

---

# REVIEWS

---

James Olney. *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life Writing*  
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998. 430p.

Holli G. Levitsky  
Loyola Marymount University

James Olney's latest book is a collection of essays which offer an account of the development of life-writing since Augustine's *Confessions*. Originating from a 1981 paper, "Autobiography and the Narrative Imperative from St. Augustine to Samuel Beckett," this book succeeds as a lively and penetrating continuation of Olney's earlier work on autobiography. Noting similarities between Augustine's *Confessions* and Beckett's *Company*, he looks at such issues as narrative theory and the relationship of the act of recollecting to the act of narrating. Armed with the keen and active intelligence of a very thoughtful reader, he attempts to untangle the mutual relationship of memory and narrative as a means toward defining autobiography as a literary mode for the late twentieth century.

Although the organization of the book at first appears confusing — structured as Prelude, First and Second Interludes, and Postlude — the book breaks itself down into two distinct parts. Chapters I and II and the two interludes provide the background discussions of Augustine, Rousseau (and Vico) which then grounds the second half of the book: Chapters III, IV, and V and the Postlude, which examine the problem of memory and narrative in a number of twentieth-century contexts. There is a kind of inevitability in the choice of examining Augustine, Rousseau, and Beckett — for Olney, each of these figures represents a major moment in the history of life-writing, and each could not have written without the others; however, there is an equal arbitrariness in the inclusion of certain modern figures. Presenting such writers as Kafka, Gertrude Stein, and Richard Wright as autobiographical might seem problematic to readers still unwilling to blur the boundaries between fiction and autobiography. Still, as the metaphor of "weaving" in the title suggests, and as teachers of the form know from experience, life-writing is the subject's best "attempt" to work his or her life into an elaborate, important, and connected whole.

Olney's project is to derive theory from the great texts of life-writing (avoiding the common temptation to force contemporary theories of memory back to historical accounts). In the "Prelude" and first chapter, "Memory and the Narrative

---

Imperative,” Olney establishes the foundation for his position by introducing the three great principals of life-writing: St. Augustine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Samuel Beckett. Together they establish a tradition against whom other figures over the centuries have had to converse/contend. By turning first to Augustine who initiated the tradition, second to Rousseau, who, Olney argues, “is the true center of it all” (xii), and finally to Beckett as the culmination, our position in the twentieth century seems inevitable. In other words, our obsession with life-writing now speaks to the essential paradox of a modern drive to search for our “true” selves even while agonizing over the impossibility of successful completion of such a task.

The literary form of life-writing began with the autobiographical writings of St. Augustine, who would understand the word “autobiography” to be from the Greek, “lifetime,” or “the course of a life” (410), with time as a crucial element. It assumed for him an historical dimension using memory as the means for discovery and creation of the narrative which would imply the course of his life, although he had no models for the form itself. And even though his conversion experience could be said to have divided his life, his recollection of events and his responses to them form a pattern of life experiences that reveal a constant concern for narrative and story rather than the post-Rousseauvian “self” or “I.” Augustine’s narrative shows no divided self, no confusion about his inner and outer selves.

In “First Interlude” Olney considers the similarities between Augustine and the philosopher Giambattista Vico, giving due consideration to his overlooked “periautobiography” translated as *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*. Vico uniquely provides both theoretical and practical justification for the tradition of life-writing. Inspired in part by Augustine, Vico’s observations seem to apply to Rousseau and to anticipate Beckett. Yet Vico’s essential role is to supply a transition between Augustine and Rousseau, bringing together (from Augustine) pious intentions with the secular world of his “new science.” Vico was indebted to Augustine for his formulation that the single principle of human learning comes from the mind, which is composed of the three elements of knowledge, will, and power. This closely resembles Augustine’s trinity of the human mind and his own analogy of that trinity to the divine Trinity. Moreover, the two thinkers similarly believed in the power of sensory experience as the initiator of the memorial process.

Perhaps one of the most original contributions this book offers is the idea of the “Trilogy Principle,” which Olney outlines in Chapter II. This principle of trilogism is “a single process that analysis would render in three stages that bear an inherently necessary relationship to one another such that any one would be incomplete without the other two” (103). Augustine, Vico, Rousseau, even Aristotle

---

(who defines narrative as writing composed of a beginning, middle and end) seem devoted to the idea of threeness as an organizing principle in their works and in the world beyond.

Olney examines the twentieth-century context by beginning in the second half of the book with the disappearance of the subject. Chapter III takes its title, *Not I*, from Beckett's short play of 1972 and signals the special regard with which he holds Beckett's work. Chapter IV and V also specifically examine Beckett's work, creating a sense in the reader that Beckett carries an almost paradigmatic significance for Olney's theory about the history and context of the idea of putting into question the use of the "I" pronoun in life-writing. Olney uses Beckett's own distrust of the first person singular pronoun in his work to show a fluid transition from a prehistory of questioning the "I" (Rousseau, Vico) to twentieth-century writers who completely shun the "I" (Stein, Kafka).

While both sections of this sweeping book offer a broad, text-based account of life-writing, Olney returns again and again to the three principal figures of Augustine, Rousseau, and Beckett, without whom autobiography as we know it today would not exist. This is not a new argument, given Olney's talent for providing historical scope, but readers wanting that position deepened by the science of memory and applied to a diverse range of twentieth-century figures (including the sculptor Alberto Giacometti) will find that the second half of this book offers a fresh and engaging perspective on such thinking. ✱