STUMBLING OVER ONESELF

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND CARE FOR ONESELF AND OTHERS

"There comes a time in life when we feel the need to tell our stories differently than usual. It happens to everyone, sooner or later. To women and men, and it has been happening, punctually, for hundreds of years, especially in Western cultures. Since, perhaps, writing has taken on the task of recounting in the first person what we have experienced, and of resisting the oblivion of memory" (D. Demetrio, *Raccontarsi* - To tell about oneself, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 1996).

These are the words of Duccio Demetrio, founder, together with Saverio Tutino, of LUA (Libera Università dell'Autobiografia di Anghiari, the Free University of Autobiography in Anghiari). Those who attend the LUA are put in a condition to acquire the techniques for writing their own autobiography.

But autobiography is also a literary genre that consolidated in the 18th century, thanks to works such as Rousseau's *Confessions*, and developed in the 19th century, merging, in the following century, with narrative, to give birth to the autobiographical novel.

When did people begin to write autobiographically? Or rather, when did autobiographical thought arise? It began when, in the history of humanity, especially in the Western world, and therefore in Europe, the concept of the "I" began to be valued. This, in the Greek and Roman worlds, was made possible thanks to alphabetic writing.
Greek literature, long before Latin literature, had used the fundamental notion of "Narrating I".
We even find it in *Homer*. Reading pages of the Odyssey,

we come across episodes where the narrative is in the first person. There are some very famous verses, taken from the fifth book of the Odyssey, in which we read of the nymph Calypso, who grants the request of Ulysses, eager to return to Ithaca:

"So he spoke, and Calypso, the lovely goddess, smiled at his words and, stroking his arm, replied: 'You are a cunning man, with no lack of wit – to even consider answering me like that. But let the earth stand as witness, and wide heaven above, and flowing waters of the river Styx – the mightiest and most terrible oath the blessed gods can make – I will not plan any other injury against you. *(...)*
Son of Laertes, resourceful Odysseus, so you now wish to get back to your own dear native land without delay? I wish you well."

This interplay between "I" and "you" has been present in the history of thought – not just in the history of literature – since Homer; we discover that the "I" alone is not sufficient; that an "I" is constructed, born, and reborn if it has the opportunity to engage with a "You" and a "We". And each of us, if we decide to write our own story, will encounter, first of all, the need to identify our own "Yous", the "Yous" who are not fantastical, not illusory, but flesh-and-blood "Yous", those yous we have loved and who have loved us, who have cared for us and who have taken care of us.
It is the I-You dialectic that constructs the autobiographical page. There may be pages seemingly written in solitude, but every piece of writing that begins as a communication technique also needs to find its own You. We need to discover interlocutors in our lives, interlocutors usually sought, loved, longed for. In writing an autobiography, we are never completely alone: we revive the past, we give it shape, we give it words, and we give it voice.

In the late ancient world, there is a work that deserves to be cited as an example of spiritual autobiography: it is the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, in which the author, through the narration of his life events, explores his soul and his interiority, through an interior excavation that seems to anticipate the methods of modern psychoanalysis.

But what does it mean for us moderns, today, to write an autobiography?
It means laying ourselves bare before ourselves, as if before a mirror reflecting our true image. And it is this reflected image that will become a narrative of ourselves, through the use of the word-seed, that ancient, auroral word that has been within us for who knows how long, a "stored" word that emerges from the depths of our being and helps us speak about ourselves.

Autobiography, therefore, allows us to explore our lives, reflect on our experiences, and give meaning to our existential journey. It is not just a writing exercise; it can also be a powerful tool for self-knowledge and selfcare.

Writing our autobiography means, first and foremost, knowing ourselves: in fact, through the narration of our experiences, we can identify our subpersonalities, understand our desires, discover new aspects of ourselves – in short, get to know our multifaceted soul. Autobiography thus becomes a journey of selfdiscovery, allowing us to acquire, in addition to a greater awareness of ourselves and our place in the world, an understanding of our own position in life, especially with regard to major existential themes, such as birth and death, good and evil.

Autobiography also allows us to leave a trace: writing is a way to document one's life, leaving a memory for loved ones, such as children or grandchildren.
Through our personal narratives, we share our perspective with our readers, presenting our "truth" about past events, often recounted only by others, and in this way, we contribute to the understanding of an era, the one we lived in.

Writing can also be a tool for processing and overcoming difficulties, traumas, or personal challenges, finding a way forward. It can also be a way to express our creativity, telling our story in a unique and personal way. By organizing and reorganizing experiences through narrative thought, those who write their own story are

able to "come out", becoming visible first to themselves, then to others, by constructing or *weaving* – as Demetrio writes – their own story-plot and sharing it. Writing about oneself, therefore, has a self-reflective and self-knowledge function; it is like taking oneself by the hand and slowly learning to accept and love oneself.

But be careful: an autobiography is not a diary, where events are poured out in chronological order and where there is no reworking of one's experience to make it shareable. Autobiography leads to the discovery of one's own story even when – as Demetrio writes – the narrator, if he or she chooses, can omit facts or even lie. What matters is not the objectivity of the memory, but the web of meanings that emerges from it.

At LUA, it is taught that an autobiography revolves around four key elements: a) commitment and work; b) death and pain; c) play and fun; d) love and passion. Three, on the other hand, are the Rs of autobiography: Remembering (bringing something back to the heart and therefore emotionally re-evoking it); Recalling (calling back, giving voice to memories); Recollecting (recomposing, putting back together what is lost).

And it is precisely in bringing memories to the surface that writing about oneself can sometimes become a source of discomfort. However, the very act of delving into the lower unconscious to bring past traumas to the light of consciousness can be therapeutic, transforming autobiography into a moment not only of selfknowledge but also of self-care. This is why "stumbling over oneself" can have a dual meaning: knowing oneself in order to own and transform oneself, even through the journey of pain or regret.

Hopper - A woman drawing on the beach

"*True self-care*", Demetrio writes, "*true taking charge and making peace with one's memories probably begins when the present, rather than the past, enters the scene. And it becomes a fertile place for inventing or revealing other ways of feeling, observing, scrutinizing, and recording the world inside and outside us*" (D. Demetrio, *Raccontarsi* – To tell about oneself, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 1996).

Through autobiographical writing, we can also care for others, that is, through the writing about others in situations of fragility, illness, grief, or loss. This involves the transition from taking care of oneself to the practice of caring, which, according to Luigina Mortari, "*is an action guided by the desire to promote a good life"* (Luigina Mortari, *La pratica dell'aver cura* – The Practice of Caring, Ed. Bruno Mondadori).

To be capable of this, we must do three things:

- take responsibility;
- have respect;
- act in a donative way.

Taking responsibility

In caring relationships, and specifically in asymmetrical ones, caring action is activated when one perceives the other's dependence and, therefore, his or her vulnerability.

Having respect

Caring means being able to activate a form of concern inspired by respect for others: if there is no respect, there can be no good care.

Acting in a donative way

Engaging in caring practices means dedicating time and energy to others: physical, emotional, and cognitive energy. One way of caring is to give time to others: giving time is giving the essence of life. The importance of other's well-being is such that it is necessary *to donate one's own time*, one's own experience, to the other. Acting in a donative way is the foundation of caring for others.
Giving time is a concept that is not easy to grasp for those who equate good with self-affirmation; but those who practice the ethic of giving know that there will be a return to being.

Those who practice the ethics of acting in a donative way know where the essential lies, they know they are dedicating time to situations in which the meaning of existence is at stake: and the meaning of action lies entirely there.

"*It is the time you have wasted for your rose that has made your rose so important."* we read in *The Little Prince*, by Antoine de Saint-Exupery.

And what is the Little Prince's rose if not our heart, the care we each have for ourselves, for our being and our relationships, the care we have for others?