

JAMES OLNEY

MEMORY &

NARRATIVE

THE WEAVE OF LIFE-WRITING





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JAMES OLNEY

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JAMES OLNEY is Voorhies Professor of English and professor of French and Italian at Louisiana State University. He is also coeditor of *The Southern Review*.

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For my brothers and sisters—

Richard

Margaret

Norris

John

Elizabeth

Frances (in memoriam)

Byron—

sine quibus non

Life lives on. It is the lives, the lives, the lives that die.

—Pseudo-Lucretius

My imagination goes some years backward, and I remember a beautiful young girl singing at the edge of the sea in Normandy words and music of her own composition. She thought herself alone, stood barefooted between sea and sand; sang with lifted head of the civilisations that there had come and gone, ending every verse with the cry:

*O Lord, let something remain.*

—W. B. Yeats



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## PRELUDE

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“Murphy, all life is figure and ground.” So Neary proclaims to the eponymous hero of Samuel Beckett’s first novel. Whatever Neary may have in mind with his gnomic saying, I am happy to appropriate it to characterize the shape of *Memory and Narrative*. The three great principals of my book—St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Citizen of Geneva; Samuel Beckett, Irish Parisian—stand like colossi each fully capable of giving his name to the age in which he lived and wrote: Augustine, presiding spirit of the Catholic Middle Ages; Rousseau, child of the Enlightenment yet prime mover of Romantic attitudes; Beckett, comic genius of a world in ruins. At the same time, the three taken together establish a tradition of writing, founded by Augustine, radically altered by Rousseau, concluding (for the moment) in Beckett, that is the ground against which, during sixteen centuries, innumerable figures and transformations have played themselves out like variations on a theme.

*Memory and Narrative* had its beginnings in a brief paper called “Autobiography and the Narrative Imperative from St. Augustine to Samuel Beckett” that I wrote for a scholarly gathering in 1981. That paper, like the first part of the first chapter of this book, dwelt on what I perceived to be some curious but striking similarities between Augustine’s *Confessions* and Beckett’s then recently published (1980) *Company* on such issues as narrative theory and the relationship of recollecting or remembering to the act of narrating. But the paper was written for a particular occasion, and when that occasion was over I tucked it into a file drawer and forgot about it. I could not, however, forget about the issues the paper dealt with, and every time I have returned in the past fifteen years to a consideration of autobiography as a literary mode—which is to say very frequently, whether in seminar or lecture or some other forum—I have found myself trying to sort out once again the tangled and fascinating, dual and symbiotic matter of



memory and narrative. Each chapter of the present book I have conceived of as a more or less freestanding essay—a kind of meditation on the subject of memory-and-narrative—woven according to its own pattern from the thematic material of the whole, all of the chapters more or less equal in weight if not the same in length nor alike in texture or tone. The ways of memory are many (and often devious), and the ways of narrative no less so, and this protean quality in the subject demands an equally protean response in thinking and writing about it.

While each of the chapter-essays has its own shape, intention, and terminology, there nevertheless lies behind them all and flows through every one of them a self-conscious narrative of history and tradition, giving a shape to the whole that has been in my mind from the beginning. As in the paper mentioned, whenever I have adopted a historical approach to memory and narrative, considering how the one and the other and the relationship between them might have changed over time, it has come to be inevitable that I should see Augustine as the initiator of a long tradition of life-narration in the Western world that now finds its conclusion in Beckett's late fictions. Murphy's response to Neary's claim that "all life is figure and ground" is to say that all life is "but wandering to find home." Home for the present tale, when it is not with Augustine in the fourth-fifth century, is situated in modernism, postmodernism, and the late twentieth century; Augustine and Beckett thus anchor my story at either end. To arrive at the later home requires leaving the earlier one (not leaving it behind, however), and it entails much wandering between. Lying like a great dragon well on this side of the Middle Ages, indeed just outside the gate of modernism, and altogether crucial to whatever it was that happened to memory and narrative in the sixteen centuries from Augustine to Beckett, is the implausible but inescapable figure of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Many other writers must be passed over or touched on very lightly in this study, but anyone who would trace a line of memory-and-narrative from Augustine to Beckett can do so only by way of Rousseau; thus the lengthy second chapter, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Crisis of Narrative Memory." Rousseau is the true center of it all: without his achievement as the middle, Augustine's would not be the beginning, Beckett's would not be the end. Lest the line of tradition snap through being stretched too far, I have inserted a pair of interludes, one between Augustine and Rousseau, the other between Rousseau and Beckett, both of them drawing on the intriguing life-writing project devised and executed by Giambattista Vico. Though he has never been accorded the significance as a life-writer that both Augustine and Rousseau have received, only Vico, in my judgment,

is capable of providing theoretical and practical justification for understanding this long tradition of writing as a single enterprise, *corso e ricorso*, universal and individual, containing all history and of profoundly human design. In performing this role in the unfolding drama, Vico adopts some crucial ideas from St. Augustine, makes some observations of eerie applicability to Rousseau, and anticipates where Beckett (who displays a deep and shrewd knowledge of Vico in his early essay, "Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . . Joyce") will come out in the twentieth century.

Chapters I and II and the two interludes provide the grounding (to echo Neary again) for what I think of as the second half of the book, chapters III, IV, and V, where I take up the problem of memory-and-narrative in a variety of twentieth-century contexts, all with specific regard to Samuel Beckett's work. Chapter III, taking its title—*Not I*—from Beckett's short play of 1972, looks at the disappearance of the subject, both grammatical and thematic, in a largish group of modernist writers—R. L. Stevenson, Henry Adams, Gertrude Stein, Ronald Fraser, Maxine Hong Kingston, Richard Wright, Christa Wolf, Mary McCarthy, Samuel Beckett, Nathalie Sarraute, Primo Levi, Virginia Woolf—of whom, for my purposes, Beckett still remains the supreme representative. Chapter IV brings together three figures—Beckett, of course, also Alberto Giacometti and Franz Kafka—whose work in and around narrative I take to be definitive for the twentieth century. Chapter V is what I there term "a case study of twentieth-century literary memory across the whole body of Beckett's work," supplemented by reference to the recent "memory work" coming from a variety of scientific disciplines.

Two further points I think it important to make about the approach adopted to the material in *Memory and Narrative*. It has long been my conviction that theory of life-writing is best derived from major instances of the mode rather than from interchange with other critics. This judgment is generated neither by disrespect for such criticism nor by ignorance of it. If one thinks of how much St. Augustine has to say about narrative and how much about memory, even as he practices the one and exercises the other, one will quickly conclude that there is God's plenty of theory here without searching elsewhere for it. The same of Rousseau and of Beckett, neither of whom conceptualizes or theorizes quite as readily and openly as Augustine, but both of whom offer material for the purpose in quite as full supply as Augustine himself. The second point, closely related to this first one and also to my sense that the life-writing project is an all-encompassing endeavor, is that if I expect my three comprehensively representative figures to sustain the massive historical and theoretical weight put on them, it can

only be by bringing to bear evidence spread out across their entire bodies of work. It simply would not do in these circumstances to confine myself to Augustine's *Confessions*, Rousseau's *Confessions*, and Beckett's *Company*, for each of these takes its place in a much larger history and in a vast network of texts without which we cannot understand what may admittedly be, in each case, the central piece of life-writing. There are at least half a dozen other major texts necessary to our reading of Augustine's *Confessions*, texts that have gone quite unattended by students of autobiography; and similarly I believe that time and again a crucial mistake has been made in focusing nearly all discussion of Rousseau's life-writing on the *Confessions* to the comparative neglect of the *Reveries* and the utter neglect of the *Dialogues*. The *Dialogues* could quite well be taken to be the single most important text in the history I am tracing, yet with one or two honorable exceptions it has received no notice at all from critics. And while *Company* (or, as I argue in chapter V, *Stirrings Still*) may be the culmination of Beckett's efforts, we will get no true sense of that culmination without an awareness of everything going before it (and here I mean to say everything before it in Beckett's work and in the tradition). This is the very principle on which Beckett's oeuvre is founded; likewise with his two great predecessors. A corollary to my practice of deriving theory from texts of life-writing and at the same time expanding the meaning of text to include a whole body of work is my resolve to discuss issues of memory and narrative only in terms historically appropriate to the time of writing. Thus I have resisted, as being both unnecessary and unprofitable, any temptation to transport recent discussions of memory, for example, back to a reading of Augustine or Rousseau.

If, in my sense of it, there is a kind of inevitability about the presence of Augustine, Rousseau, and Beckett in this study, I must admit that, on the contrary, there is something rather arbitrary in my choice of the dozen modernist writers named as supplementary to Beckett. What I mean is that virtually any writer of the century might have been chosen, with nearly equal validity, instead of those I have settled upon. (With regard to the most glaring omission, I will say only what Anatole France said: "Life is short, and M. Proust is very long." I decided at the very beginning of this project not to mention Proust a single time, for if I had let him in the door at all what I should have had to say about him would have turned out to be almost as long as *À la recherche du temps perdu* itself.) But that so many contemporary authors offer themselves as obvious choices is part of the point: that an agonized search for self, through the mutually reflexive acts of memory and narrative, accompanied by the haunting fear that it is impos-

sible from the beginning but also impossible to give over, is the very emblem of our time.

Although I have in the past written frequently about autobiography as a literary genre, I have never been very comfortable doing it, primarily because I believe that if one is to speak relevantly of a genre one has first of all to define it, and I have never met a definition of autobiography that I could really like. Looking back from the present moment, it strikes me that there has been a gradual alteration—an evolution or devolution as one may prefer—in the nature of life-writing or autobiography over the past sixteen centuries, moving from a focus on “bios,” or the course of a lifetime, to focus on “autos,” the self writing and being written; and this shift, which one sees occurring unaware in Rousseau to become finally established and pervasive in the twentieth century, has introduced a number of narrative dilemmas requiring quite different strategies on the writers’ part. In the course of *Memory and Narrative* I call the kind of writing I am looking at by various names—confessions, autobiography, memoirs, periautography (although I deny myself use of this designation until it becomes historically available with Vico), autography (H. Porter Abbott’s term for what Beckett does), and—the most frequently employed term—life-writing. I confess that from among these terms I have a special fondness for “periautography,” which to my ear has a sound that is both strange and familiar, both ancient and new. “Periautography” was the term used by Count Gian Artico di Porcía when he issued the “Proposal to the Scholars of Italy” calling for the scholars to write their intellectual memoirs for the educational benefit of the young; it was this proposal that elicited the book that we have in English translation as *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*. What I like about the term “periautography,” which would mean “writing about or around the self,” is precisely its *indefinition* and lack of generic rigor, its comfortably loose fit and generous adaptability, and the same for “life-writing” (though the term in itself seems to me less attractive than “periautography”). As I write this, I am reminded that I said much the same thing about autobiography in the preface to *Metaphors of Self*, my first book on the subject. In the twenty-five years since *Metaphors of Self* there has been a flood of publications on autobiography, books and articles that have undoubtedly increased and sharpened our understanding of this mode of writing but that have also, to a degree, fixed it in place as a literary genre with rules, conventions, expectations. As I reflect back, in the manner of life-writing itself, I realize what I had not been aware of when I began *Memory and Narrative* and certainly was unaware of when I wrote *Metaphors of Self*: that *Metaphors of Self* was the beginning—as three or four books

and numerous articles have been the middle—of something that has led to *Memory and Narrative* as its natural conclusion. And I am satisfied that it should be so. For by whatever name we call the literature—autobiography, life-writing, or periautography—there exists a particularly intriguing kind of writing to be considered for which any one of the terms mentioned might be a fair enough designation, the crucial tactic, in my view, being not to insist on strict definitions and rigid lines of demarcation. I have always felt, and continue to feel, that it is best to think of what I am doing as exploratory in nature rather than definitive. It is in that spirit that I have written *Memory and Narrative*.



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I

## MEMORY AND THE NARRATIVE IMPERATIVE

### St. Augustine and Samuel Beckett Ensemble

ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.

VLADIMIR: They all speak at once.

ESTRAGON: Each one to itself. . . .

VLADIMIR: What do they say?

ESTRAGON: They talk about their lives.

VLADIMIR: To have lived is not enough for them.

ESTRAGON: They have to talk about it.

*Waiting for Godot*

“Lord, since eternity is yours, can you be ignorant of what I say to you?” St. Augustine asks at the outset of book 11 of the *Confessions*; and being certain that all that takes place in time is eternally present to the mind of God, Augustine goes on to ponder the next logical question about the act he has been engaged in throughout the first ten books of the *Confessions*: “Why then do I put before you in order the stories of so many things?”<sup>1</sup> We all know the kinds of stories Augustine has been putting before God in order, stories, like the one of stealing pears, that have little moment in themselves but that, echoing events in both the New Testament and the Old Testament, reverberate in significance far beyond their apparent triviality. Shorn of Augustine’s theological terminology and the confessional context, this question about narrative motives and intentions is essentially the same question the various narrators of Samuel Beckett’s fiction and the characters of his drama ask over and over again. What is the impetus, Beck-

1. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Rex Warner (New York: Mentor, 1963), 11.1, 257; hereafter cited by book and chapter numbers as *Conf.*, with page numbers from this edition.

ett's different personae ask, why the compulsion to begin and rebegin, all over again and incessantly, these futile stories of futility, in search of something that though it may be desired cannot even be named? "And ever murmuring," as the anonymous voice of *The Unnamable* puts it, "my old stories, my old story, as if it were the first time."<sup>2</sup> Augustine's "Why then do I put before you in order the stories of so many things?" becomes in Beckett, "Why should I try to put in order, time after time, the stories of so few things, my old stories, my old story, as if it were the first time?" With Beckett, the impulse to narrate, which could be and was given rational analysis and logical explanation by Augustine, has become irrational and illogical, compulsive, obsessional, repetitive, unwilled and often unwanted but not to be denied.

The entire justification, validation, necessity, and indeed exemplary instance of writing one's life, of finding the words that signify the self and its history, are offered to us for the first time (according to my narrative) in the *Confessions*; by the time of *Company*, the justification and validation established by Augustine are long since vanished and all that remains of the Augustinian legacy, drawn on so many times by so many writers from the fifth to the twentieth century, is the necessity of performing the narrative act without a first person in sight to perform it or to do the remembering that precedes, accompanies, and follows the narrating. That necessity, however, has lost nothing of its compulsive force. "Strange notion," the narrator of *The Unnamable* says, "Strange notion in any case, and eminently open to suspicion, that of a task to be performed, before one can be at rest. Strange task, which consists in speaking of oneself" (*Trilogy*, 285). Strange as the task may be, however, the last words of this exercise in life-writing confirm the necessity of carrying it out. "I don't know," as the narrator says,

I don't know, that's all words, never wake, all words, there's nothing else, you must go on, that's all I know, they're going to stop, I know that well, I can feel it, they're going to abandon me, it will be the silence, for a moment, a good few moments, or it will be mine, the lasting one, that didn't last, that still lasts, it will be I, you must go on, I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would

2. *The Beckett Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Picador, 1979), 277, hereafter cited as *Trilogy*.



surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on. (*Trilogy*, 381–82)

But let me return to Augustine's *Confessions* to establish the beginning of the historical, philosophical, psychological process that issues finally in Beckett's "I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."

When I say that the justification, validation, and necessity of writing one's life are established in the *Confessions*, I have principally in mind a passage in book 11 in which Augustine describes what happens when he recites a psalm that he knows. This absolutely crucial passage on narrative comes after the equally crucial disquisition on memory in book 10 and the twin meditation on time in book 11, toward the end of which Augustine writes: "It is now, however, perfectly clear that neither the future nor the past are in existence, and that it is incorrect to say that there are three times—past, present, and future. Though one might perhaps say: 'There are three times—a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future.' For these three do exist in the mind, and I do not see them anywhere else: the present time of things past is memory; the present time of things present is sight; the present time of things future is expectation" (*Conf.*, 11.20, 273). That "one might perhaps say" that there exists such a temporal hybrid as "a present of things past" follows from Augustine's exalted conception of memory, and it is what grounds his ideas about narrative in general and about life-narrative in particular. "Suppose," Augustine says of the narrative act and the way it realizes itself in time,

Suppose I am about to recite a psalm which I know. Before I begin, my expectation is extended over the whole psalm. But once I have begun, whatever I pluck off from it and let fall into the past enters the province of my memory. So the life of this action of mine is extended in two directions—toward my memory, as regards what I have recited, and toward my expectation, as regards what I am about to recite. But all the time my attention is present and through it what was future passes on its way to become past. And as I proceed further and further with my recitation, so the expectation grows shorter and the memory grows longer, until all the expectation is finished at the point when the whole of this action is over and has passed into the memory. And what is true of the whole psalm is also true of every part of the psalm and of every syllable in it. The same holds good for any longer action, of which the psalm may be only a part. It is true also of the whole of a man's life, of which all of his actions are parts. (*Conf.*, 11.28, 282)