Introduction

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Introduction by Louis Finkelstein

Nothing is more important, or more difficult, to understand than the spirit of man. Regarded merely as an accidental mutation in the evolutionary process, its particularity might still challenge the mind and dazzle the imagination. By it, above all else, man is distinguished in a universe overwhelmingly larger, older, and perhaps more enduring, than he. Yet even in most celebrated "lives", the growth of the spirit is, as a rule, a subordinate, rather than the central motif. In the perspective of spiritual biography, all life's incidents derive meaning from their relation to emerging personality. The creation of art, music, or letters, the attainment of office, power, or wealth, accidents of childhood, maturity, and age, reveal traits of character, which they may in turn affect. For the chronographer these relations articulate a narrative and help resolve enigmas; for the spiritual historian they illumine the mystery of man. Both writers use the same data, and have the same scope. They differ in emphasis, in the arrangement of their material, in the ideas they try to convey.

His subject's decisions, even in slight matters, may occupy the spiritual biographer far more than overwhelming external phenomena. The variables within man's control share with social and natural forces the power of transforming man's spirit; but only conduct can reveal his personality. Hence the spiritual biographies of members of the same family, living at the identical time and place, with many common experiences, are distinct. The accounts of their lives may include whole chapters describing large events in which all participated and which affected all equally. But each narrative of spiritual development is unique. The recording angel, perpetuating the history of mankind in all its details, might save space through comprehensive introductory chapters with footnotes and appendices for particular idiosyncracies. No such economy is possible in his annals of the human soul. These are spiritual biographies, complete for each person, and utterly different from one another.

The spiritual autobiographer acts, in fact, as his own recording angel, while he adds a particularly significant chapter to the record itself. His task is in some respects the most arduous which man can undertake. To peer into one's own soul, to recall the stages in its growth, to mark its pulsations, and to report the findings, requires rare humility, detachment, and wit. Without these, a confession will lack the indispensable stamp of sincerity and authenticity, and will present its subject as an awkward personification, rather than as a living personality. Being human, the candid author will have to tell of vain regrets, as well as happy achievement. As autobiography is but a special form of biography, he dare not take himself too seriously. A chronicler, especially of the spirit, must view any life *sub specie aeternitatis,* as a curious, interesting, but not too significant incident in the onward march of man. If the memory of failure moves the effective spiritual autobiographer, he laughs through his tears. When he exults in recollection of success, he bears in mind the

insignificance of individual endeavor in the light of the world's challenge. A confession is neither a lament nor a paean, not a combination of both. It is the nearest approach of temporal man to the Day of Judgement. The spiritual autobiographer serves as defendant, as advocate, as prosecutor, as witness, as judge, and jury, and adds to these the offices of observer and reporter. To be read, he should be absorbed in his own tale; yet he cannot indulge in the luxury of narcissism. He is Micawber, serving as his own Dickens; a combination of Boswell and Johnson; a living Hamlet, with the gifts of Shakespeare; in fact, a follower in the great tradition of Augustine, Cardinal Newman, and Henry Adams.

The difficulties which beset the spiritual autobiography may be a measure of the value of his labor. While man's supply of physical goods is in direct ratio to his need, his knowledge appears to be in inverse ratio. Air is more plentiful than water; water than food; food than shelter. But man knew the shape and movements of the sun, moon, and planets, before those of the earth; he understands the animate far less than the inanimate; the human less than the non-human; and himself least of all. He accurately foretells eclipses but not economic depressions; he can forecast the approximate result of elections, but not the state of his own emotions. Compared with anthropology and sociology. biology is an advanced science; yet even that is far being the precision and maturity of astronomy, chemistry, or physics.

Despite the severe limitations imposed by the nature of his work, the spiritual autobiographer has an enviable opportunity for service. However distorted his vision of himself, it comprehends data concealed from all others. Even when his generalizations are mistaken, his particulars are invaluable. The reader of his confessions who may understand him better than he understands himself, can yet derive from him wisdom obtainable in no other way. A spiritual autobiography is of immense value for the psychologist and the sociologist. But it is primarily a contribution to morals and philosophy. It persuades and convinces, rather than proves or demonstrates. It is construction, not an experiment. It is concerned with causes as instruments and not as scientific explanations; and with effects, as guides to future deliberation, not simply as results of past action. it adds to men's wisdom, even more than to his knowledge; it refines his character and sharpens his insight, far more than it expands his horizons and adds to his accumulated science.

The autobiographers were selected for eminence in special fields, for diversity, and above all for a certain spiritual quality permeating their lives and actions which we may comprehend under the general term, saintliness, though it varies greatly from person to person. They are of varied faiths; and naturally each expresses his views in the particular dialect of his religion. No method of presentation was suggested to the writers; no request was made for uniformity or similarity of approach. As a result, no two stories are alike. Yet there are wide areas of agreement among them. Each author records external fores as major influence in the formation of his character; each recognizes his general spiritual outlook as a preponderant influence on his conduct and thought; expressly or by implication, each attributes to a combination of passion and detachment (which must be rare among men) the modicum of effectiveness with which he is willing to credit himself and on which

he relies for further usefulness. These resemblances may be characteristic of all spiritual autobiography; perhaps they alone supply the daring requisite for so challenging a task.

While such essays might delight and instruct any generation, their moral is especially relevant to our own. These frank self-revelations, with their concentration on the problems and influence of character and spirit; subtly but inevitably turn the mind of the harried lover of mankind to a profounder view of today's evolving world crisis. The candor of the participants in this volume, necessarily revealing achievements which shyness or modesty might prefer to conceal, also discloses the character and spirituality which have enabled these men and women to concentrate an unusual proportion of innate energy on the tasks before them. Heredity and good fortune may account for talent and education; the effective use of this endowment is a manifestation of temperament. In following these unpretentious records, the thought gradually insinuates itself and grows upon one that true success is, to a far greater degree than it is now usual to admit, a function of character; and that while our ancestors may have erred in their utterly moralistic interpretation of phenomena, including all the blessings and calamities of Nature, contemporary historians and philosophers have gone even further astray in the opposite direction, in their disregard of the spiritual factor in personal and social life. As the anxieties of the immediate present obtrude themselves on our attention, even in the reading of these narratives, we may wonder whether they do not contain a key to the riddle of our time. They suggest that our age is witnessing neither a Sophoclean cycle of inexorable fate, nor a simple and accidental comedy of errors, but rather a profound and logical, yet altogether interceptable, tragedy of character. No easy optimism, depending on mere astuteness to alter the dread course of events, nor equally lazy despair, dooming mankind to a future jungle, is encouraged by these fifteen chronicles of struggle and achievement. Conscience asks whether the truths recorded in this microcosm may not also apply in the macrocosm; and whether sufficient attention has been given to man's ability to modify inherited patterns of thought and behavior, when necessary to save himself and his civilization.

Judicious evaluation of these autobiographies stirs the hope that Titan of laboratory and machine, modern man may yet escape the fate of Prometheus, if that human benefactor's charity and philanthropy can be emulated. It is rather in the guise of Zeus, jealous for dominion, and without sufficient love in his heart, that man is in peril of death through his own thunderbolt. His invasion, however limited, of godlike dominion over Nature is consistent with security, provided it is combined with similar imitation of Divine love and mercy, and, so far as possible, Divine wisdom. If he is not to offset his partial abolition of natural catastrophe with others of his own invention, perhaps he should learn to pray in the manner attributed by an ancient Talmudist (boldly, and not too literally, or with too much gravity) to the Deity Himself: "May it be My will that My pity may override My wrath; that My love may enfold My temper; that I may conduct Myself with mercy toward my children; and that I may for their sake transcend the bounds of law."

In an age of increasing power, these spiritual autobiographies offer the more pleasant and encouraging intelligence of the enduring ideal of service.