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Lindsay Tucker

Jacob's *The Statue Within: An Autobiography* vs. Jacob's Nobel laureate statement

The Statue Within: An Autobiography is a seemingly candid reflection of the life and work of the French Nobel laureate, François Jacob. In 1965, he and his research partners (Jacques Monod & André Lwoff) were awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine for their discoveries concerning genetic control of enzyme and virus synthesis. Nobel Prize recipients are required to provide an autobiographical statement, which can be found on their website (<http://www.nobelprize.org>). When comparing these two autobiographical works, one finds radical differences in structure and content. I examine here how Jacob approaches the following elements in each work: passage of time, his involvement in World War II, and his family.

Jacob's autobiography toys with the passage of time and creates a rather complex structure. In the first chapter, Jacob reflects on his life saying:

I see my life less as continuity than as a series of different selves--I might also say, strangers. At the end of the line, I see the little boy....then comes the adolescent....the medical student....the fighting man of the Free French Forces....the wreck of a man....the beginner at the Pasteur Institute....all this gang marching in single file. I have trouble imagining that, when the name François Jacob is called, all these selves can leap up and answer, 'Present' (15).

The idea of Jacob's 'selves' all marching in a line introduces an interesting concept. Where does the line begin? Where does it end? Is it possible for all of these 'selves' to be present at the same time? Jacob moves between these 'selves' throughout the development of *The Statue Within* as if he were multiple characters in a monologue of his life.

In Jacob's Nobel laureate statement, there is a rather brief, linearly developed account of his life. He provides a few sentences of his origins and early education, and states that his "studies were interrupted by the war." Then, he quickly moves into detailed description of his work at the Pasteur Institute, his scientific discoveries, his books published, and awards received. Jacob concludes his statement with a brief sentence about his family. The Nobel laureate statement was updated by Jacob in April 2005, and he expanded his list of scientific work, awards and accomplishments. He also added that his wife, "Lise Bloch died. Second marriage in 1999 with Geneviève Barrier." Unlike the accounts in Jacob's *The Statue Within*, the information is presented in a concise manner and dates provided are exact. The doubts concerning time and memory present in his autobiography do not occur in the Nobel laureate statement. Instead, he assumes a professional role which reflects the concise manner and style of his Nobel laureate statement.

In each of these autobiographical accounts, it is easy to see that the 'François Jacob' being portrayed is rather different. In *The Statue Within*, Jacob's descriptions of his involvement in World War II are lengthy and provide the reader with a sense of his pain and strife during that specific time of his life. Shortly after his mother's death in 1940, he was sent to Africa as a medical officer. Jacob reflects on this moment by saying,

Everything I believed in, everything that I thought I'd believe for life, everything that seemed the very basis of our existence, forming our protective armature, that seemed to shape our view of the world: all this crumbled in an instant. In an instant the country has foundered. In an instant, despite its great men and its great schools, its generals and its institutions, its teachers and its senate, it has collapsed, body and soul (99).

This represents the 'François Jacob' filled with uncertainty, the 'François Jacob' who joins the war never knowing if or when he will return, the 'François Jacob' who simply follows the military traditions of his family upbringing. After he finally returns to France, he reflects upon the war and refers to it as an 'intermission' in his life. This suggests its lack of importance, because he has returned to where he was before the war resuming his duties as a medical student (187). The war becomes a memory that Jacob seems to draw a veil over. However, the role assumed by Jacob in the Nobel laureate statement is the exact opposite. Jacob is portrayed as the war hero who "was severely wounded in Normandy, in August 1944. He remained in the hospital for seven months, and was awarded the Croix de la Libération, the highest French military decoration of this war." There is no sense of uncertainty or regret in this statement, and Jacob assumes the role of the war hero with great pride. In *The Statue Within*, Jacob gives a detailed description of his time in the hospital; however, he fails to mention anything about receiving the military award for his service in the war.

Toward the end of *The Statue Within*, Jacob begins to discuss his life with Lise Bloch and the family they have created. He says that he "associated the thought of Lise with all my dreams of happiness" (206). At one point, Jacob is affectionately talking about Lise and his children

(Pierre, Laurent, Odile, and Henri) and states that their existence “was like a revenge on the war, on death” (272). It is clear that he has a great love for his family, and an intense hatred for the war and everyone because he associates it with death. The war is tied to the death of his mother, his friends, and the life that he had. In the Nobel laureate statement, Jacob addresses his family at the end by saying, “in 1947 François Jacob married the pianist Lise Bloch. They have four children: Pierre (born in 1949), who has become a philosopher, Laurent and Odile (born in 1952) and Henri (born in 1954), who are still undifferentiated.” The manner in which he presents his family is similar. In each work, descriptions of his family appear at the end and are rather brief. The brevity of the Nobel laureate statement is not unusual because it is typical of this sort; however, the fact that it was revised in April 2005, and there was no change to the ‘undifferentiated’ status of his children raises concerns. The attention given to his children in *The Statue Within* is that of a loving father; the lack of attention given to his children in the Nobel laureate statement reflects his role as the ‘war hero’ that is carried throughout it. The Nobel laureate statement does not provide the reader with the emotional registers of Jacob that are evident in his autobiography.

What is gained by comparing these two autobiographical accounts of François Jacob? One is thereby forced to examine the different roles that Jacob assumes in each work and how it affects the work as a whole. In the Nobel laureate statement, it is clear that Jacob is taking a traditional, professional, and militaristic approach in his presentation of his life. Content and structure deepen the portrayal of Jacob as the decorated war hero and accomplished scientist. On the other hand, *The Statue Within* can be viewed as a brash and genuine account of Jacob’s life. It is full of emotion: love, hate, uncertainty and passion. Whether or not these accounts are

wholly truthful is questionable and one cannot take each account at face value. However, in each work, the reader must look beyond the lines to find that Jacob has carefully and delicately constructed these 'selves' that are being portrayed. Although *The Statue Within* and the Nobel laureate statement were both written by François Jacob, they offer an interesting point of comparison and insight to the life of the many 'selves' hiding behind the curtain.

Works Cited

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