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Opinion - Internal Simultaneity: A Science of Autobiography

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NAEEM INAYATULLAH, MAY 4 2020

Autobiographical and autoethnographic approaches to IR continue to be misunderstood, notwithstanding their recent achievements and despite efforts to establish a kind of rigor. Autobiography is, of course, necessarily tied to the first person singular – the “I.” Scholars and writers sympathetic to autobiography tie the “I-point-of-view” to singularity, particularity, uniqueness, and idiosyncrasy. In short, they present the inner world of a mind that shares experiences bounded in space, time, and culture. This is exactly as it should be. A narrative without these elements could hardly count as autobiographical. However, too often, this necessary element is taken to be sufficient.

While my reading eye gathers together the particulars of space/time/culture, my inner ear awaits a universal resonance. Particulars and universals are one and the same. If scientific/analytic accounts propound abstract universals that give us skeletal and lifeless arguments, then autobiographical accounts that leave universal echoes unattended produce stories with little bite and a decaying resonance.

This divide between science versus the “I” results from a foundational misunderstanding. Usually we stress the difference between analytic and autobiographical approaches. The former falls on the side of science and rigorous argument. The latter on the side of humanities/art and impressionistic suggestion. Science provides us with structures of the world, the rules and laws that influence, guide, and govern events. Autobiography instead centers on actors, agents, and actions where specific individuals live out particular lives. On one side, science and structures. On the other side, stories and agents.

What we usually miss is the overlap of these seemingly opposed categories. We can ascertain structures because we note that agent action produces institutional patterns. Likewise, we can note that actions follow patterns because agents internalize and reproduce structural logic. Both continuity and change occur within this reciprocal determination. I am alluding to a rudimentary version of dialectics.

Alexander Wendt’s interpretation of Anthony Giddens’ work on the so-called “agent-structure problem” took our field to the door of dialectics. But we failed to enter or occupy the room. If we had, we might have noticed two things: both Wendt and Giddens retain a dualism that is fatal to the dynamic flow that constitutes dialectics; and, that the great masters of dialectics emerge from the tradition of thinking that centers Hegel and Marx. But all this is fodder for a different essay, even if essential for my provocation.

Agents and structures are *not* different entities. They are simply necessary reifications that we employ to speak about “flow,” “dynamic internally connected processes,” and the quasi-mystical interconnection between “parts” and “wholes.” What is true for so-called “agents” and “structures,” is equally true for “universals” and “particulars,” for the “abstract” and the “concrete” for “science” and “stories,” for “distance” and “intimacy.” All these are ways of talking about dynamic flow.

What this means is that when we write or evaluate autobiography, we are not failing to perform science. Of course, there is a real difference in form between abstract analysis and storytelling. This is the moment of difference. But both forms necessarily address themselves to “structures” *and* “agents,” “universals” *and* “particulars,” the

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“abstract” *and* the “concrete” to “distance” *and* “intimacy.” This is their moment of sameness.

I am aware that I’ve provided a set assertions, or, more generously, my polemic is the conclusion of an argument that remains outside this presentation. My task here is not to provide that argument, much of which is available elsewhere. Rather, I imagine my readers as those who, while open to the narrative form, worry about its ephemerality and imprecision.

Besides assertions and the admission that my argument is absent, have I anything else to offer the reader? I can tell a story or two.

For over a decade I taught a class centered on the music of the African Diaspora. Later iterations included music of the Middle East and of south Asia. I asked students to write 5-10 short papers on (1) the sounds they hear, (2) their response to these sounds, (3) why they have these responses, and (4) the aesthetic principles from which their responses emerge. Invariably, they started the course believing that their tastes were private, unique to their particular biography. But three elements emerged as they iterated their responses and as they developed their criteria. Some of them began to see that their “tastes” were responses to a significant other. They either mimicked or opposed a parent’s “tastes.” More specifically, their loyalty to a particular genre or group was a kind of nostalgia for a childhood memory. Their musical taste expressed loyalty to a relationship. Second, they begin to realize that what they count as “real music” versus what they dismiss as “not really music” resulted from their cultural upbringing. For Western audiences, vocals, guitar solos, and horn sections make music recognizable. But the small instruments of a percussive ensemble, such as a clave, bell, shakers, and hand drums, were dismissed as ambient adornments. Or, pieces that were between 2 and 6 minutes are acceptable but the demands of a sixty-minute South Asian rag remained out of bounds as a kind of tuning rather than playing. Third, they invariably saw their responses to musical compositions as *their* private internal claim and not the result of an artist’s skill in directing their ears to specific social meaning. In sum, they assumed their responses to music were idiosyncratic, internally developed, and uniquely theirs. When and if they emerged out of this solipsistic haze, they began a journey that located their private responses in familial structures and cultural life. And they began to recognize that artists conceive and execute their intentions *within* the listener’s “private” tastes.

Another course I taught for many years was titled, “Love, Hate, and Sexual Desire Under Colonialism.” In this and in a current course I am teaching, “Writing and Criticism,” students often confront the source of their sexual desire. They come to the class with a hidden shame about some perceived sexual perversity. But the readings and the discussions reveal the structured nature of their most private fantasy. An admission made all the easier today due to how much of the internet is powered by the pornography industry, an enterprise that leaves no kink unexplored nor unnamed.

“How did these “tastes” or “proclivities” get in you?” I ask my students. At first, they take my question as rhetorical. Only later do they discover that it requires them to work out the relationship between their biographies and, for example, racism, sexism, and classism. Not to mention the internal simultaneity of their lives with white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism and international relations. Autobiography is a form of science as much as science is a form of autobiography, it turns out.

I am not calling for a hyper-awareness of the science of autobiography. That would be as debilitating as the usual penchant for regarding it as voyage into uniqueness. Rather, I propose we regard autobiography as way of coming to know the world. We can explore our lives with the same care and wonder we bring to the study of the world at large. After all, we too are that world. There is a plethora of ways achieving this end. Many of these are showcased in the Journal of Narrative Politics.

Notes

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