

## ALFRED KORZYBSKI MEMORIAL LECTURE 1988

### LIFE AND LANGUAGE IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by

**Jerome Bruner**

[At the Yale Club of New York City, November 11, 1988]

**INTRODUCTION BY WILLIAM EXTON, JR.:** This is an extraordinarily distinguished gentleman; his distinctions, some of them at least, have been very widely recognized. He was born — a certain number of years ago, which I have here but I won't reveal — he's a kid to me, of course. He served in World War II, in Psychological Warfare Division — that's something we ought to discuss sometime — he was Professor of Psychology at Harvard when I first knew of him, from '45 to '72; he was Watts Professor of Psychology at Oxford from '72 to '80; he was the G. H. Mead University Professor at the New School for Social Research, '81-'88; he is a Research Fellow at the Russell Sage Foundation currently, and presumably working on finding further boundaries in his areas of expertise. In '62 he founded and then directed, jointly with George Miller, the Center for Cognitive Studies at Harvard which continued until '72.

His honors are many, but among them he's a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; Fellow of the American Philosophical Society; Honorary Foreign Fellow of the British, Swiss, and Spanish Psychological Societies. Recipient of Prizes: Science Award of the American Psychological Association, Gold Medal for Research — CIBA Foundation, The G. Stanley Hall Medal for Studies of Human Development, the Edward Lee Thorndike Medal for Studies in Education, the '87 International Prize of the Balzan Foundation — 175,000 dollars! for a lifelong contribution in Human Psychology. Also honorary degrees: Duke, Yale, Northwestern, Sorbonne, Geneva, Madrid, Free University of Berlin, Louvain, Bristol, Sheffield, et cetera! It goes on and on.

And he has written a large number of books, and I have them here, and I will share this with anyone who is bibliographically inclined; and he says: "I have been especially interested for many years in how human beings 'construct' their knowledge by converting experience into a symbolic linguistic form as well as into other culturally shaped codes. I worked on problems in perception, memory, thought, problem-solving, and language acquisition."

I only want to add this: in 1949 or '50, the Research part of the Navy made a very big mistake and invited me to become a member of a committee, of which this gentleman was Chairman. It had a Top Secret mission, and without revealing any more than I can, it had to do with the problems of having crews on nuclear submarines sequestered inside metal hulls for three months at a time. And we began with a week up at New London getting familiar with it. The Navy picked this gentleman to be Chairman of that committee and he conducted the research, and

I have no doubt that one of our major nuclear deterrents owes him a great deal for its operating validity. And there's more I'm sure that could be said, but that's probably enough, for the moment at least, to introduce Jerome Bruner.

I'm very moved to be here. I should introduce this lecture by greeting you all, members of the Institute of General Semantics, and also greeting former colleagues, former students because there are some of you in that category in the audience. It's very moving!

Korzybski is an astonishing figure. He has had an impact very very difficult fully to grasp, but to put it in some sort of intellectual tradition I've tried to think through where he fits in Western thought. The best I can do is this: there was, for a long time, and indeed it still exists today, in Russian and in Eastern European linguistics, a strong trend that went under the name of "Poetics". Its objective was to find out what it is that language can do, to save people from responding automatically to language.

That is to say, if I may take a very striking example of Shklovsky and the Russian formalists, they posed a conception that they spoke of as ostraneni. Ostraneni refers to how you make the obvious and the familiar strange, so that you look at it afresh. And they saw one of the uses that they spoke of as the poetic function of language, of the literaturnost of poetry, and the novel, and indeed any kind of writing, as an invitation to the speaker to awake to what he was saying or hearing.

Now this tradition goes back a long and interesting way, to one of the really legendary figures of the turn of the century in linguistics, a Pole about whom Korzybski knew, whom everybody knew in linguistics at that point, with the most astonishingly French name, as some Poles had at that time; he was called Baudoin de Courtenay. Baudoin de Courtenay came from Warsaw and Czestochowa, to the University of Leningrad to lecture, and was

one of the first to recognize the importance of the way in which language, as we say today, is constitutive as well as communicative; that is to say, it not only communicates a picture of reality but actually constitutes it or constructs it. Now Baudoin de Courtenay, coming from Warsaw, the Poland that Korzybski had been exposed to, had a very long reach. He influenced the poets of the next generation, he influenced people like Roman Jakobson, one of the great giants of the field; even unto today the Professor of Linguistics in the University of Moscow, Professor Ivanov, still represents that tradition.

So that as I look out at this group this evening and see what the Institute of General Semantics has done, in a sense it has carried, so to say, the plea for consciousness and against automaticity, machinelikeness, robotry, and seized the instrument of language as doing it. So it is indeed for me a great honor to be the thirty-seventh, I believe it is, lecturer in this series.

Now, I want to speak this evening about many things. So many that I could go on in the way that Fidel Castro used to go on before the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, starting at ten in the evening and going till six o'clock the next morning. I shall try not to. For I want to talk about a matter that's of enormous interest to me. I think it will interest you as well. The ultimate form of time-binding is the concept of a life. That is to say, you say: "I am Me, and I'll tell you about my life." and I'll say "What's happened? What's your life been about?" When you do that, what you do is essentially construct something crucial, a life. A life does not just happen, it is constructed.

Before I talk about this ultimate time-binding, this process of creating a text that is your life (not merely reporting it), there are some preliminaries. What in the world would you report — of all the things that you can say, why did you say that particular one? Before I go on, however, I have to let a few skeletons out of the closet — not so much out of the closet, rather I want to rattle them a little bit. Because skeletons are like stick figures and you get a better sense of their morphology if you move them around a little bit.

First off, I want to say as bluntly as I can, for starters, that autobiography is not what might be called something about a real world, life out there, whose semblance one captures in writing or telling an autobiography. Rather, it's created or constructed as an act of autobiography. It's like, in a way, Henry James's wonderful quip about stories happening only to people who can tell them. To live a certain way means to be able to follow a kind of story. Being able to tell it renders you able to live it. A "life story" not only construes experience but it goes on reconstruing itself, reconstruing itself, jusqu'à dernier instant, absolutely to the end. Some lives actually get written down; most of us, however, are not part of that small minority that writes autobiography. But that is not the point.

You mostly write the story of your life in your head, you do it in patches, you do it to interlocutors, to your wives, to your friends, even to strangers. You do it in the excuses you tell — and as you do it, you get caught in it, you become the autobiography you're telling. That is the ultimate form of time-binding. A life, if you will, is a conceptual construction: one of its consequences is not only how we construe the past, but how we construe, and live, the future.

Since we seem to be in the business of

telling about our personal experiences, let me confess that I have written an autobiography. I wrote it on order: the Sloan Foundation decided that there was a group of about a dozen of us who had somehow — what shall I say — disturbed our deans, or our colleagues by creating a certain amount of conceptual hubbub in our fields, and it would be a good idea to have us retell our intellectual autobiographies. I tried it. I did write the book (1983). It's all right, it can even be purchased down the street, at Harper and Row.

But you realize, when you write an autobiography, that it is full of options, what you choose to write about. What is an "intellectual autobiography," by the way? May I include a fair-haired cousin of mine whom I adored and then felt jilted by? Did that set me searching for higher truths? Possibly — no, I don't think so; certainly it set me searching for something. One is left with an open cheque. What does one write in an autobiography? Should I have taken it as normal (and not worth telling in an intellectual autobiography) that my mother's rule was that each of us children should spend at least an hour alone every day? Her rule did not have much ostranenyi about it: I took it for granted. I thought everybody spent an hour alone every day. And I thought so for a long time. And I even thought that something was wrong with the world when it was not possible for me to spend an hour alone a day.

Now that's curious: that rule became a working metaphor for me. I judged my life in terms of it. It is in the background of my autobiography. Put it this way: you select a set of metaphors and images that construct your life and put it together. Accordingly, there can be no such thing as a uniquely true "aboriginal" autobiography. Oh, we may miss out on details: whether you went to Europe this year or the year before; but that's trivial. On this view, there must be lots of alternative autobiographies that can fit a life; there is one about whether or not "I should have been a

pair of ragged claws scuttling across the floors of silent seas." There is another about why I am a rotten mathematician, but good at linguistics; still another about why I love long-distance sailing, etc. Each is a response to a metaphor that captures you.

There is prevalent a notion that a good autobiography requires only that you don't deceive yourself. I want to pause for a moment on the subject of self-deception. Is "self-deception" an oxymoron? Who is deceiving whom?

We meekly (and without *ostranenyi*) take it for granted that because there are sleeve-worn metaphors in psychoanalytic theory, we "repress" things. And then we imitate a machinery for mind, including repression, that comes to dominate our autobiography.

I was discussing with some friends a new syndrome, called "multiple personality disorder," a syndrome reported for about 40 women in 1980. In the next two years there were 600 cases. They involve dissociation and usually follow upon a prolonged trauma in the life of the patient — usually sexual abuse, mostly women sexually abused by the father or somebody close in the family. It involves an unacceptable part of a life which gets squeezed off as unbearable. Occasionally the "squeezed off" part takes over and a "multiple personality" appears. What's interesting is that these symptoms do not often appear as presenting symptom on first visit to the consulting office. They develop after six months to a year with the doctor, possibly as an iatrogenic symptom in response to the therapy, which is itself premised on "splits" within the person and about "conflicts" between those split segments of the self.

I bring this up here because it's characteristic of autobiographies that they are about one self, a single self is presupposed in our culture. Self is held to be the same self

tomorrow that it was yesterday, and occupies the center of things, like the earth in the pre-Copernican world. That single self, moreover, is drenched in agency, to use a linguistics term; that is to say, the somebody at the center of things is doing things. Things may fall on your head, from the floor above, beyond your own control, but the Self is full of agency. A single unified figure is acting.

I should tell you now that over the last five years possibly, I've been analyzing autobiographies, literary and spontaneous alike. Lots of them. I have never ever seen an autobiography that didn't have turning points in it. Turning points are very interesting: no autobiography gets written without a reversal. "So I decided I had enough of him" And then: "So I decided to x..." The turning point may be linked to something in the external world, but even then, it's linked by the teller to a 'mental' state, an intentional, a decision state.

And that then produces supporting and sympathetic weather in what is reported after the decision. We make the world itself conform to the decisive turning point. It's like a story I know. It takes place on the Northern Line in London, and is about a man who lives out in Hampstead. He has a very important deal in the City and he's got to take the tube in early. The Northern Line is a long-suffering line, it's a little bit like the I.R.T. on the West Side in New York, a little bit decrepit but much beloved. And this man must take an early train into the City to see his broker; he has a big deal going. Alas, he wakes up a little late, rushes over to the Belsize Park tube station, where he reaches into his pocket, to get a coin to buy his ticket from the vending-machine. He gets out what he thinks is a half-crown, but it's a 10p. He puts it into the machine and it blocks. He has to take an elevator down to the platform, but by the time he finally puts the right coin in, the elevator goes down and he misses it. It is getting later and later; he's furious. He finally gets down

on the elevator but he has missed the train. There's some poor fellow on the platform who has his foot up on a bench, tying his shoe. He walks up to him, gives him a swift kick in the backside and says "God dammit, you're always tying your shoe!" That is creating sympathetic weather!

Now, when you go through one of these self-driven internal transformations, you find sympathetic weather, you find somebody there who is always tying their shoe. "I decided I'd had enough, I couldn't stand that house any more. He always left such a mess behind. So I left a note and I said to him 'You can keep it!'" There are three things then: Unity of Self, Agency, and Abrupt Transformations.

Now, what's so striking about autobiography is that these three things — this Unity, Agency, and Abrupt Turnings — have a great deal in common with the structure of fiction, whether you get your theory of fiction from Aristotle's *Poetics*, or from a modern literary theorist. There is a unified main protagonist (with conflict), lots of agency, and the turning points (*peripeteia* in the *Poetics*) — this is the stuff of narrative and of drama.

Pause for a moment to consider what is involved in the writing or telling of an autobiography, or even in the thinking of an autobiography. You'll see that from an epistemological point of view it should give you vertigo, make you absolutely go out of your mind, for the following reason: there is a narrator, here and now, who is holding the pen or speaking. He is telling a story about a protagonist who happens to bear the same name as his. In the end, his task as an autobiographer is to bring the narrator and the protagonist into each other's arms in the present. He, the narrator, is telling the story here and now about a protagonist who lived there and then under different circumstances. By what warrant does he have the privilege of altering and excusing some particular nasty

piece of behavior as only an "undergraduate caper"? Or explaining infidelity as adventurousness? The narrator preempts a position of authority with respect to the protagonist. The protagonist, most often, becomes putty in the narrator's hands.

In my life, there is a protagonist by the name of "Sonny" who was fond of blowing up three-inch salutes in trashcans; he's a very distinguished professor now. But Sonny meant no harm in those days, I will tell you. How come Sonny meant no harm? Because I'm giving you the picture of Sonny through the eyes of the distinguished Professor Bruner, who is trying to make a unified whole of his lifelong benevolence.

Now that circumstance is automatically an invitation to borrow a genre from fiction. Life imitates Art, because Art contains not only specific stories, but *genre*. Take, for example, the dullest kind of autobiography, the kind that "tells it like it is." "Telling it like it is" is a convention, a convention which says in effect, you start at the beginning and you go on. "I was born, buh buh buh..." Chronology serves for cause.

But it can serve in other ways too. Let me give you one autobiography that I collected; a spontaneous one among autobiographies collected, usually taking about two hours to tell with nobody getting the least vertiginous about this business of bringing narrator and protagonist together.

Our subject started off by saying: "I was born in the Midlands. My family ran a hotel. The obstetrician when I was born picked me up by my heels —" Well, I was expecting a full dull account, right through the chronology. He fooled me. Here's how he continued: "He picked me up by my heels. He slapped me on my back" and "He broke two ribs. You see I had osteoporosis. That's the story of my life... People trying to do good for me ending up by

breaking my bones." Chronology had obviously been only a frame for another metaphor. He never mentioned that incident again, but as he relived the thirty-six years of his life he was plainly searching out situations with that metaphor in the background. And the metaphor creates a genre — the vulnerable near-victim navigating the perils of the world.

Let me say a word about people developing an autobiographical genre, whether the intellectuals' Bildungsroman, or the black humor genre of the self-mocker, or the American pastiche based on the tribulations of a Woody Allen "nebbish" personality, constantly involved in disguise. All, in a sense, are disguises, but there is no "real" or "true" or "aboriginal" self that exists to be disguised. We are not autonomous, self-contained atoms. We live for and with others.

Kirk Varnedoe, the art critic, introduced me to a book I had not seen before, a study of self-portraiture in painting. Claes Oldenburg, for example, comments on self-portraiture always involving an element of disguise. Once we give up the Rembrandtian ideal of resemblance, we face it. Oldenburg's self-portrait self-consciously uses the art of disguise — with ikons and symbols set out to reveal and to hide. The form of the disguise and the revelation are both linked to genre.

Genre is a schema for tying together an enormous amount of detailed material by sampling only a little. In connection with tying together a lot by sampling a little, I want to introduce a concept that comes initially out of Biblical criticism. And bear in mind that all literary theory and all literary criticism comes initially from Biblical criticism. In Biblical criticism, there is a distinction made between 'Edut which refers to witness: those things you have seen, felt, experienced, all past tense stuff: "I was walking down O'Connell Street," and Midrash, interpretation basically, what I took that afternoon walk for. To 'Edut and

Midrash, I want to add a third thing. Call it Stance. Stance is a way of orienting yourself toward things — how the narrator orients himself toward that poor same-name protagonist, who is completely at his mercy. Genre, I think, dictates the way in which the mimesis of 'Edut, the diegetics of Midrash, and the diatactics of Stance get put together in a story, including autobiography. That putting together is, so to speak, the "master disguise" of an autobiographical account. By "master disguise" I mean the pattern of a story the narrator can live with, his protagonist would not object to too strenuously, and that a listener can understand.

As an example, let me take a piece by Primo Levi — partly in tribute to a man whose work I love. It is an example of witness, interpretation, and stance, which are fitted together with breathtaking skill. It is from his astonishing book, *The Periodic Table*, an account of life at the chemical factory, close by Auschwitz, where he was sent to work as a chemist. It's in preparation for telling about how he and his pal, Alberto, steal cerium rods from the chemical factory, which they then sell as favors to S.S. guards in Auschwitz to use as flints for their lighters.

Listen to Levi: "I was a chemist in a chemical plant, in a chemical laboratory (this too has been narrated) and I stole in order to eat. If you do not begin as a child, learning how to steal is not easy; it had taken me several months before I could repress the moral commandments and acquired the necessary techniques, and at a certain point I realized (with a flash of laughter and a pinch of satisfied ambition) that I was reliving — me, a respectable little university graduate — the involution-evolution of a famous respectable dog, a Victorian, Darwinian dog who is deported and becomes a thief in order to live in his Klondike Lager — the great Buck of *The Call of the Wild*. I stole like him and like the foxes: at every favorable opportunity but

with sly cunning and without exposing myself. I stole everything except the bread of my companions."

Here he catches it all: the stance of repugnance toward stealing, the immediacy of laughter and the pinch of satisfied ambition when he masters it, the locational fix on his position as a little university graduate, the cultural literary model, Buck, taken out of *The Call of the Wild*, the intellectual placement of his justification in an evolutionary perspective: in order to survive, he stole, but he didn't steal from his friends.

Pages later, he begins on the iron-cerium rods. It is "an alloy from which the common flints of cigarette lighters are made," the ones he trades for food with the guards back in the Lager. Then the story turns to the agonizing details of thinning the rods to fit a lighter, how this had to be done under blankets if they were not to be caught; and he ends by telling about the tremendous skill it took to do all this without making any flap under the blanket. And you suddenly realize that for survival to be meaningful in this man's life, a brilliant chemist as well as a brilliant writer, you need the subtext of acquired skill. And it was skill (and pride in its use) that led him to survive. Alas, when he felt that skill could not prevail, that his story could no longer prevail in the post-war world — it was no longer worth living. He killed himself last year. And we are all poorer. In a book that was published posthumously, he tells us that somehow he couldn't make people understand what it was like to live in a world at the edge of non-humanity. History and forgetting were arrayed against him. Mankind was forgetting about the struggle of bare skill against inhumanity. He felt he could no longer go on, his books could never prevail. In that last book, *On Memory*, he says: "They have won. They have won."

Forgive me if I go on just a moment longer. I promised not to do what Fidel Castro

did, but I'll keep you a little while longer. I commented earlier that, in spite of autobiography being an epistemologically complicated thing, we seem to be able to do it easily. If you stop a guy on the street out there, coming right out of Grand Central Station — people are so used to being surveyed now, you can say "Tell me the story of your life." "Uh?" "Yeah, tell me the story of your life." "Yeah? Sure." They tell you some story of their life. They may start off banal, but it doesn't stay that way for long. Most people will tell you something interesting.

How come we're so good at it? To understand this better, we have studied how young kids tell their own stories to themselves. Take a little girl, Emmy, daughter of a donnish couple at an unmentionable university in New Haven, who talked to herself at bed-time starting at about the age of a year. We studied those monologues (recorded by her parents) until she was about three.\*

Emmy had extraordinary monologues after lights were out. The whiny tone, used to keep her parents in the room, disappeared and she would launch into astonishing accounts of her day. Children begin to tell events of the day, and to put them into stories, narrative forms, almost from the start of language. By the time they are adolescent, faced with the question of "the rest of your life" and what the past means, they're really quite experienced at building narratives. From the eighteenth to the thirty-sixth months that we recorded, Emmy had plenty of interesting events in her life to ponder. For one, a younger stranger came into the house, her brother Steven, who took over her room, her crib, and her parents' attention. Shortly thereafter, she went off to a nursery school, where she had her first contact with

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\* Katherine Nelson (editor), *Language from the Crib*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989.

little boys who bash you, something she'd never run into before. Her reconstructions were quite amazing.

For one, she was rapidly learning to convert what happened to her into causal language. She also had to deal with canonicity, as it's called linguistically: how things normally are, as compared to how they are now. Canonical sequences were couched in the timeless present tense. When you talk about the past, as in "Sundays we have bacon and eggs," that's the timeless present. As she mastered things in life they would tend to disappear from her monologues; she needed them no longer, she had control over them, they were causal, they were timeless. They showed up only as benchmarks.

Now: let me take you to the fulness of life. I have never seen an adult autobiography that did not have 25 percent of its clause units in the present tense. Autobiography is not a genre just about the past; it is as much about the present. That is to say, it is taking the past and putting it into timelessness, commenting on it, doing Midrash on 'Edut, taking a Stance. Mimesis, Diegetics and Diatactics are the standard, well rehearsed maneuvers. Indeed, Tennessee Williams in his splendid memoirs starts off by saying: "I hope the reader will forgive me; I discover in reading back over this particular set of memoirs that it's mostly in the present tense, with a few flashbacks." But that's the way autobiographies are!

If an autobiography is successful, its success consists basically in its being self-believable. And one ends up, when one has a self-believable autobiography, beginning to imitate it, beginning indeed to comment upon it, as something that really is true. And indeed, it's then when you try to convince others to make their biographies correspond to your autobiography. A good autobiography, that gets round all over the hurdles that I've outlined, transcends issues of what "actually"

happened, and deals with meaning.

A friend of mine told how his then lady kept a diary. When they would get into another quarrel over dinner she would get her diary down and report what had "happened" the last time. He said "You know, it was absolutely a tissue of lies!" Just as well they broke up!

Obviously, the way in which we put this autobiographical text together, this time-binding, place-binding, role-binding, drama-binding thing, easily gets to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. It's in that sense that you become your autobiography. Now please, this is not to say that there are not things that happen to one. This is not to say, for example, that you don't fall down and break your back. This is not to say, for example, that you don't have poverty or degradation in your life. The 'only' point I'm making is that such conditions or events do not fully affect your life until you find an adequate way of putting them into your implicit autobiography.

This brings me back to turning points. We all, at one time or another, have paid out anywhere from 75 to 250 dollars an hour to go to the shrink with our troubles. What is the task of psychiatry under these circumstances? Donald Spence has written a book in which he argues that narrative truth, that is to say, finding an adequate narrative that would capture the texture of a life, is more important than historical truth, — about exactly how it was that you wanted to roast your father in the oven. In a sense, the task of the psychiatrist, whatever his theoretical bent may be, is a little bit like the task of the literary critic or the good editor. He examines texts for their narrative genre, their style, their invariant turnings. It is in these that he finds the problems. "You know, there's a certain repetitious quality in the way your stories go. Can you tell them in any different way — like try telling that one in a different way!" And

says the person "I can't do that; this is true!" "Ya, ya, I'm sure it's true, I know it's true. But on the other hand, there are lots of truths — try it."

So the interesting question that emerges, from the point of view not only of psychiatry but of self-accounting generally, is equipping people with the images, the metaphors, the myths, the skills to make and remake something of a life. I really mean the technical skills, and I want to go back to the beloved Primo Levi. He writes of himself, recognizing that he is not just his hidden impulses, but his skills as well. And these include not just computational skills but narrative skills as well, so that you can construct a life that is livable for yourself and others. I come back to ostranenyi, how we freshen things that have

become banal, rather than banalize things that have become revolutionary.

So, what I want to leave you with is the sense that this most personal thing requires what the French call un artiste de la vie, an artist of life. That means, basically, creating a narrative that works — learning a language, learning what to expect; learning also, not only about ourself but about the world, learning to be our own anthropologists. Sir Alexander Marrett once said that Anthropology, like Charity, begins at home. For you need a sense not only of your internal landscape, but the external landscape in which it works.

So that is the thirty-seventh Alfred Korzybski Lecture, and I thank you very much for the opportunity to deliver it.

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#### DISCUSSION

[Dr. Bruner's remarks are in Italics.]

THOMAS NELSON: Thank you very much, Professor Bruner, for that talk. It was a shocking talk to me, because the last time I heard you speak was in a Teacher Faculty meeting in New Canaan, I think it was fifteen years ago, and you were riding high on Cognitive Studies, and you'd written a book: "On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand." Am I correct? *Yes, you're quite right. I'm immediately wondering why I didn't disguise myself better ...* I was thinking about autobiography, and the question requires you or me to turn into Fidel Castro, so you can say "Go read my autobiography" — but the transformation in you, in that period of time, is so phenomenal it's blowing my mind. What has mellowed you? is my question. At that time — maybe you read Korzybski, I don't know — you were very very clear about knowing cognitive things that you were advising faculties on, and you were saying such things as "Any intellectually honest subject" — *Any subject can be taught at any age to any child in some form that is*

*honest.* You remember too? I don't think you know what you've done to my autobiography. I was chairman of the Science Department and the Math Department, and we believed you so — actually you were extremely convincing. *It was true, what I said.. Then? or now? Both. I'll come back to that...* The point I'm making is: You turned our entire faculty into trying to not just memorize the quadratic formula, but to derive the quadratic formula, and I could go on into various things, because you were extremely convincing in that work. *I loved that work on the quadratics, that was fantastic, yes. Should I read your book to find that out? Yes.*

*I just want to say one thing, because it is a very interesting part of the autobiography. In setting — it's odd to be the architect of a revolution; that's a really odd notion, that sort of takes away the role of fate. The cognitive revolution came along, and it was essentially a revolution against the kind of behavioristic,*

*kind of Skinnerian type thing at that point, and that was a battle worth fighting. My father told me once when I was a kid that the thing you have to watch out for more than failure is success. We succeeded perhaps too well, and what happened was that the world became a world of information processing. It's perfectly plain, as you will see in a 1986 book, called "Actual Minds, Possible Worlds," we're trying to argue that there are two modes of thought: that one of them is essentially this paradigmatic, more mathematical logical technique, for organizing aspects of nature, but for organizing your experience of humankind, you need the narrative mode; you need the vicissitudes of an agent acting in some unitary way toward goals, and getting conked on the noggin, and somehow managing to go on. So in a sense, what you speak of as a transformation may be more sort of the order of a completion. Maybe it took a little bit of growing up to recognize that your passion of that particular moment didn't cover terribly much of the world, particularly the world having to do with people. And I think that's an honest answer to that. How I happened to do it, God only knows.*

**ROBERT PULA:** You used the phrase "succeeded too well". I would like to suggest that the problem is not that you succeeded too well, but that you succeeded too poorly. This is an urgent issue, I think, in all of scientific work. I'm particularly interested in Hobson's recent book, *The Dreaming Brain*, in which he talks about the task of psychoanalysis and psychiatry, in which he refers to it as literary criticism. It is basically what psychoanalysis has been based in is not science, but literary criticism. And a lot of what you said about the autobiographical business tonight is shockingly reverberating with that, and I'd ask you to speak to that.

*I will. I will speak to that with great pleasure because it happens to be something that is absolutely preoccupying Carol and me.*

*There are two approaches that one uses essentially in attempting to understand. I'm going to oversimplify because time is short. One of them is plainly a mode in which you are trying to get at things like causes and structures — structures as in a crystal — deep underlying causal structures that produce things on the outside. And the other is an interpretive mode of a kind that we know for example in the different meanings that the Bible has, different meanings in the Law, we saw the drama of it in the Bork hearings this last summer. The question of how to interpret the Founders' intent, the question for example of how to refresh or renew a classic. For example, somebody reading "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" today, in a modern situation, in a post-Joycean world, in a sense is understanding something about the symbolic structures that everyone takes in.*

*Let me make that even more condensed. If I go now, for example, to being an anthropologist in everyday life, there are models of experience that are present in the art and myth we create as time goes on, and to understand how people use those requires an interpretation of them, of what they believe and what they say, in much the same spirit as one would interpret a text. You can't do it experimentally. There's no way of setting up experiments that will bear directly on this. There are things that can contribute to your understanding when you look at things and .... But I want to argue, in the sciences of Man — and if you don't like the word Sciences, and I find it a bore — I mean science-shmience so long as you're finding out something. So long as you recognize that there is a stage — Professor Luria of Moscow referred to this as Romantic Science, understanding the single case interpretively and all it can mean, which then also has the effect of leading to a tremendous kind of vivification, of the other kind of research as well; if you can understand what one means by this interesting interpretive side of autobiographical*

*construction, then it leaves all those students who need Ph.D. theses with nifty little experiments too — there's always plenty of work for the journey. Thank you.*

**ROBERT MULLER:** Professor, I'd like to thank you for a very informative lecture; I enjoyed it very much. There's just one question I had: you mentioned a word addressing a therapy which was the problem, not the cure. What was that word you used?

*Oh yes, "iatrogenic" — it refers to forms of disability that are created by the cure. That is to say — I shouldn't give you too many examples of this, it would not be in the public interest [laughter] — for example, (let me just take a very mild example) when somebody requires a long period of rest in a hospital, it may very well be the case that that long period of rest will produce a syndrome which is called "hospitalism," in which the person begins to give up hope and that kind of thing, and the hospital actually has the effect of killing them, rather than curing them. Is that a form of therapy which they should now have abandoned?*

*Well, there's an interesting problem: what I used was that Multiple Personality Disorder, so-called, as something that may be iatrogenic, that is it may actually be produced by the therapeutic situation, in operation with the culture that the person is living in. The argument has been made that the reason Multiple Personality Disorder is almost completely confined to the United States of America has to do with something about the loneliness of our lives, and may go back to David Riesman's*

*book "The Lonely Crowd"; you know, the fact that we have no way of maintaining our unity as, for example, "The Lord is One, and Man is patterned on the Lord". That is a doctrine that our grandfathers and grandmothers believed. There was a unity, there was that patterning, which was Scriptural. Now, if you have a notion in which you're dealing with a possibility of Roles being the important thing: "I gotta do my job well, down at the Law firm" or, "I've got to get myself finally elected into that tennis club," each one of those things being a Role; and there being no centralized unifying thing, it may very well be that the power of a central metaphor in life to hold one together against possible dissociative forces may be less, and when in a psychiatric situation the doctor helps the patient understand what the problem is, it snaps off into a dissociative syndrome. This is not intended as a criticism of the doctor, any more than the idea that the hospital can produce a hospitalism syndrome should be put — it should be put at their door in one sense, I mean it's a very tough question to ask. But you can see, in the way I'm trying to put it, I want to make the therapist, the hospital, the teacher, not separate from the culture, not separate from life, but part of it. It's as the old joke had it, you know: Education is not the solution to the problem of how you get people equipped to be competent, it is the problem.*

**WILLIAM EXTON, JR.:** I think we all need to thank Dr. Bruner once more for an extremely valuable meeting. [Prolonged applause.]