disguise and deception –perhaps self-deception as well? This is a crucial and inescapable question, which cannot be lightly dismissed. Yet J.S. Mill's autobiography as a monument of clarity, modesty and sincerity, as a testimony of a person's attempt to relate to his times and to the intellectual currents that had shaped his own ideas, points to another use of autobiographical writing that may allay the all-too ready censorious and disdainful suspicions of our post-Freudian cultural outlooks.

In what follows I would like to suggest that Mill's autobiographical project can be considered on two levels from the point of view of its relevance to political theory. One level is that of the process of autobiographical writing itself as an interplay of disclosure and disguise, which constitute in fact two sides of the same relation, that between the self and society. This process of self-discovery presupposes a standard of criticism outside the self, which *ipso facto* makes autobiographical writing relevant as a vantage point through which to pass judgement – through self-criticism – on the human condition. On this level Mill's project could furthermore be connected with other similar attempts in the tradition of political thought. There is a second level of analysis on which autobiographical writing could be seen to be of direct rather than indirect relevance to political theory. This has to do with judgements and reflections on important political and social issues that might be recorded in autobiographical texts. Such statements could very well enhance our appreciation of a theorist's overall vision, perceptiveness and sensibility.

Turning now to Mill's *Autobiography* we will note that, in the corpus of his writings, this text of self-revelation has attracted relatively little comment from political theorists. Perhaps it is too historical, a kind of «mental history» as it

* This is a revised version of a paper originally presented at the John Stuart Mill Bicentennial Congress, London, April 2006. I am deeply grateful to my colleague and friend Professor Lea Campos Boralevi for her help and encouragement in producing the revised version.

has been aptly described,¹ and not rigorous enough for their analytical tastes. Yet the *Autobiography* is clearly an attempt to talk meaningfully about politics and public commitment and about the interplay of political engagement with intellectual life and personal sentiment, by saying something about the self. This enterprise by definition runs the risk of turning into a flight in self-indulgence. Mill's achievement consists not only in avoiding this risk but in turning his self-revelation into a record of his times, an interesting personal testimony about issues and questions that transcend the individual self and point to broader enduring concerns.

The *Autobiography's* significance, however, is not limited to its intrinsic interest as a comment on the «spirit of the age»² by one of the leading critical minds of the period. It is important as a political project on its own and as such, I wish to suggest, it can be connected with a number of other important sources in the canon of political thought, forming with them a «subcanon» of statements on public life through a reasoned revelation about the condition of selfhood. It could be suggested, furthermore, that although the authors of these autobiographical accounts appear to be writing about themselves, they are in fact making a statement about the human condition and its significance for public life. Considered in this perspective, Mill's *Autobiography* could be seen to belong to a tradition of autobiographical writing in the canon of political thought that includes important earlier sources of political reflection, both ancient and modern.

Precisely because it has attracted so little attention by political theorists, it would not be amiss, I believe, to propose in general outline a reconstruction of this tradition of autobiographical writing, whose main value consists in its contribution toward a substantive rather than formal understanding of the nature of political thought. At first sight this subcanon within the canon could be seen to include Socrates' *Apology* and Augustine's *Confessions* among the ancients, Montaigne's *Essays*, Rousseau's *Confessions* and Mill's *Autobiography* among the moderns. These are the obvious examples, the major milestones one might call them, but certainly this brief list could be enriched with other sources as well. Perhaps the greatest and most complex text on this list is Rousseau's *Confessions* and this was not his only autobiographical work. The Pléiade edition of his complete works includes a whole volume running to almost two thousand pages of

¹ R.D. CUMMING, *Human nature and history*, Chicago and London, 1969, vol. II, pp. 367-388.

² J.S. MILL, *Autobiography*, Indianapolis, 1957, p. 112. I am quoting this edition, which I used as a graduate student, but the authoritative standard edition of the text is now that included in the *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. I: *Autobiographical and Literary Essays*, ed. by J.M. Robson and J. Stillinger, London, 1996, pp. 1-290. The introduction to this edition contains a very useful discussion of the manuscript tradition of the text. For an Italian edition see J.S. MILL, *Autobiografia*, a cura di F. Restaino, Roma-Bari, 1976. An earlier, "historic" Italian ed. was published in two volumes by Rocco Carabba in the famous series "Cultura dell'anima", Collezione di libretti filosofici diretta da G. Papini. See J.S. MILL, *Autobiografia*, transl. by D. Pettoello, Lanciano, n.d., 2nd ed. 1934. The classic work on Mill in Italian is M.T. PICCHETTO, *Verso un nuovo liberalismo: le proposte politiche e sociali di John Stuart Mill*, Milano, 1996.

«écrits autobiographiques».³ By comparison Socrates' *Apology* and Mill's *Autobiography* are much more modest and less ambitious attempts. This is not quite an incidental fact. It may very well be understood as a basic indication of the difference between Socrates and Mill from Rousseau on the score of how seriously each of them took himself. Yet Rousseau is not quite right when he claims in opening his *Confessions* that what he sets out to do was «an enterprise which had no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator».⁴ In claiming so much Rousseau pretends to ignore the affinities of his work with those of Socrates and Augustine, but how could he forget Montaigne's assertion in the prefatory note to the reader of the *Essays* that he himself is the subject matter of his book?⁵ So Rousseau's claim is excessive but his enterprise, despite its complexity and length, is not in essence that much different from those of the other authors in the autobiographical canon. All of them make an open statement about themselves in relation to public life, the life of the city, and in doing so, in revealing an aspect of the self that normally ought to have been kept private, they attempt to invite fellow humans, their readers or – in Socrates' case at least – their listeners to a venture in self-discovery and critical self-assessment that may contribute to an improvement of humanity. Thus autobiography is a public project for all these writers and that is why their pertinent texts belong to the canon of political thought. The venture in self-discovery and self-assessment to which we are all invited by these authors, including Mill, involves essentially a recognition and public admission of our insufficiencies. We are invited to be disabused of the delusions about ourselves we tend to cultivate, trapped as we are in our inability to see clearly and judge rightly ourselves and others. Thus Socrates in the *Apology* talks especially of his ignorance. Augustine in the *Confessions* exposes his unconquerable propensity to sin, «the spirals of his errors».⁶ Montaigne warns the reader of the *Essays* that the subject – that is himself – is frivolous and vain.⁷ Rousseau in his turn issues an urge to look for the natural man beneath the deep layers of self-deception and hypocrisy which society forces upon him.⁸

All of these autobiographers reveal something unflattering about themselves and they do so publicly, at court, from the pulpit, through the medium of the printed word – the utmost publicity possible – wishing, hoping, perhaps nurturing a secret ambition to act, through their self-disclosure, as gadflies among their fellow citizens, who might be persuaded in this way to proceed to similar forms of self-discovery and recognition and thus be liberated from vices that nurture illu-

³ J.-J. ROUSSEAU, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. I, ed. by B. Gagnebin, M. Raymond and R. Osmont, Paris, 1959.

⁴ Id., *The Confessions*, transl. by J.M. Cohen, Harmondsworth, 1953, p. 17.

⁵ *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, transl. by D. Frame, Stanford, 1965, p. 2.

⁶ P. BROWN, *Augustine of Hippo. A Biography*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969, p. 164. See SAINT AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, transl. by R.S. Pine-Coffin, Harmondsworth, 1961, p. 71.

⁷ J. STAROBINSKI, *Montaigne in motion*, Chicago, 1985, pp. 222-225.

⁸ Cf. J.N. SHKLAR, *Men and Citizens. A Study of Rousseau's Social Theory*, Cambridge, 1969, p. 41.

sions and false opinions, reduce life in society to viciousness and open the way to corruption.

A critic may detect an element of self-righteousness in all this, an insidious form of self-indulgence. I do not think it has to be understood necessarily this way, considering that our authors, especially Augustine and Montaigne to be sure, do not appear particularly kind to themselves and reveal without hesitation their penchant for nakedness in the service of truth. Mill's *Autobiography* could be readily connected with this interpretative context if we take into account the way he talks about himself in discussing his life-long education. He talks about his own insignificance and evokes as the main reason for writing his autobiography any interest that might accrue from the account of his unusual educational experience.⁹ To confirm his declaration about the insignificance of his life he adds later on that all, or at least the best of his ideas were not in fact his own, but originated with his life's companion, Harriet Taylor-Mill.¹⁰ In a quite real sense Mill's public acknowledgement of his insignificance and unoriginality comes as a sequel to Socrates' ignorance, Augustine's sinfulness, Montaigne's frivolity and vanity in the autobiographical canon – an admission of insufficiency that is meant to hold up a mirror to humanity, in the hope of providing a stimulus to self-reflection that might bring about a liberation from the vice of self-deception, that people appear to be craving so much.

It is interesting to speculate on the model of reconstructed person that emerges from the public admission of their own insufficiency by the main autobiographers in the political tradition. Socrates by declaring his own ignorance aspires to emancipate his fellow citizens in the democratic polis from the tyranny of false opinion sustained by the politicians, the orators, and the poets. Augustine confesses his life-long submission to sin in the hope of setting the members of his religious communion on the road to salvation. Montaigne through his self irony and by opting for withdrawal from the world points to an escape from the vices, especially cruelty and hypocrisy, that plague humanity.¹¹ Rousseau, in his turn, through his attack on self-deception is striving to remove the many obstacles that the perversion of character in corrupt society puts on the way of making the self fully transparent and thus capable of service to others. Although Rousseau does not admit it, his project of recovering sincerity and authenticity through the shedding of perversion and hypocrisy is very close to Montaigne's, with the basic difference of course that Montaigne does not seem to believe that given the world as it is, a public project is really a viable option, whereas Rousseau entertains the hope to turn the transparent self into a public-spirited citizen.¹²

⁹ MILL, *Autobiography*, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 119-121. See also J.M. ROBSON, «Introduction», in J.S. MILL, *Autobiography*, London, 1989, pp. 14-15.

¹¹ MONTAIGNE, *Essays*, pp. 306-318. Cf. J.N. SHKLAR, *Ordinary Vices*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1984, pp. 10-17, 19-21, 23-35, 42-44.

¹² J. STAROBINSKI, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau. La transparence et l'obstacle*, Paris, 1971, pp. 216-239.

Mill's project is clearer and more realistic than Rousseau's. Through the narrative of his own life, which he disguises as just an account of his education, Mill is in fact building a model of the democratic citizen who combines public engagement with a mature personality, critical thought and all-sided cultivation. What he is arguing against is the model of his own personality as the «manufactured man»¹³ of the years prior to his mental and emotional crisis. Mill's argument was in fact against an early version of «one-dimensional man», but in this case this was the product not of the complete rationalization and control of technology upon society and humanity, but of a different and earlier version of the illusion of total rationalization associated with utilitarian radicalism. Mill wants to preserve the democratic engagement presupposed by radical politics, but he also feels that public commitment should not be allowed to cripple individual personality, make politics and rationality into obsessions and thus turn the political activist into an emotional and intellectual invalid, incapable of appreciating and enjoying the immense variety of human experience, especially its higher aesthetic forms. How to combine democratic citizenship, which would include a firm commitment to equality, with the fullness of human experience is in fact the challenge of Mill's *Autobiography* to political theory. The commitment to equality is *ipso facto* involved in the recognition of socialism as an essential precondition of the eventual improvement of mankind.¹⁴

Political theory in the Twentieth Century has proposed various responses to Mill's challenge, very often ignoring or overlooking his original question: the politics of authenticity in the 1960s,¹⁵ the standard of «complex equality» and the multiplicity of experience it presupposes,¹⁶ even the fullness of the embattled selfhood of modernity¹⁷ in a way, could be considered responses to Mill's questions about the human condition. So Mill could be seen standing at the close of the autobiographical tradition in the canon of political thought and conversing with the politics of modernity. This brings us to the second of the two levels upon which his autobiographical project can be of substantive service to political reflection.

The earlier tradition from Socrates to Rousseau had in fact used autobiographical self-disclosure and self assessment as a more effective form of social criticism, a kind of personal protest against corrupt and unthinking society. Mill transforms this heritage by turning it into a challenge to the future when he reformulates the basic question of justice in the following terms:¹⁸

¹³ MILL, *Autobiography*, p. 100.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 148-150. On the use of the *Autobiography* as a source of evidence in elucidating Mill's practical political preoccupations see M.T. PICHETTO, *Mill e la rivoluzione del 1848*, in *Ideologie del 1848 e mutamento sociale*, ed. by M. Larizza, Firenze, 1999, pp. 191-200 and F. ROSEN, *The Method of Reform. J.S. Mill's encounter with Bentham and Coleridge*, in *J.S. Mill's Political Thought. A Bicentennial Reassessment*, ed. by N. Urbinati and A. Zakaras, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 124-144.

¹⁵ E.G. MARSHALL BERMAN, *The politics of authenticity*, New York, 1980.

¹⁶ M. WALZER, *Spheres of Justice*, Oxford, 1983, pp. 3-30.

¹⁷ CH. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 495-521.

¹⁸ MILL, *Autobiography*, p. 149.

The social problem of the future we considered to be, how to unite the greatest individual liberty of action, with a common ownership in the raw material of the globe, and an equal participation of all in the benefits of combined labour.

The formulation of the question of justice comes in fact as the outcome of self-reflection and of the critical assessment of his own intellectual trajectory in Mill's autobiographical project. The evocation of the issue of «the raw materials of the globe» adds a quite unexpected contemporaneity to this assessment of the prospects of global justice. Could Mill be considered a theorist of globalization *avant la lettre*? It would be interesting to reflect on this question. It would be sobering indeed to both unreflecting enthusiasts and paranoid exorcists of the global processes unifying the planet in our own age to pause and ruminate on Mill's possible contribution to an alternative perspective on issues of global justice. If we substitute the term 'management' for the term 'ownership' in the passage just quoted from the *Autobiography*, who could dispute that Mill in his project of self-disclosure is posing the critical questions of the future of humanity? Mill's bicentennial in 2006 coincided with a world-wide ecological disaster announcing, it is to be feared, things to come in the future of the planet. On that occasion we hypocritically rushed to blame wild life instead of searching its origin in insatiable human greed, as Augustine, to remember another of our authors in the autobiographical canon, would be immediately able to recognize. Mill's formulation of the question of global justice comes as a sobering invitation to serious self examination to post-modern society and as a reminder to political theory to ask itself whether it has been really posing the essential questions.

PASCHALIS M. KITROMILIDES