BAXTER'S QUEST FOR ORIGINS:
NOVELTY AND ORIGINALITY
IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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Although he began writing in his mid-thirties, Richard Baxter was among the most prolific and the most widely read of seventeenth-century authors, and this seems to have been for him the fulfillment of a boyhood dream. In the course of his autobiography, he explains that the principal sin of his childhood had been not the stealing of fruit (though he once stole some), nor the playing of tip-cat, but the seeking after that last infirmity of noble mind: "those Ambitious desires after Literate Fame."¹

In this century Baxter is read chiefly by scholars, but his writings have commanded attention in several different provinces: social thought and economics, intellectual history and American studies, ecclesiastical history, and literary criticism. Max Weber, in elaborating his controversial thesis on the origins of the spirit of capitalism, presented Baxter as the clearest exponent of that ascetic Protestantism that values sobriety, industry, diligence, frugality, and prudence. Perry Miller illustrated Baxter's role in the development of the covenant theology at the roots of colonial New England politics. And Louis Martz, in studying meditative poetry, showed that Baxter is the fount of puritan views on the art of meditacal meditation.² Moreover, as the serious study of autobiography has taken root, the Reliquiae Baxterianae has been judged, along with Bunyan's Grace Abounding and Fox's Journal, to be one of the major English works in the genre before 1725.³

1. References are to Reliquiae Baxterianae: or, Mr. Richard Baxter's Narrative of The most Memorable Passages of his Life and Times, ed. Matthew Sylvester (London, 1696), and are supplied according to book and page thus: 1.5. The abridgement by J. M. Lloyd Thomas has recently been reissued as The Autobiography of Richard Baxter, ed. N. H. Keeble (London: Dent, 1974).


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Baxter's autobiography is an odd book. He had apparently completed it when he came to the end of what is now Part I, with the inclusion of his justly famous self-review. Part II turned out to be longer and less organized; and it was severely abbreviated in the 1925 edition of J. M. Lloyd Thomas. Part III is odder and more chaotic still. It degenerates, as Joyce's Portrait of the Artist does, into something like a diary. But unlike the thoughts of Stephen Dedalus before he leaves Ireland, those of Richard Baxter before he left this world seem rather desperate. The inclusion of a host of materials, without apparent unity or design, shows that the book has got out of its author's control, and he feels that he should leave behind everything that might possibly be relevant to the book that he is failing to write. This development, I will suggest, is consistent with a new idea of literary originality that was inchoate in Baxter's time. Before turning to the autobiography itself, however, I should like to isolate two fundamentally different conceptions of originality.

I

In his recent study of Romantic Origins, Leslie Brisman has described the popular concept of originality that prevailed in England until the early nineteenth century. Its principal spokesman during its last great flourishing was Sir Joshua Reynolds, whose Discourses on Art "summed up the established view that 'by imitation only, variety, and even originality of invention is produced.' Originality meant newness in the sense of modest individuality, and was perceived as an achievement to be gained by following—or, for some, swerving from—a model predecessor." Brisman contrasts the originality that looks back to a precursor, which even Eliot's classic essay on "Tradition and the Individual Talent" envisages, with a "concern for romantic or idealized origins," which "free[s] the writer from 'following' anyone and impel[s] him to leap over the grounds of individuality in search of an ultimate antecedence." This latter concern is characteristic of the major Romantic poets.

In the English Renaissance, by contrast, it was not common for a writer to claim "ultimate antecedence" for himself or his work. (The idea of a "renaissance" seems inimical to such a claim.) Sidney, in his Defense of Poesy, recognized that some might deem it too "saucy" a comparison when he sought to assimilate the role

of the poet-maker to that of the Creator. But in the seventeenth
century, when autobiographies began to be written in large num-
bbers, a decisive step was taken in the direction of Blake and Words-
worth. Baxter, in writing an autobiography, pointed himself in
that direction. For an autobiography not only accords to individual
experience a primacy of place; the verbal reproduction ascribes
to the life it purports to record an originality and itself confers it.
As J. Hillis Miller observes, a “second constitutes the first, after
the fact, as an origin, as a model or archetype. The second, the
repetition, is the origin of the originality of the first.”

Baxter would have been appalled (I think it is fair to surmise)
at the idea that he was seeking an ontological autonomy; appalled,
too, had he foreseen that the Nonconformist literary tradition was
to culminate in a literature that presumes to challenge even “God’s
original I am.”

In seventeenth-century England, the impulse to seek origin-
ality was of a piece with a key assumption of reformed Christianity:
the early figure is most closely in touch with Light and Truth, and
is to be contrasted with those who arrive belatedly and are merely
“traditional.” The New Testament passage that is most directly
relevant betrays a startling ambivalence about whether Christianity
is old or new: “Brethren, I write no new commandment unto you,
but an old commandment which ye had from the beginning. . . .
Again [i.e., on second thought], a new commandment I write unto
you, which thing is true in him and in you: because the darkness
is past and the true light now shineth” (I John 2:7-8). If a reformer,
having the Johannine texts especially in mind, thinks that he sees
“more light,” it is not always clear whether this is “new light” beyond
what the New Testament offers or a restoration of the old light
after an intervening period of darkness.

Until the middle of the seventeenth century, when radicals began
making claims for new revelations, debates about the “new” and
the “old” in Christian revelation had been largely carried out in
terms of the alleged dichotomy between Scripture and Tradition.
The Bible was widely believed to have been written in a time when
the Spirit provided unique inspiration. Scripture was “early.”
Tradition, the accretions and innovations introduced chiefly under

pp. 7-10.
8. Although the quotation follows the Authorized Version, I have interpolated the translation of the New
American Bible (New York: Benziger, 1970) here, the better to highlight the ambiguity.
popish influence, had compromised the pristine truth of the gospel. It was secondary and belated. This view survived the quarrels of the day and makes its mark in Swift’s Tale of a Tub: there Peter, who represents the papal church, forced his brothers “to wear on their Coats whatever Trimmings came up in Fashion; never pulling off any, as they went out of the Mode, but keeping on all together.” Martin, Swift’s Luther figure, began the process of trying to root these trimmings out, and the result was no thing of beauty.

It is important to notice that Luther and the reformers of the sixteenth century did not present their programs as innovations. They did not call for bringing Christianity “up to date.” They sought rather a restoration of an apostolic ideal that they supposed could be clearly discerned in the Bible, taken as a collection of historical documents attesting to a timeless ideal from which the church had fallen away. Catholic reformers, no less than Protestant, sought to locate their ideal in the past. In the opening sermon at the Fifth Council of the Lateran (1512), the prior general of Luther’s order called upon God to bestow on the clergy the strength to recall religion to “its old purity, to its ancient light, to its native splendor, and to its sources.”

Invariably, reformers presented their programs as a reaffirmation of past values which had been lost as society degenerated through time. A return to the past would provide the road to the future. No new developments in religious belief were to be expected. For Luther, John O’Malley explains,

the purpose of ecclesiastical councils was to fix ever more firmly the ancient belief of the Church. One of the most serious charges which both he and Calvin leveled against the papal church was that it felt it could concoct new articles of faith. Calvin was himself convinced that whatever stems from human inventiveness corrupts religion.

In the potent ecclesiastical controversies on the eve of the English civil wars, when both sides were Protestant, each side presented its programs as being in accord with some hallowed ancient practice,

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sometimes from the apostolic period, sometimes from Edwardine or Elizabethan times, which were thought to have been solidly Protestant.

Even the radicals of the Interregnum period, though they sought to disengage their contemporaries from exclusive reliance upon a biblical ideal, often presented their position as a restoration of a former state of affairs. The Quaker Samuel Fisher wrote that the Light "is that good & old way, Older than the Eldest among the Sects of this age." It could confidently be identified with a biblical original; it was "that Antient way, unto which, God by the Prophet Jeremiah called back the Israelites, when degenerated from God into their own traditions." For Fisher, "the old thing which was from the beginning" is exactly the message which those "stiled Quakers" share with John the evangelist: that God is light. If this light enlightened the "Penmen" who wrote down the Scriptures, it was prior to the Scriptures, and they merely testify to it: the Light "shined in the heart of man long before [sic] the Scriptures were."\(^\text{13}\)

This contention meant, as Baxter was quick to point out, that the Bible became answerable to a spirit within each individual believer. The absolute priority of the Text had been called radically into question. For his part, Baxter sought to discredit the Quakers, and he pictured them as belated:

The Quakers are but a few distempered people, risen up within a very few years, in this corner of the world. . . . And therefore I would know of them, Where was the true Church before the other day that the Quakers rose? . . . I remember what a Boy told them lately near us, "Your Church and Religion (saith he) cannot be the right, for I can remember since it first begun." Sure Christ had a Church before the Quakers.\(^\text{14}\)

To show that the Quakers were but recently arisen, and that their origins were new, seemed sufficient to refute them.

During the 1640s, however, with the rise of the sects, something genuinely new and unprecedented had begun to happen on a large scale; and it had decided implications for writers as well as preachers. The new was beginning to be valued for its own sake. The expectancy that God was about to offer new revelations, "more light," pervaded the millenarian movement. It combined with a renewed emphasis upon "experimental" religion; and it was fed by the prophecy of Joel 2:28 (quoted in Acts 2:17), which predicted

\(^\text{13}\) Christ’s Light Springing, Arising Up, Shineng Forth, and Displaying it self through the Whole World (London, 1690), pp. 11, 2, 13.
\(^\text{14}\) The True Catholick, and Catholick Church Described (London, 1690), pp. 78-81. I have substituted quotation marks for the square brackets that enclose the quotation in the original and have omitted italics.
that the Holy Spirit would be poured out anew, so that contemporary religious experience could be thought to rival the Bible as a source of saving truth. Writing about the radicals, Christopher Hill has summed all this up: "One consequence of the stress on continuous revelation and on experienced truths was that the idea of novelty, of originality, ceased to be shocking and became in a sense desirable."\(^{15}\)

In a sense desirable: Hill's point needs qualifying. There had always been some room for novelty within the tradition. Preachers and exegetes, though they were responsible for understanding the old meaning embedded in the sacred texts, turned loose their ingenuity to make applications to present-day circumstances. Moreover, the originality had always been desirable; but a wholly different notion of what constitutes "originality"—as if from a different universe of discourse—had long been prevalent. To be original for a reformed Christian had meant to be in touch with primitive apostolic Christianity. Those in the line of Luther and Calvin wanted to be one with the historical Jesus Christ, who had saved mankind, and they were confident that their reading of the Bible could transport them back over the intervening centuries to that privileged period, *illud tempus*.\(^{16}\) To live "by the Bible only" was to be "early," and "original," uncorrupted by merely human teachings and safe from the illusion that there would be new revelations.

In the works of various millenarians the contention that God was making new revelations, independent of the Bible, came to dramatic formulations. Laurence Claxton, for example, claims at the outset of *The Quakers Downfall* "that I write this by the same spirit of inspiration as the Prophets and Apostles did theirs." But he passes on to higher claims, that John Reeve and Lodowick Muggleton are the "third and last Commissioners" predicted in the Book of Revelation, and that he is their unique witness: "there is not any in the world now living . . . but onely my selfe to bear record and testimony" to this, since "I am endued with divine knowledge to write that for the next generation."\(^{17}\) This is "originality" of the


\(^{17}\) *The Quakers Downfall, with All Other Dispersations Their Inside Turn'd Outward* (London, 1659), pp. 1, 12, 15.
new sort, the kind that Hill prizes and that Blake and Wordsworth will claim for their writings.

For his part, Baxter, though he was in the dissenting line and committed to further reformation, strenuously objected to the idea that any of his contemporaries could produce a text to rival the Bible. A modern Christian was necessarily humble and must remain secondary and belated vis-à-vis the sacred text. "The Spirit was given by Christ," he writes in his Paraphrase on the New Testament,

to his Apostles, to lead them into all truth, and bring all his doctrine and Commands to rememberance to teach them to all nations, recording them to be our continued instruction, Law, and Rules. But the Spirit is not given to the Quakers to these ends, nor in this measure. And it is given now to the faithful, not to reveal to them a new Law, and Gospel, but to cause them to understand, believe, love, and obey, that already revealed. 18

While he was part of the trajectory that moved leftward, as it were, from the via media of the Church of England, Baxter fought against a conception of originality which would value what is unprecedented and eccentric in the individual.

But there is in Baxter's autobiography an anxiousness about his own origins, and there is a tendency to accord individual experience a primacy of place. Baxter tries to suppress this tendency, and from his attempts to hold off its excesses his writing gathers much of its individuality. The process of redefining "originality" in a direction away from conformity to an established ideal and from the "imitation" of ancient precedents is far from complete in the Reliquiae. But there are unmistakable signs that it is well under way.

II

With the failure of the Savoy Conference to accommodate the views of conscientious dissenters (for whom Baxter was the principal spokesman) and with the passing of the Act of Uniformity in 1662, it became increasingly clear that Nonconformity was to be a permanent feature of English life. 19 Many Restoration Nonconformists were eager, however, to show that they were the legitimate heirs to the Reformation. In our own time they have had an especially able expositor in Geoffrey Nuttall, who has argued that the organized "Nonconformity which emerged in and after 1662 was not

a new phenomenon, sudden and unpredictable in its uprising. On the contrary, it was the latest expression of a movement which had persisted for many years, with its origins indeed in the sixteenth century.

But these Nonconformists were worried about their seeming lack of roots. They sought to relate themselves to a pure apostolic tradition that would antedate the traditions of the established church. Their pleas for further reformation, after the Restoration of the monarchy and of the episcopally governed church, were based on a desire for the restoration, as they supposed, of a still earlier state of affairs, a return to the period of apostolic Christianity. They had not been converted to the perspective of those who valued novelty; and their uneasiness about the relations between their new situation and the ancient ideal is evident in their desire to see themselves as a persecuted minority like the Christians of the New Testament and to trace Nonconformist genealogies back into the preceding century. It also appears in their regular insistence that they are not to be confused with “fanatick” and “enthusiastick” innovators. Bunyan’s apology at the outset of The Pilgrim’s Progress aptly illustrates the sort of disclaimer that dissenters continued to enlist:

This Book is writ in such a Dialect,
As may the minds of listless men affect:
It seems a Novelty, and yet contains
Nothing but sound and honest Gospel-strains.

Despite its striking originality (in our modern sense of the term, dating to the eighteenth century), Bunyan persists in presenting his book as a mere re-presentation of evangelical truth, in accord with the standard dictum that assigns all saving truth to “the Bible only.” But even as he cedes priority to the biblical text, he wrests a priority of interpretation away from those who have adulterated the “honest Gospel-strains.”

Baxter’s autobiography, while it does not claim to re-present biblical truth, likewise aspires to an interpretative priority. It seeks to interpret the texts that God has but recently written in history—Baxter’s own “life and times,” as the subtitle has it. It comes from the pen of a man who wrote chiefly pastoral and polemical works, and by contrast with these it represents a set of relatively secular

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concerns. It is not a spiritual autobiography, but it tells the story of the emergence of organized Nonconformity from the viewpoint of the leading spokesman for the puritan party in the Restoration period. In other words, the Reliquiae does not seek to restore biblical “earliness” and originality, but to recover and preserve a much more recent history.

When in the course of the book, Baxter comes to explain why he undertook to write his own biography, he includes among his motives this desire for interpretative priority. He meant, he says, to “prevent the defective performance of this Task, by some over-valuing Brethren, who I know intended it, and were unfitter to do it than my self” (1:136). Implicit here is Baxter's recognition of his public significance and of the propensity of “certain...Brethren” to see in him a model. He may have supposed that his “prevention” would be of the sort that precludes, or stops, or wholly frustrates, other efforts—by detractors as well as by hagiographers. But it is relevant to recall that the primary meaning of prevention (the seventeenth century took an active interest in prevenient grace) is “to act before, in anticipation of, or in preparation for (a future event...)” (OED). The etymology of the word (pre+ventre: to come before) suggests that questions of priority are at stake in matters involving prevention. In writing his auto-biography and taking care to entrust it to successors, Baxter meant to get there first so to speak, to ward off other interpretations of his life and times by providing a prior and definitive account. Given the polemical context, this may not seem surprising. But only a century earlier such a procedure would have been unthinkable—except to a really original thinker. Before 1600 there were virtually no English autobiographies in the modern sense of the word.23 Only in the seventeenth century was a radically new estimate of the bases of a writer's authority emerging: it accorded as never before a privileged place to personal experience. And the writer who insisted on his independence of mind and his nonconformity to established norms implicitly knew this.

From the opening pages of his autobiography, Baxter gives evidence of his awareness that he was leaving behind a model story about the making of a Nonconformist. Appropriately, these first pages concern origins of various sorts: the origin of his fear of God, of his interest in the Bible and in a life of learning, and of his Nonconformist leanings. He does not go so far as to depict himself and his family as utterly original, but he is concerned to establish the

independence of their faith. His father, he says, was converted without human agency. But he does not scruple to acknowledge that he himself owes his first, childhood faith to his father: “But though we had no better Teachers, it pleased God to instruct and change my Father, by the bare reading of the Scriptures in private, without either Preaching, or Godly Company, or any other Books but the Bible: And God made him the Instrument of my first Convictions” (1:2).

Presumably, Baxter does not hesitate to acknowledge that his faith also owed a great deal to his reading, because he felt responsible for choosing what he read and for making sense of it “experimentally.” In this respect he differs greatly from Bunyan, who tells how he had felt an intense longing “to see some ancient Godly man’s Experience, who had writ some hundred of years before I was born.”24 For he had supposed that contemporary accounts of spiritual experience were merely secondary: “those who had writ in our days, I thought (but I desire them now to pardon me) that they had Writ only that which others felt, or else had, throw the strength of their Wits and Parts, studied to answer such Objections as they perceived others were perplexed with, without going down themselves into the deep.”

The parenthesis indicates that by the time he wrote Grace Abounding Bunyan had become convinced of the possibility of having firsthand spiritual experience in seventeenth-century England. But even when he had supposed that such experience was the exclusive province of heroes from an earlier age, he was already disposed to assign privilege of place to immediate personal experience (“going down themselves into the deep”) over book-learning. This makes another contrast with Baxter.

The early pages of the Reliquiae attest to the spell that books had over young Richard. He was inspired by the Schoolmen (Aquinas and Scotus and Ockham) to desire to think and write clearly. But he was, on the other hand, greatly discouraged when he found that his spiritual life was not developing along the lines described in the writings of contemporary divines (1:3-6). He seems to have been the more troubled by this because his earliest teachers and the books he first read led him “to think the Conformists had the better Cause” (1:13) and to surmise that the course of a person’s belief would conform to an established paradigm.

Predictably, his first doubts concerned his own sincerity, as he was measuring himself against an ideal found in books. But he

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gradually learned that there are things in books that are not to be trusted, and he began to experience other sorts of doubts. He questioned the very existence of God and the veracity of the Scriptures. This impelled him, he reports, “to dig to the very Foundations, and seriously to Examine the Reasons of Christianity, and to give a hearing to all that could be said against it” (1:22). It would be interesting to know what Baxter thought counted against Christianity, but he does not rehearse this search. His recovery led him into a pastoral role, and he concludes the story with an edifying moral: “Nothing is so firmly believed,” he urges, “as that which hath been sometime doubted of” (1:22). This taking of personal responsibility for one’s beliefs, while it is not unique to the Non-conformists, is characteristic: the principal charge that they laid at the door of their adversaries is that conformity is unthinking.

Later in the book, when he begins to tell the story of how he became a writer, Baxter again insists upon his independence from received ideas. He wrote most of The Saints Everlasting Rest during an illness, when he “had no Book but a Bible and a Concordance” at hand. This enabled him to discover that “the Transcript of the Heart hath the greatest force on the Hearts of others” (1:157).

But, of course, the transcript of the heart will bear the markings of what one has read. And, elsewhere Baxter seems eager to situate himself in a line of writers, as when, in an addition to Part III, he reviews the names of figures whom The Saints Rest has assigned to heaven. The list tells us whose company the writer expects to enjoy in eternity, and it includes: “Peter, Paul, Austin, Chrysostom, Jerom, Wickliff, Luther, Zuinglius, Calam [sic], Beza, and Bullinger,” and various English divines, such as Hooper, Latimer, Cartwright, Ames, and Sibbes (whose Bruis’d Reed had greatly moved him in his youth).

III

There is then in the Reliquiae evidence of a double desire on the part of the author: on the one hand, he wants to establish the independence of his faith, which is based on the Bible and which he has tested for himself, but at the same time he wishes to deny that his views are eccentric and to show that he belongs to a legitimate tradition. The author’s ambivalence is better understood when we consider an anecdote that he includes early in the book.

25. That this is a trope (cf. Athanasianus, Contre Gentes, and Erasmus, Encomium Moriae) does not mean that it is insincere—not that all writers use the trope for the same purposes.

26. The pagination begins anew in Part III. This quotation can be found at 3:177; the reference to Sibbes at 1:34.
Baxter recounts the story of his estrangement from an old friend, James Berry, who became “conversant with those that . . . thought the old Puritan Ministers were dull, self-conceited, Men of a lower form, and that new Light had declared I know not what” (1:57). He laments the fact that Berry gave “Light among the Sectaries” precedence over “the Light which longer and patient Studies of Divinity should have preposset him with,” and he concludes that “he lived after as honestly as could be expected in one that taketh Error for Truth and Evil to be good” (1:57).

If this reflection on his old friend’s fall from puritanism makes Berry seem rather like the Satan of Paradise Lost (“Evil be thou my Good,” 4.110), it is important to notice that implicit in this critique is Baxter’s long-standing conviction that “Education is God’s ordinary way for the Conveyance of his Grace” (1.7). Study prepossesses one with light, that is, takes one back to a time before the loss of the knowledge of God, who is Light, to the condition which God’s prevenient grace restores to fallen man. Baxter could endorse Bacon’s opinion that, before the Fall, Adam possessed “a pure light of natural knowledge” that enabled him, for instance, spontaneously and accurately to name all the animals, and with Milton’s contention that the “end . . . of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright.”

For much of his life, Baxter placed great faith in the power of education to be a channel of God’s grace and a means of reconciling differences. But by the time he wrote the autobiography, he had moved somewhat closer to the figure in Paradise Regained who urges that one

who reads
Incessantly, and to his reading brings not
A spirit and judgment equal or superior
(And what he brings, what needs he elsewhere seek)
Uncertain and unsettled still remains,
Deep verst in books and shallow in himself. (4.322-327)

The narrator of the Reliquiae stands in judgment on the image of a younger self that he depicts in the opening pages. He tells how he had become so enthusiastic about the possibility of receiving God’s grace through reading that he was “somewhat excessively in love with good Books; so that I thought I had never enow, but scrap’d up as great a Treasure of them as I could” (1:5).

To his lasting regret, however, Baxter allowed his tutor to dissuade him from attending Oxford or Cambridge. In the course of his self-review, he admits that he had erred in another way too, as a result of not having been exposed to learned men except through their books. He overvalued formal education because he had never had it, and he gave too much esteem to the learned: “now Experience hath constrained me against my will to know, that Reverend Learned Men are imperfect, and know but little as well as I” (1:129). In making the sharp contrast between past and present selves, Baxter has recourse to the language of light, but in a manner opposite to what we would expect.

Instead of a simple casting of his younger self into a benighted position, and allowing that his more mature self enjoys “more light,” he says that experience has revealed to him “far greater Darkness upon all things” than he had observed in his youth. Formerly, he “had a great delight in . . . daily new Discoveries” and in “the Light which shined in upon” him (1:129). In time this came to seem delusory, and he admitted to accepting a position closer to that of his long-standing adversaries: “though the Folly of Fanatics tempted me long to over-look the Strength of this Testimony of the Spirit, while they place it in a certain internal Assertion, or enthusiastick Inspiration; yet now I see that the Holy Ghost in another manner is the Witness of Christ and his Agent in the World” (1:127). This insight contradicts the emphasis of many of Baxter’s writings, but its importance lies in the fact that it points up the greatest strength of the sectaries’ appropriation of the rhetoric of enlightenment.

Language that compares two views, one past and the other present, is cast inevitably in visual terms (“yet now I see”); and to write an autobiography is to tell the story of the origins and development of the enlightened personal perspective of the narrator, the new view that gives him the authority to speak. It is virtually impossible to write an autobiography without assuming that one enjoys more light than previously. But for Baxter, the increase in personal enlightenment is not tied to a conversion narrative nor to claims about new revelations of divine truth.

Baxter experienced great difficulty in making up his mind about the relative values of the light that comes gradually from patient study and of the light that arises spontaneously in the heat of controversy. But he was certain that personal illumination was not a

function of some mystical experience in opposition to what can be learned from Scripture and the history of the church. He deemed the Nonconformists of his own day naively optimistic in supposing that they had “more light” than their Elizabethan predecessors: “I must confess,” says the well-read polemicist, “I have great reason to believe the clean contrary, if by Light they mean Knowledge, that the old Nonconformists had much more insight into these Controversies than Professors have of late” (2:440).

In face of disputes generated by the proliferation of interpretations during the Interregnum, Baxter sought earnestly to preserve the originality of the Author of Scripture and to disallow the inference that misinterpretation had been built into the fabric of human speech: “we must not blame God for not making a Law that no man can misinterpret or break, and think to make such a one our selves, because God could not or would not” (2:198). By the same token, misinterpretation is not simply a function of human willfulness. “All human language is so woefully ambiguous,” he complains, “that there is scarcely a word in the world that hath not many senses; and the learned world never came to agreement about the meaning of their common words, so that ambiguity drowneth all in uncertainty and confusion.” Hence, life in a disputatious age: “in this as in many other Matters I have found that we are not the Choosers of our own Imployments, no more than of our Successes” (1:124).

Baxter felt chosen to be a polemicist, not to be a writer of the first rank who achieves “literate fame.” His willingness to make this sacrifice, as he understood it, manifested itself in the value that he placed upon spontaneity in literary style. This was for him a moral matter, not so much an aesthetic one. He assumed that the careful stylist spends an inordinate amount of time on his writings. One should not, according to a familiar puritan sentiment voiced by Bunyan, “With Rhimes or Lines, but Truths, affected be.”

But already at the start of the autobiography, written perhaps in his late forties and relatively early in his literary career, Baxter hints at his dissatisfaction with an involvement in short-lived controversies that precludes taking care over matters of style. “I was

so eagerly carried after the Knowledge of Things,” he says of his youthful studies, “that I too much neglected the study of Words” (1:6). The really sad reflection appears later, however, when he admits about his books that “fewer well studied and polished had been better” (1:124). “The opposing of the Anabaptists, Separatists, Quakers, Antinomians, Seekers, &c. were Works which then seemed necessary,” he observes. Yet they had cost him a dignified “literate fame,” such as can appertain to spiritual writers. “But now,” he says, “I could wish I had rather been doing some work of more durable Usefulness” (1:124).

IV

Along with The Saints Rest, the Reliquiae Baxterianae represents Baxter’s work of most enduring usefulness. But its use has been chiefly as a historical document, and it has been little appreciated as a literary monument. It endures, as Joan Webber remarked, “less as literature than as the portrait of a wise and good and much tormented man,” who bore within him “the conflicts of his age.”31 Among the conflicts of the seventeenth century in England was the need to deal with a new awareness that unprecedented things were happening. Within the autobiographer there was a fundamental conflict about the relative values of the new and the old; and his autobiography is a not quite successful attempt to resolve this conflict.

The tension is present from the very start, in the book’s first Latin epigraph and in the decision to write an autobiography. The choice of a classical epigraph makes the book seem traditional. But the content of the quotation, and of the context behind it, suggests, astonishingly, the near irrelevance of classical, perhaps even of biblical, learning: “Mihi quidem nulli satis Eruditi videntur quibus nostra ignota sunt.” The epigraph comes from the introductory section (1.2) of De finibus bonorum et malorum, where Cicero defends his choice of subject matter and his use of the Latin tongue, sensitive as he is to the possible objection that Greek is the language of philosophical thought and that Latin is by contrast with it merely secondary and derivative. It is in this context that Cicero insists, “To my mind no one can be styled a well-read man who does not know our native literature.”32

Baxter, it seems, by taking the quotation out of its original context would have "nostra" refer not so much to England's literature as to its history—"our things," or "our doings." The prominence of the ego here, in "mihi" as well as "nostra," is remarkable for Baxter. But it highlights the fact that his allotment of a sizable amount of energy to recounting his life and times already contains within it a statement about their value. A recognition of the uniqueness and of the historical importance of his life and times is present in the very existence of the autobiography, even if the author would be unwilling to claim for them an "ultimate antecedence."

In Baxter's case, the writing of the autobiography, perhaps more than the tale he means to tell in it, gives the essential story. It began as a restructuring of experience in view of the mature attitudes described in the self-review. But gradually still other attitudes, more closely akin to those of the sectarians (who, like himself, were excluded by the Restoration settlement) overwhelm the writer. His desperate attempt to include all possibly relevant materials reveals that he failed to believe he had a single principle by which he could organize his life.

It is only fair to point out that all autobiographies have something of an unfinished quality about them. The writer always writes not only about but also within the limits of a life that is not yet complete and cannot be viewed from outside. For this reason every autobiographer necessarily relies, for perspective, upon a personal intuition about his life's meaning. This intuition, in fact, imparts to his work its unique authority. The book not only describes a life, as a biography purports to do, but itself constitutes an important aspect of that life.

The neglect of the task of reducing his materials to order, especially after he had recognized that "fewer [books] well studied and polished had been better," suggests the degree to which Baxter had become persuaded of the significance of his own utterances. Part III leaves behind the concern to lay bare what Sylvester's preface calls "the Original Springs and Sources of all these Revolutions, Distractions and Disasters which happened from the Civil Wars . . . to the Restoration" (§ VII). More than the preceding parts, it was evidently written "sparsim & raptim," again in Sylvester's phrase (§ V). It evinces the extent to which Baxter had moved toward crediting his own inward light, and perhaps bears affinities to the sort of writing in which D. H. Lawrence, himself writing in the Nonconformist line, engaged for a time, when, in Eliot's estimate, he had given way to "the Inner Light, the most untrust-
worthy and deceitful guide that ever offered itself to wandering humanity."33

Baxter's writings, finally, are more weather vane than storm center. They provide an index of the way the winds of inspiration are blowing on the eve of the eighteenth century. If Dr. Johnson was the first critic actually to observe that a writer's originality consists in the "ability to reflect the inner drama and process of a mind with feeling,"34 Baxter's autobiography reveals an original mind at work and shows that a new conception of originality has begun to surface. With its emphasis on the authority that comes from personal involvement and experience, it also contributes to its emergence.