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# **Life Writing: Constructing Specular Meaning In-Between Unshared Histories. The Case of *Groundwork* by Robert Welch**

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**Abstract:** As Lacan puts it, the self can never completely confess for itself. Between the ego and the Other there is always the interstitial void filled by the symbolic and by public language. In the following lines we will try to analyse the interstitial space between the interior language and the public one, the distances between generations that inscribe themselves in each other and the rest which remains between these unshared histories as the Other inside us survives its space in a certain mirror.

**Keywords:** History; Self; Generations; Memory; Time; Irish; Otherness; Autobiography.

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## **The Inter-Historical Veil**

Paul Ricoeur defines the time of memory as ‘another’ time, which situates the “beyond” of temporality and presentification<sup>1</sup>. The time of memory is not related to looking back in recognition, but to looking back in distance and dissociation. The novel of Irish writer Robert Welch, *Groundwork*, seems to want to differentiate life from within history not through individual particularities and narratives of the private, but by injecting distance and space-bars between events, narratives, voices, recollections. The novel wants to cover 400 years of Irish history encapsulated in short, fragmentary and non-linear chapters about the weight of history and genealogy upon the lived experiences and struggling of characters. He manages to create this ‘another’ time of memory as an isolated sphere of time by drawing the narration as a closed circle of genealogical silent waves and family tree determinations. It is not just another temporality inside this closed circle, but also another history that concerns

itself with family ties and genetic heritage and not with collectively inscribed events. This gives Welch's novel a certain nostalgia for duration and lived experience which are inextricably clustered together in history and collective representations. Irish nationalism, as we can see in *Groundwork*, finds its ground not in representation, but in mystical ties between generations, grandfathers and grandsons, mothers and daughters, tangled families etc.

Usually, in narrative, experiences are embedded inside their own importance in relation to the story of the Subject. In the case of *Groundwork*, the micro-experience is not constructed in relation to the place it occupies in the life of an individual, but in accordance to its place in the history of becoming of a certain family. Inside the bridged correspondences opened by the narratives of *Groundwork*, the micro-experience unfolds itself as a spectre of the previous generations and it does not gain relevance at the level of individual story, but at the level of collective belonging. The idea of the consciousness of a generation is not present at the level of the characters, being replaced by an unrecognized inter-historical veil that fills the blank spaces between individuals and forgotten members of the family. This inter-historical veil is built by means of a 'montage' that draws bridges over time, connects episodes and moments and attracts correspondences between different types of becoming. Tracing a lineage between families, individuals and events aims at a 're-assemblage' of history. This fictional act of re-assembling history through genealogy internalizes and makes intimate the acknowledged chain of events. This attempt has to do with an Irish need of gaining independence in relation

to macro-history and it also deals with the endeavour of taking their self-image beyond political identity.

### Memory, Genealogy and Self-Image

*Groundwork* proves that the principle of memory is not to testify against transformation and time, but to find a link between facts that would be able to create the sense of belonging by inserting the Subject in an "irrational" cause-effect chain. Memory creates an intersection with one's own life and, thus, generates the sense of belonging to ourselves. The narrative through which we normally perceive ourselves is the individual, personal story, but when we perceive ourselves at a genealogical scale (meaning that we permanently place our actions in the geometry of a family tree), the dimension of the self-image changes. The self-image is no longer the result of individual action, but the consequence of universal collective participation. The characters in *Groundwork* do not place themselves at this genealogical scale, but through all the drawn correspondences there is this other possibility for the construction of the self-image inside a genealogically assumed history. I would argue that, although the novel aims at capturing the essence of Irish people, it actually manages to universalize the deeply rooted Irish experience.

At one point in the novel, one of the characters, an eighteenth-century poet, talks about the relation between event and history, aimed at *making fact accord with volition*. I think that the novel plays with the 'anti-historical' character of the event, focusing on its emotionally isolating dimension. The emigration of Patsy and the

girl and their arrival in America is not investigated as a social event, but it is constructed as an accumulation of emotionally relevant details. The focus is on the dirty feet of the girl as she sets her first step into the boat that will take them out of the country ravaged by famine. This isolating perception of a subjective detail marks the 'anti-historic' dimension of the event and manages to dissolve *fact* inside *volition* turning every gesture into an expression of "bare" will and not an expression of historical determinism.

### The Feeling of Being Alien

I want to draw a distinction between what it means to be politically alien and existentially alien. The feeling of being politically alien is based on the social impossibility of belonging, while to be existentially alien has to do with the feeling of being alien, that is inhabiting a time, not just a space that is not yours. A time that is not yours is a time where facts and happenings are confiscated into a sort of documentary framing. The novel, *Groundwork*, works as an attempt to get time out of the traditional framing and understanding by turning it into a time of unconscious human inter-relations. It is definitely not the time of personal story or national identity, but the time between stories and between identities.

The alienation created by time, history or social space is founded on an absence of meaning or an impossibility of meaning. The absence of signification sets the promise of truth beyond reality and beyond the order of things. Life-writing and autobiographical projects try to capture and re-invest this absence of meaning by

making truth available inside the horizon of personal story.

### Who Can Tell the Truth?

There are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths<sup>2</sup> says Alain Badiou in his book, *Logic of Worlds*. These truths open up the infinite paths on which a world can operate inside tracks described by points of truth, which are the Subjects themselves. Truths do not only exist or are being reached, but they can also produce themselves, acting as, what Badiou calls, *generic multiplicities*. Truths are the effects of bodies, as Badiou proves through his dialectic materialism, and we could go further and say that in the shadows projected by these bodies and their acts, there lies the possibility of meaning as long as a shadow is always a potential, awaiting image. Is this shadow the image of a self or of a body? And in this uncompleted specular moment, when the reflection is at the same time material and incorporeal, does the possibility of self-image, confession, existential investigation and life-writing arise? Badiou states that we do not live and speak only amid things and bodies, but we actually reside, breathe and act *in the transport of True*. What is this space of truth transportation if not the world in the process of emerging? I think that *the transport of True* has to be synchronous with our body movements and speech acts and when it is not, meaning that it is sent way ahead of us or beyond us, then the possibility of deceiving, reinventing, life-writing and autobiography finds a provisional voice. This voice is no longer a means of transport because it does not carry an identity or a story, but it is the sound of restoration: the

restoration of meaning and consciousness inside the promise of truth.

As Philippe Lejeune would argue, any novel can be autobiographical as long as we take into consideration the *phantasmal contract*, which is the indirect form of “signing” an *autobiographical contract*<sup>3</sup>. And indeed, any piece of writing holds the promise of truth, be it personal, universal or anonymous. That is why we will argue that *Groundwork* has a confessional dimension, although there are multiple voices and no continuous self. It is a piece of life-writing concerned with the impersonal heritage of violence and behaviour and the anonymous truth of collective thought. We talk more about ourselves by acknowledging this heritage that happens at every moment, than we would do by talking about us as if we naturally belonged to ourselves. *Groundwork* pieces together the autobiography of the trans-generational production of man and its self-conscious discursive possibilities.

The truth cannot be separated by its character of address and interpellation, meaning that the *practices of truth*, to use Foucault’s expression, are not equally distributed inside society. Truth and falsehood are not a matter of choice concerning faithfulness towards the representational and confirmatory demands of an empirical reality, but they are both a matter of possibility and access to the discursive products of memory, history, ignorance and oblivion. We cannot choose to tell the truth or name it, or write about it, but rather it is the truth, be it ideological, religious or linguistic, that performs us and posits us in the *excess of words* necessary for the disembodiment of the conscious self. There is no hiding place in the face of truth, but, actually, the truth

creates its own hiding places so that the subject can come out again towards the truth of the spoken, towards the bareness of an unhidden self that can be justified and assumed only through the life-writing and confessional excess of words. Sometimes the discursive burst of self-reflection is nothing but a drive to equalise meaning by making everything plane/flat inside the universal truth of exposure. Just like our seventeenth-century character from *Groundwork*, who undertakes a historical and scriptural quest in order to expiate his fault. One Sunday at Mass, our character, a priest, commences to talk about truth in its Christian significance. Looking at his audience, he sees, among the folks, the face of an adulterous woman that used to confess her sins from time to time and he starts making direct accusations prejudicing the woman in front of everybody. Then he decides to write a book, *The Groundwork of Knowledge Concerning Ireland*, to atone for his anger and his *lethargy of heart* that lead to the public and linguistic exposure of the self and its sin. This short chapter is a *mise-en-abyme* for the whole aim of Welch’s novel. But let’s now turn to the precise moment during Mass when the truth explodes:

I ranted on about the falseness of privacy, that everything stood naked before the Lord; that the soul, wracked by remorse, could find no hiding place when all was made plain and clear in death. Then I saw her fat, composed and sanctimonious puss down in front of me, lips pursed in the simulacrum of pious meditation, and I felt something, a clot of hate, explode in my head<sup>4</sup>.

The truth “drive” is actually the impulse of erasing meaning created by the layered world of the known and the unknown; it is the will to create and impose the uncontested truth of the event as the ultimate essence of existence; it realizes from the moment it is prefigured, as Badiou says about each truth, its claim to universality<sup>5</sup>. But what happens after you have exposed the bare self together with its constitutional sin? The exposure does not open the possibility of creating new meaning and discourse, because there is no longer a story or a secret. It cannot be related or told, because it remains there, in the eyes of everybody, suspended in the impossibility of being made subjective. The exposure does not belong to anybody, not even to the thing exposed. It cannot be appropriated because the exposed self, sin, hidden act is the end of meaning and confession and the beginning of a shared plain of unspeakable truth. In order to open the resources of unfinished meaning again, the exposure is re-injected with significance by means of guilt. The self cannot be left hanging in its pure bareness, blocked inside *the transport of True* and exposed in its lack of narrative and confessional possibilities. This shameful bare self of exposure becomes the central reflection of the collectivity that depicts it. This is the moment when the quilt of exposure (on both sides) unleashes the field of significance and the possibility of a new confession and a new story arises. Our priest decides to atone for his guilt by means of writing and investigating the history of human becoming, where, he admits, error and falsehood play a vital role in the creation of a speakable event:

That is why I will try to explain in what I am going to write how is it

that falsehood leads to tyranny and the imprisonment of conscience. Only prayer and devotion will free us from the torment and delusion of history. And yet the history must needs be written, because the pain and chagrin of event is compounded by the wilfulness and error of historians<sup>6</sup>.

So it is not through the mechanisms of *exposure* that history and life-writing are pictured, but through suppressing exposure by means of subjective guilt consignment.

It is in the realm of *the private* and inside the politics of intimacy that the truth of life-writing becomes the truth of experience. There is no truth of experience without the field of significance entertained by the “secrecy” of *the private*, which gives consistency to a mono-nucleic inwardness. Inside the truth of experience, generated by *the private*, things happen just because they are outside discourse, outside the narrative and outside identity and they become speakable when they are generated back into an event that can be witnessed and confessed. Here we can turn to Paul de Man and insist on the fact that it is not life that produces autobiography as a consequence, but it is the autobiographical project that determines life inside the well-defined lines of self-portraiture. Inside the mode of figuration of life-writing why do we pretend to lay bare a non-narrative truth of experience as if we could claim we need no story to be able to confess? Is life-writing a tricky way of translating the “truth” of the self beyond the narrative?

**The *Voice-from-Beyond-the-Grave*  
or the *Eye-from-Beyond-the-Face*?**

*Thus it can be said that writing makes  
the dead so that the living can exist  
elsewhere<sup>7</sup>*

In his short essay, *Autobiography as De-facement*, Paul de Man talks about autobiography's epitaphic character which functions as *the voice-from-beyond-the-grave* that is able to speak after things have been arranged in life, with the confessional attitude of the dead who no longer disclose in front of the living, but in front of history itself. This *voice-from-beyond-the-grave* can attach a *face*, making the discourse visually memorable or can take away a face, disfiguring the name, but liberating the story. *The voice-from-beyond-the-grave* contains the muteness of life and it is this impossibility of speech from within life that becomes the source and the perspective of the story beyond death. Paul de Man claims that the autobiographical project operates as a *restoration of mortality*, depriving us of the world experienced as private and continuous singularity. Life becomes a story told not by the voice that has "lived it," but by the voice that integrates it and, thus, takes it out of the particularity of understanding. Because of this, the *voice-beyond-the-grave* is also, in De Man's words, a *de-facement of the mind* that shifts back to autobiography in search for a veiling of this disfiguration. When the echo of this afterlife voice is heard, the face is no longer the frame of the story, because there is the perspective of completeness which can no longer hold an interface, thus, dissolving the figurative and physiognomic face of the mind. This is the type of voice that can trace the history

of a family, because it takes the testimony of the living to speak inside the confessional discourse of the dead. Drawing the entangled history of an Irish family, Welch uses *the-voice-from-beyond-the-grave* to, paradoxically, dig back into the future and reveal the representational paths of genealogical self *de-facement*. Family has the power to individualize, but when traced back into history it de-particularizes and fragments our experience, which becomes nothing more than the shaped dispersal of a diachronic, decisional wave. Robert Welch would agree to the de-particularising effects of the family tree upon the individual, which works as a re-insertion mechanism that frees us from the singularity of individual story and shapes us back into a layered historical plurality: "Family. It makes us slave to chance, but it frees us from the world, too. It gives us another way of looking at people. When you consider that they come from families, too, not unlike your own"<sup>8</sup>. Can genealogy and transmission bear a face beyond the world that contains it or is it just the voice the one that can speak from beyond the grave? In the following paragraph, we will argue that also the eye can acquire a structural, discursive and descriptive position from beyond the grave or, in other words, from beyond the face.

The *visor effect*<sup>9</sup> that Derrida talks about is the mechanism through which we inherit any type of law, be it internal, structural or legislative. The spectral gaze of the watching eye beyond the door which separates spaces and times functions as the autobiographical eye from beyond the grave, which is not looking down on us, but is actually implanting a code inside the self-reception stories and histories. It is the

code of in-betweenness, which filters features and makes them meaningfully available. We will try to prove that the fleshless, watching eye from beyond the door or grave is not internally sensed as the one which articulates our story, because it is observing us, but as the one that tears it into pieces, due to the fact that, in its temporality of the “beyond”, it can see the blankness between gestures, the unfriendliness of life fragments and the absences between narratives. But before this we need to turn to Derrida’s revealing words:

This spectral someone other looks at us, we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony, even before and beyond any look on our part, according to an absolute anteriority (which may be on the order of generation, of more than one generation) and asymmetry, according to an absolutely unmasterable disproportion. Here anach[r]ony makes the law. To feel ourselves seen by a look which it will always be impossible to cross, that is the visor effect on the basis of which we inherit the law<sup>10</sup>.

We feel ourselves looked at from inside an anteriority, says Derrida, but it is not the past or history looking at us through the visor effect mechanism, but the always present anteriority of the immediate, of the invisible close-by, that makes the disproportion perceivable not between times and spaces, but inside the lived experience itself. The eye-from-beyond-the-grave, as we have decided to call it, is impossible to cross, because it is absent from among things and worlds, in order to be totalizing in its meta-narrative of the incorporated anteriority

of the event. The eye generated by the visor effect sees not only the anteriority of our gestures, but also the anteriority of its own look. The visor effect does not rely on any kind of specularity, but, on the contrary, it imposes the impossibility of mirroring, reflection or a response of the outside. That is why even if the Thing *looks at us and sees us not see it even when it is there*, it is not able to tell the story of why we cannot see it, but just the blank distance between what we see and what we do not see. It is exactly what Robert Welch acquires in his novel, where, as readers, we can “see” by means of the visor effect, not just the links between generational stories, but also the empty space between the gesture of the grand-mother and the decision of the grand-daughter, or the blind gap between seventeenth century inhabitants of Ireland and the twentieth century immigrants of America. The visor effect, be it political, discursive, historical or autobiographical, splits the stories and gestures by de-synchronising the time of the dead at the core of the time of the living. Through the voice of an Elizabethan general, Mountjoy, who meditates on the shallowness of victory and the killing of the enemy, Welch talks about a theology of the event, which confirms once again the intervals and breaches inside human acts and inside genealogies: “There is an understanding that events do not unfold; there are, it becomes apparent, monstrous gulfs of dark between the lifting of a hand and the grasping of the halter”<sup>11</sup>. *Groundwork* creates an intergenerational history by means of the voice and the eye from beyond the grave, accomplishing not only a work of memory, but also a work of sepulchre. In Ricoeur’s words, “the historiographical operation is the scriptural

equivalent of the social ritual of entombment<sup>12</sup>. The fragmentary novel of Robert Welch does not deal with the type of historical death of those who bear a name, but it gives a supplemental function to the common death of the anonymous people and communities. Common death is the one that invests the voice with the meaningful, but anonymous silence of inter-generational tunnels, while, as Rancière argues, in *The Names of History*, the death of the king is wasted and de-legitimized by reason of the *excess of words*. Voices can float and circulate between worlds and histories, because common death digs underground communicational passages between testimonies and it links all the stories and all significances, from-beyond-the-grave. We should understand Rancière's words in the logic of historical and post-historical communities: "The ground is an inscription of meaning, the tomb a passage of voices"<sup>13</sup>.

### Inter-Connectedness of Life

*The heavier the burden, the closer our ties come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become.*

Milan Kundera

As Ricoeur states, hauntedness functions in relation to collective memory, just as hallucination would operate inside private memory. Hauntology (to use Derrida's term) is not just the coming back of the dead or the intersection with the spectre, but also the type of relation between times and generations, where the ghost of a genetic chain disaffirms our testimony and turns it into the testimony of the others, whether they are visible or invisible, named

or unnamed. Welch's novel contains chapters written in the first person singular or the third person singular. In both cases the testimony of that voice becomes the testimony of all the other accumulated micro stories, whether they are from the future or the past, because the inter-connectedness of life testifies more than the isolated episodes of life. Confession, testimony and life-writing are constitutively individual acts in western culture and, when uttered or read, they reaffirm the speaking Subject and its coherence throughout a story, but how can one confess not its narrative existence, but its belongingness to life and genealogy? This becomes possible in Welch's novel, where the imaginary reconstruction of family trees is a way of confessing one's mimetic ties and bringing into the world a fathered being of connatural trans-historic moment.

As Ricoeur points out, it is the generational transmission that invests the abstract notion of debt with a carnal and institutional meaning. How many other forms can this historical debt take when it comes to the flawed rawness of everyday life? Žižek talks about a *symbolic debt* we have towards the spectre. The dead return because we have not given them enough meaning by means of symbolic investment and not because they generate an immaterial surplus of life. At the core of each encounter with a haunting spectre there lies the logic of debt, a debt that can no longer be paid, because it has been resolved by means of the apparition. The generational debt has the same mechanism as the *symbolic debt* and it cannot be paid by historiographical or life-writing operations. This debt opens up and entertains the inter-connectedness of life not only inside narratives and individual stories, but also in-between histories, because of



the indebted relation it creates between life and death. In *Groundwork*, this debt is persistent, giving an ontological weight to each owing episode that follows another. This is how every family reunion pays a *symbolic debt* to the nineteenth century Famine, every new-born pays a debt to the war, each American immigrant pays a debt to the land they left behind, each factory worker pays a symbolic debt to a landowner, each secret pays a debt to a necessary story and so on, the entanglement of *Groundwork's* universe can go on forever. The episodes and life moments from around history are not simply connected by means of associations and symbolic debts, but they tend to work as two multiple-layered mirrors that face each other, not being able to completely capture or contain each other, thus, creating meaning inside their in-betweenness. This specular confrontation comprises inside it the confusion of reflection, because we can no longer distinguish between the surface that projects and the surface that reflects images. The reflection confusion of the in-between creates the possibility of an infinity of intervals and, thus, this infinity opens up the potentiality of meaning and the resource of being able to belong to a certain historical or existential moment in a variety of ways. Histories and stories are not shared; it is just their *in-betweenness* that is the place that can become a collective and universal meeting point.

Maybe the signification force of the life and history's in-betweenness is most visible inside the concept of genealogy. "Genealogy is the institution that makes life human life"<sup>14</sup>. By creating a transmissible way of operating into existence, by supplementing a diachronic connectedness of life, and by creating ties that help

us insert ourselves in the realm of the Real and perceive ourselves as ontological beings, genealogy, as Dilthey puts it, "allows us to hold the thread of life"<sup>15</sup>. Suddenly, life becomes not something that emanates through our pores or streams through our molecules, but something we inherit, or more precisely, something we come into by means of genealogical transmission. In the life-writing project of Robert Welch's *Groundwork*, it is at stake that life does not rely in the gesture itself, but it is acquired in the light of family history, world history and the transmissible occurrence of life and action. The short non-chronological chapters manage to create the transmissible life impression, showing that the history of a family is, actually, the history of a nation and the world history is nothing but an autobiography of being.

According to Pierre Nora, there are two types of belonging: one is the *horizontal identity*, which has to do with the feeling of solidarity towards contemporaneous people and the other one is *vertical solidarity*, a sense of diachronic history belongingness. What Pierre Nora observes is obvious in the question he asks himself: "As the place of change increases, how and why has the horizontal identification of individuals of roughly the same age been able to supplant all forms of vertical identification"<sup>16</sup>? Maybe the history of violence has become such a loaded burden that it no longer manages to make us feel real, but, on the contrary, it de-realizes us. That is why we turn to pure memory, the type of memory that "mocks history and abolishes duration to make itself a present without history"<sup>17</sup>. With these words in mind we can turn to Welch's novel and see how love, infidelity, decisions, politeness, rage, etc.

are played out at the dawn of unhistorical centuries.

As Emmanuel Levinas observes, there is a fundamental non-coincidence in the diachronic time which determines the relation with the other. Thus, all relations are based upon this *solitude de l'exister* that can be either inter-historical or inter-human. In the case of generational links there is most obvious that, as Levinas states, the relation with the other is a mystery derived from the reminiscence of self inside the both banal and illuminated encounter. This reminiscence of self confronts itself with the

absence of the other (not as imaginary or physical) but temporal. As we have seen in *Groundwork*, the other is already absent in time and that is why otherness is just another face of temporality. This non-coincidence that we have analyzed marks an entire modern culture (not only the Irish one) that bears witness to its collective monologues from which conditional forms of memories spring. The inter-connectedness of life if different from the dis-connectedness of collective memory, but the two dimensions interact with one another digging short-cuts between unbridged structures of otherness.

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