

HEIMITO VON DODERER

My Nineteen Curricula Vitæ

*Translated by
Vincent Kling*

Alongside the increasing Sisyphus toil of pointless letter-writing (always answers to people who think they're the only ones who ever wrote to him and ergo are offended if things don't work out right away), there belong among the special torments to which a writer of advancing years is exposed those demands on him for an autobiographical statement, in preparing which all sorts of people are eager to offer guidance; from America one even receives by way of instruction something called "Sample Autobiographical Sketches." Things have reached their sorriest pitch, however, when the publisher himself – after all, he's supposed to be his author's tried and true comrade in arms – begins applying the like instruments of torture to him. To these the novelist proves most sensitive of all. Understandable, since his whole life is focused on surmounting direct autobiography, with the upshot that he's now hurled back to his point of departure. Direct autobiography is nothing more than writing by the non-writer, by the writing reader; direct autobiography in the novel is absurdity or abreaction, but it's not narration. One mustn't try to make into one's object the very thing about which objectification is the last trait being alleged.

An author has no biography. Instead, he has around himself the accumulated titles of a more or less inadvertently stabilized environment; he therefore can produce absolutely nothing autobiographical. Anyone else would be able to do it sooner.

But he's supposed to.

Let's try with one of those four-square literary biographies German style:

I was born in the year 1896 at Unkel on the Rhine, the son of simple but unsavory people. Since my parents did not possess the means to grant me the benefit of a higher education, it was my kindly uncle, Wilhelm Albrecht Beschorner, who made it possible for me to attend the Gymnasium at Hildburghausen, so steeped in tradition, where, sitting at the feet of Friedrich Albert Schröter, I first absorbed into my being the fragrant atmosphere of classical culture...

It just won't work this way. I really have to ask for your understanding here. (Besides, not one word of it is true.) We'd much prefer to offer instead several Échantillons or samples of mini-autobiographies.

Something like this: 1

First you break windows. Then you become one yourself.

Or: 2

What I've endured at my own hands allows whatever others have inflicted on me by way of humiliation and suffering to vanish into complete insignificance as merely concomitant.

Or: 3

The first half of my strength was exhausted in my family home. Squandering the second half was an activity the companion of my youthful years, who possessed a lofty opinion of herself, thought she was entitled to pursue. I was to carry out my life's work with the remainder. If I have met with any measure of success, a quick glance at the arithmetical aspect will show that it couldn't have all just worked out on its own that way.

Or maybe: 4

An author has no biography (we've already said that), because, over and over again, all his previous language seems to him to be pseudo-logical. It is in this, though, that he must write his direct autobiographical notes, for better or worse – if at all. Thus occurs – like a seam that's tearing – a disavowal without end: in favor of the indirect, the no-longer-direct autobiographical work.

Perhaps this way: 5

Beset on all sides by dangers, always in proximity to their nearby lightning bolts, I went on living by pure chance, between the lines, as it were. Right there in the lines of course, where things happen logically, I would long before have passed out of existence.

Perhaps I may also be permitted this: 6

We know this subject well enough.

We hope to find it once again in this life, socially integrated into the drove of objects.

Until then we'll let it just plain stand there.

Enough subjectizing!

Further: 7

When I ask what this existence of mine consisted of, I must say that it contained many a situation I mastered imperfectly, quite a few in which I failed, and innumerable disgraces – all counterbalanced by a rare stubbornness I am unable to acquit entirely of having drawn its astonishing strength from the self-saving attempts of a desperate man – still and all, he was never totally desperate, never totally without hope (he wouldn't have dared go that far!): rather, he always held between his teeth a corner of the banner of hope, which was, at the same time, his own cloth of fasting he was gnawing on.

Or: 8

To comprehend one's life means above all to know what parts of it weren't life at all.

Or: 9

The complete dissolving of a pseud-logical autobiography into the chaos it actually depicts – that is our essential autobiographical act. Not until after that happens is it possible to start a life that one can hope won't degenerate into biography.

Perhaps this may be added: 10

Most autobiographers stand in a naïve relation to the ownership of their own first list of priorities, because they have no other, lacking any experience of a second.

Let's try it this way: 11

I cannot deny development. It took me up from rock bottom and just a little bit beyond, to just the point at which I should have begun from the first: so my "development" is nothing more than a very belated catching up to the pre-natal head start that geniuses have always had and that they didn't first have to commence fighting for at a late stage of a long life.

Let's try it again: 12

Habit patterns and the changes in my relation to them constitute my whole biography: at first they remained unaltered and rested content in their identity as non-writers. Then the writer took up arms against them. So the habits cunningly disguised themselves and contrived to find a dwelling place inside the writer

himself. They leapt right into the maw that had been wanting to devour them, and the minute they looked out, they were dressed up as a writer. But the several stomachs – yes, the habits were swallowed after all – of this intellectually mechanical digestive system, equipped though it was with certain filters or sieves, just couldn't pass them, owing to the habits' unalterability and undecomposability. There was no other out – up they came with a heave. He who gobbled them down extends his thanks to them today for their collaboration in a successful experiment.

Another attempt: 13

This man isn't really so hard to understand. Basically soft, cowardly, and mean, he always wanted to rig himself up so he could climb onto the pedestal of his pretensions: needless to say, without letting go of anything, God forbid; immigrating into great resolves with bag and baggage, knick-knacks, and gee-gaws all nicely arranged would have suited him very well. That's how he wanted to establish himself.

Or: 14

You finally lift the lid, as from a pot and look into your own life, and you have the whole menu up your nose: what there was for breakfast, for lunch, for dinner. At that moment, however – and this is very odd – you've not just eaten; you've gorged.

Or: 15

My life – a box in which I was packed and out of which I took myself.

And still another way: 16

For brief moments, nothing about this life of mine surprises me any more. It all came out of the same basic situation: ever-present weakness on the flight into some surrogate, into a life outside of life – and a vehicle built like that burst at every joint under the pressure of an unplanned course, one forced on it by the rudder.

Or: 17

What power of intelligence would have been mine, if once in my life I could have applied my brain-power to something besides the constant suppression of my own stupidity!

Or? Could it be that just such intelligence was acquired through just this exercise? Then I would have something to thank my stupidity for, too.

The possibility of an autobiography: 18

Not until everything we had bursts the chains in which we secured it – and thus organized it, so to speak – does it scamper away from us and attain a distance that makes it visible.

Finally: 19

In all seriousness, my actual work consists not of prose or verse – rather, of recognizing my stupidity.

Firing live ammunition without a challenge is done in one's sex life and in art, as everyone knows. You take notice of it. When you grow older, you have a good friend and comrade in arms, the publisher – but then he demands an autobiography. We've just seen what can come out of that in the most different ways. Surely, though, part of an author's autobiography must include his vastly more innocuous publishing history.

The purposeful is the extreme opposite of the providential. We think we're serving the first, whereas we're acting for the second. A hedge of purpose can be as thick as you like – the providential will penetrate through every tiny opening like a fine gas. In America today a young author writes a novel and turns it over to an agency, which then looks for a publisher. An arrangement as purposeful as this really has all the appearance of a direct line, the shortest connection from one point to another. But there are no direct lines in life, only curves. Having moved from Vienna in 1936, I was living very despondently in a studio apartment on the outskirts of Munich. I had come to Germany to find a publisher. My previous ones in Vienna had gone out of business. One of them was named Doctor. Ungar. Today he plays a most creditable role in the publishing business in the United States. I just found this out a short time ago, to my happiness. So there I was in the vicinity of Munich, and after only a few short weeks I already had a picture of literary Germany in 1936. It was crushing. At some social gathering in Munich I met a painter who came from the Caucasus and whose name was Halil Beg Mussayassul. While on the way home, on the platform for Route 3, he brought to my attention the publishing house of C. H. Beck. However, I was too exhausted and too horrified by what I'd seen in Germany in this brief time to follow up on his tip. A friend, Herr Rudolf Haybach, who came to Vienna to visit me, did it instead. He had been my very first publisher, having brought out my three earliest books, but he had turned to another profession in 1930. From Vienna, he sent a few of my published works, and then, later on, a manuscript to the Beck house. They wrote him from Munich that they were most interested in getting me on their list. Of course they were surprised to discover that I lived just around the corner. In the office of the reader Horst Wiemer I gave an oral synopsis of *Every Man a Murderer* in September 1937. I couldn't even imagine saddling this house with *The Demons*, the first part of which was ready in manuscript. Besides, the book would have been unpublishable anyway, given conditions at that time. And now it wasn't the author, but rather the publisher, who left the territory of the purposeful with an energetic and quick step and entrusted himself to the territory of the providential – the rights for *The Demons* were acquired (apparently Pythia must have had a little office in the rear wing of the palace that housed these publishers), the orally presented novel came out in the following year, and in the year after that, the manuscript that my friend Haybach had sent from Vienna (*Ein Umweg – A Detour*). After signing the contract, the reader took me to the owner of the publishing house, Dr. Heinrich Beck, who occupied what was then the library,

which burned down during the war. "I'm very glad to have secured you for my house," said Herr Beck. After this September day in 1937, there followed a time of happiest collaboration with Horst Wiemer and another reader, Dr. Luise Laporte, an irreplaceable personality for whom I was to feel a sense of great admiration and obligation to the end of her life. Then the war came along, and I had to report for military duty. When the whole disaster had taken the exact course that Pythia, in her little branch office on Wilhelm StraÙe, had predicted, the road was clear for *The Demons*. Again from Vienna, this time through another publisher, one under a licensing agreement – it was I. Luckmann (owner Frau Ilse Strobl-Luckmann), a house that is still working with me today – contact with Munich was established. Meantime I had written *The Strudlhof Steps*: This had been made possible by the I. Luckmann house. Belles-lettres now constituted an independent department of C. H. Beck publishers, and this soon became a separate house under the direction of Herr Gustav End, whom I likewise consider my publisher, along with Dr. Heinrich Beck. Literary matters were and still are in Horst Wiemer's hands. Years of collaboration and friendship unite me to these gentlemen. I have described this whole road in a very abridged way; and yet it seems tortuous enough. Knowledge of life does not consist of routine handling of the purposeful, but of having come to know and make one's way along curves. The question, "How do you find a publisher?" can't be answered. The answer has to be experienced instead.

A Division of the Year of My Birth, 1896

Beginning of the Garden City Movement.

First Alpine ski school, in Lilienfeld, Austria.

First modern Olympic games, in Athens.

Establishment of unemployment compensation on the community level: "Cologne Municipal Relief Fund against Unemployment in Winter."

Ludwig Rehn: first successful cardiac suture.

Discovery of radioactivity of uranium by Becquerel (uranium discovered in 1786 by Martin Heinrich Klaproth.)

Giacomo Puccini: *La Bohème*.

Art nouveau from Munich.

Film exhibitions by the LumiÈre brothers in Paris.

R. Eucken: *The Struggle for the Spiritual Content of Life*.

H. H. Busse founds, along with L. Klages and G. Meyer, the "German Graphological Society."

Leo Tolstoy: *The Power of Darkness*.

Henrik Sienkiewicz: *Quo Vadis*.

Arthur Schnitzler: *The Love Game*.

Rainer Maria Rilke: *Offerings to the Lares*.

Gerhart Hauptmann: The Sunken Bell.

Albert Langen and Th. Th. Heine found the political and satirical weekly magazine *Simplizissimus* in Munich.

King Albert of Saxony guarantees the Three-Class Franchise.

Friedrich Naumann founds the "National Social Union."

Theodor Herzl: The Jewish State (Jewish-Zionist call for a homeland in Palestine).

Italy's war against Abyssinia.

Battle of Adua: Abyssinia defeats Italy and gains independence.

Looks pretty good. A promising baby. A baby without an oeuvre yet. Linguistically still a virgin – astrologically, too.

A sidelong glance at my own work must not be left out. As such, I designate primarily the first part of my Novel Number 7: *The Waterfalls of Slunj*, along with the novel *The Merovingians* and the divertimento "The Trumpets of Jericho." Unfortunately, this last work has remained unknown to many of my readers, because it was published abroad, not by my regular publisher. Of my subordinate works there is one, a novel called *The Demons* (1956), that strikes me as a reasonable success. I fervently hope to see yet a fifth printing of my novel *The Merovingians*, or *The Total Family*, and so I wish to set down the preface to that printing right here and now: "May this fifth printing help to a final breakthrough such Merovingian natures as have not yet been able to conquer the last of their inhibitions."

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