

LAWRENCE WHEELER

Classical Roots of William Morris's Autobiography

History is not woven by innocent men. — Acton

The critical discussion arising around autobiography in the last twenty years has focussed, in part, on the question whether autobiography is, in some sense, a peculiarly Western form, generated out of certain historical conditions of the industrializing and radically individuating culture of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thus a number of commentators on the genre—Georges Gusdorf chief among them—remarks on necessary conditions and limits which historically inscribe and circumscribe the possibility of autobiography.¹ Those conditions and limits, their historiographical meaning, and the qualities informing an autobiography are themselves individually significant and require some discussion. But these qualities assume even richer significance in the recognition that certain authors quite early on in the late Enlightenment and nineteenth-century evolution of autobiography begin to toy with the presence of autobiographical forms in their work and to interfere with the narratorial continuity that structures autobiography. Hence my purpose in this essay is first to consider some of the axes along which autobiography has emerged into treatment as formal literary structure in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, to work toward an appreciation of parts of the cultural context of that autobiographical development, and then to try to relate significant aspects of that formal emergence and that context to the work of William Morris and, in particular, to the utopian romance *News from Nowhere*. My intent in so doing is to suggest that Morris, richly aware of the structures and implications of the autobiographical viewpoint, moves to subvert those structures by inscribing them in a pattern of self-reference and self-generation. By so doing, I argue, Morris throws into suspicion the received understanding of the individual self which the western tradition has labored to create.

Thomas Kuhn has persuasively argued that certain

conditions characterize the maturation of a "normal" science, perhaps chief among them the recognition on the part of that science's practitioners that they may transcend the simple taxonomic stage and begin to define the principles which order and regulate entry into the category under examination. In the case of the emergence of the study of autobiography as science, three works of relatively recent date (as well as the Gusdorf essay already referred to) will serve nicely to represent this normalizing stage of the endeavor: Roy Pascal's *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, Philippe Lejeune's *Le pacte autobiographique*, and Anne Hunsaker Hawkins' *Archetypes of Conversion*. Each concentrates on a different part of the problem posed by that radical western fiction, the autobiography; none is exhaustive.

We should first consider the Gusdorf essay which has been taken by many theorists as a fundamental base for the careful study of the genre. Gusdorf establishes a number of preliminary criteria which characterize autobiography: it is a prose narrative, from a particular time and space (post-scientific revolution, western), which retrospectively considers and attempts to present the quality of the lived existence of a particular and historically identifiable individual.² Thus for Gusdorf the importance of the genre is that it records the evolution of a sensibility refined enough to shape a literary analogue of the experience of self-conscious and self-ironizing identity, and that it is capable of communicating that self-consciousness in a Diltheyan intersubjectivity. Whether the autobiography passes itself off, finally, as fact or fiction is for Gusdorf essentially a triviality; it is the form of the individual consciousness which is sought within the work, and that is irrelevant to the veracity of the work. Hence the summary importance of autobiography for Gusdorf is that it is peculiarly Western in reflecting the highly individuated form of consciousness arising in