

## Autobiography and the Making of America · Robert F. Sayre

THAT AUTOBIOGRAPHY is a common form of American expression now seems to be well recognized. In the last ten or fifteen years a number of books and articles have been published on the subject, more are in the works, and many universities now have courses in it or in some aspect of it.<sup>1</sup> Students and teachers of autobiography are even accused of riding a band wagon, or of turning to this “new” field now that there is supposedly nothing left to write about poetry and the novel. But the wonder is that literary scholars have taken so long to acknowledge something that is not only currently interesting but also historically rich and culturally revealing.

Forms of autobiography, loosely defined, appeared in the earliest exploration narratives and travellers’ tales describing and promoting the new land. Another form appeared in the colonial chronicles and settlers’ narratives, like William Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation* and John Winthrop’s *Journal*. In the 18th century, when Americans had still not written any plays or novels or much poetry of distinction, a number of them wrote distinctive diaries and autobiographies: the diaries of Samuel Sewall and William Byrd, the *Journal* of Sarah Kemble Knight, the *Personal Narrative* of Jonathan Edwards, the *Journal* of John Woolman, and Crèvecoeur’s *Letters from an American Farmer*. From these traditions emerged many of what have since become the classics of American literature—like Franklin’s *Memoirs* (as he called them), Cooper’s *Pioneers*, *Walden*, and *The Education of Henry Adams*. A decent appreciation of autobiography is a prerequisite to the understanding of American literature in general.

Yet what makes this approach now attractive and even obvious is that in the last decade contemporary writers have refitted autobiography in so many provocative ways: from the very private memoirs of Lillian Hellman to the very public and self-publicized personal adventures of Norman Mailer; from the elegant soul-searching of James Baldwin to the sweeping apologetics of Malcolm X; from the witty literary experiments of Vladimir Nabokov to the glittering showmanship of Tom Wolfe and the “personal” journalists. Autobiography seems to be both one of the oldest forms of American writing and also one of the freshest and most lively. Where only a short while ago it was assumed to be one of the most predictable kinds of writing—“I was born . . .” and all that—it now is anything but. It has been re-invented with the authors’ re-inventions of themselves. In a period which has produced so much dislocation of personality—from the break-up of old cities and neighborhoods, from changes in family patterns and sexual habits, from the explosion of racial and class boundaries, and from the commercialization even of self-history and personality—our generation has

had to reformulate the basic integer of society and history. The search for a new culture requires the search for a new self.

The trouble with these seemingly sound and widely accepted generalizations, however, is that every one of them could be made of almost any other period of American history. Cultural change and personal dislocation are not exceptions in America; they are the rule, which may be one of the most important reasons why autobiography in America is indeed a traditional form of expression. Therefore, the problem confronting the critic is one of accounting for both permanence and change: the permanence of the autobiographical impulse or necessity; the changes and varieties in the expressions it takes. And can we do this without making the critically meaningless claim that finally all kinds of writing are in some sense autobiographical? Or to state the problem another way, what are the common elements in something with so many different manifestations? Can one definition apply to both a wide range of literary masterpieces and a wide range of (paradoxically) almost anonymous vernacular forms? For autobiography in America means not only the comparatively famous works just referred to; it also means Indian captivity narratives and the "biographies" and "autobiographies" of notable Indian chiefs, the countless success stories of businessmen and celebrities, the protest stories of ex-slaves and oppressed workers, the tales of pioneering and of the "Americanization" of immigrants, the deceitful apologies of scoundrels and rogues, the utterly artificial "True Confessions" in magazines of romance and pornography, the formulae of high school yearbooks, photograph albums, curriculum vitae, and *Who's Who*. Autobiography is an industry, a sometimes hand-made, sometimes machine-made common commodity, like "grubby" clothes and three-piece suits, old family mansions and pick-up trucks with campers. And like clothes, cars, and houses, it is a necessity, or almost a necessity, which we use in work and for entertainment, whenever we say who we are and where we've been. "Slowly the history of each one comes out of each one," said Gertrude Stein. "Sometime then there will be a history of every one." And this very universality enforces a democratization and levelling. As Stein went on: "Every one is always busy with it, no one of them then ever want to know it that every one looks like some one else and they see it mostly every one dislikes to hear it."<sup>2</sup>

As Americans ought to know well, however, quantity and concentration do not necessarily produce quality. Whatever praises the literary nationalist might like to sing, Americans have been no more capable of great autobiography than have the writers of other nations. There is no American egotist to come near to Cellini—not even his great admirer Mark Twain. There is no American Rousseau, nor any great autobiographer of the intellect and spirit like Mill or Newman, no self-analyst like Jung, nor even the refined if necessarily constricted autobiographers of Puritan familial oppression like Edmund Gosse and Samuel Butler. And most readers would find Thomas

Wolfe a gross substitute for Proust. But there may be good reasons for these deficiencies in American self-assessment. An American seems to have needed to be an American first, then an autobiographer, and this places some limits on his or her achievement. Being an American, with this experience to write about, is a special opportunity, but it may also exclude other dimensions of autobiographical writing.

In all these respects, one could compare American autobiography to American architecture, especially domestic architecture. In both there have been masters, like Franklin and Thoreau, Sullivan and Wright, as well as hundreds more who have conformed to more conventional styles, and thousands working from the equivalent of mail-order catalogues, design books, custom, and habit. They have built the lives and the homes in which the masses of Americans have lived: self-images which are, in fact, shelters, be they comfortable or uncomfortable, suitable or pretentious. And what a developer said of "his" work affirms Stein's remark on self-histories: "these houses are all alike—they only look different." Yet even their likeness betrays the tastes and aspirations of the inhabitants, which is why the study of autobiography in America, like the study of domestic architecture, cannot be confined to the work of masters. It contains both classics and commercials, works of high and popular culture.

Another similarity to architecture, which Richard Poirier discussed in *A World Elsewhere*, stems from that American tendency to think of style and self-expression as a house. The "American book"—be it novel, poem, or autobiography—builds an ideal house (like Thoreau's), a house of fiction (like James's) which is an improvement on the shabby, imitative, or mundane houses in which we are born and raised. The autobiography is, or can be, that second house into which we are re-born, carried by our own creative power. We make it ourselves, then re-make it; make it new.

Perhaps the urgency of this building comes, ultimately, from the memory Americans have that as immigrants they were once homeless in this new world, that they had to crawl into cellars on the sides of hills, into sod houses and log cabins, or into tenements vacated by someone else. To eventually own a house meant success, arrival (or a second arrival) into the new civilization. This is why the house (not clothes) is the major metaphor in American self-expression. In a larger sense, civilization itself has been the national expression: the cutting of forests, building of railroads and highways, digging of mines, raising of factories, and the coeval building of thousands of authorities and institutions, the homesteading, the domesticating of the continent. And the special virtue of autobiography is that it has been a form in which so many builders have compiled records of their work. It describes their hundreds of careers and achievements and also their unifying achievement, their character, which collectively composes the national character. Their need to write and record has been as urgent, in some cases, as their need to build.

Therefore, American autobiography is like and unlike other autobiographies simply as Americans are different and not different. America has had its backwoodsman, Canada its *courrier du bois*. Most Americans are immigrants; so are many South Africans and Australians. Germany, England, and other nations have also had inventors, founders of industrial fortunes, labor leaders, reformers, and so on. Moreover, autobiography is certainly not the only kind of testimony to these similarities and differences. Biographies, novels, poetry, and film express such differences too. But autobiography, like a house, can be, perhaps should be, more individual. It is the person's opportunity to say what America has meant to him, to tell "Where I Lived and What I Lived For." And what Thoreau clearly implied in his simple-seeming chapter title is that a connection is basic: the "where" of house and place is closely linked to the "what for" of values and ideas.

Scott Fitzgerald—maybe the least physically settled of all American authors, a renter and hotel-dweller extraordinary—made a more emphatic statement when he wrote in the 1930s that America was essentially an idea.

France was a land, England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter—it was the graves at Shiloh and the tired, drawn, nervous faces of its great men, and the country boys dying in the Argonne for a phrase that was empty before their bodies withered. It was a willingness of the heart.<sup>3</sup>

We may not agree that "willingness of the heart" is *the* idea, but we can certainly agree with the broader perception. From the times of Columbus, Cortez, and John Smith, the ideas of America have gone up like lights along the shore, to be reported and magnified in notebook and journal, then illustrated in human life and built into civilization.

The matter which I would like to study is the connection between autobiography and these ideas of America. I would like to see what some of the ideas have been, how they have organized the lives which Americans have lived and the stories they have written. For Americans to have built this "House" of Civilization and Autobiography in a mere two or three hundred years is an impressive feat. We may be critical of it, but we still have to wonder at the extent of the work and the unity of purpose, in spite of constant conflict and disagreement, which finally went into it. A study of some of the major autobiographies may help us to see what the unifying purposes and methods were.

That Fitzgerald made his association of America and ideas at about the time when he was writing his "Crack-Up" essays and his last autobiographical novel seems like a coincidence worth examining. In the 1920s, he had also been autobiographical, fitting his yearnings and his own actions into thinly disguised stories which made him a hero of his generation. As he

said later, in "Echoes of the Jazz Age," 1931, the 1920s "bore him up, flattered him and gave him more money than he had dreamed of, simply for telling people that he felt as they did. . . ." But having been a hero and then having been ditched, he began to think harder about the relation of a hero to America. The same nation that had lifted him up, making him rich and famous, had put him down, leaving him small markets and great debts. Worse yet, he was a scapegoat on whom Americans of the 1930s beat out their shame for their own earlier extravagance and irresponsibility. Adulation had turned to scorn, from many of the same people. So it was not the "land" or the "people" who had changed; it was the idea of America. "A willingness of heart" seems chosen to transcend these shifts of political and economic weather. It could apply equally well to a Twenties millionaire like Gatsby and a Thirties Hollywood producer like Monroe Stahr. But primarily it applied to Fitzgerald. If he could satisfy himself that a president like Lincoln and the soldiers of Shiloh and the Argonne had it too, that seemingly objectified his heroic idea.

In a general way, however, he was still doing something to which he had guiltily confessed in the "Crack-Up" essays. There, in the midst of describing his loss of vitality, his discouragement, and his overdrawn resources, he reported his alarming discovery that for twenty years he had had no conscience of his own. He had been living by or living off the virtues of other men, and he proceeded to list five of them. In intellectual matters his conscience was Edmund Wilson. For his ideas of "the good life," he borrowed from another friend. In literary style, he did not imitate the friend (obviously Hemingway), "because my own style. . . was formed before he published anything, but there was an awful pull toward him when I was on a spot." A fourth man was his silent adviser in "my relations with other people," which seemed better than using Emily Post's "systematized vulgarity," but was still borrowing. His "political conscience," the fifth, had been almost dead for ten years, but when it revived, he took it from a lively younger man. Then, with the list made, he realized that "there was not an 'I' any more—not a basis on which I could organize my self-respect." He was without a "self. . . like a little boy left alone in a big house."<sup>4</sup>

To most readers this has seemed like a shocking exposure of the barrenness of American values. In none of these most important areas did Fitzgerald have the example of parents or a secure cultural tradition. Religion was no help. The books and instruction he had received in college were no help. His "self" was just a boyish selection of the attributes of five friends, each of whom looked superior in one thing.

From Fitzgerald's example it is easy to see that the "individuality" that supposedly lies behind autobiography and which Americans patriotically endorse may be a sham. Is it a nation of individuals, as the publicists proclaim, or a nation of conformists, each scrambling to imitate and be somebody else? But individuality and conformity in America are less opposites

than complements. As Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America*, the same revolutions that set men free to make up their own minds, “to seek the reason of things for oneself, and in oneself alone,” also set free the energies of public opinion, which “does not persuade others to its beliefs, but it imposes them and makes them permeate the thinking of everyone . . . .”<sup>5</sup> But valuable as it is, Tocqueville’s analysis failed to perceive the subtler ways in which this dialectic of individuality and conformity has worked in America. Tocqueville somehow could not see beyond an image of solitary, beleaguered individualists (like Descartes, Voltaire, or the American village atheist) surrounded by a disapproving mob. Fitzgerald’s confession is not that he took his conscience from public opinion but from five comparatively distinguished and accomplished friends. His selection of these five, out of all the possibilities, was the act of an individual, of someone independent from both the mob and the pressures of tradition and authority. At the same time, it is a sign of what makes Fitzgerald so charmingly like all the rest of us. He is like the undergraduate who wants to be as bright as A, as good in sports as B, a class president like C, as good looking as D, and so on. Or he is the adult who wants X’s interesting job, Y’s fine house, and the community respect of Z. The bad word for this, of course, is envy, and we should not deny its bad effects. But the good word for it is emulation, the ambition to improve one’s self by equalling or surpassing an esteemed rival.

Significantly, the original authority on the “instinct of emulation,” as he called it, was John Adams, to whom it was an instinct second only to self-preservation as a force in human life, and he studied carefully its application to politics and education and to their role in American government. Unfortunately, his essays on it were written as a part of an extensive critique of the French Revolution, done as translations and commentaries on an Italian historian, Enrico Caterino Davila, who had written on the 16th century civil wars in France. The later essays were also interpreted by Adams’ enemies as advocating monarchy, so he quit the project. The combination of this almost unbelievable muddle of intentions and allegedly treasonous position has kept the essays, called *Discourses on Davila*, from ever being known to more than a few dedicated political scientists and Adams admirers. But they are brilliant speculations on a difficult subject which is also embarrassing to discuss frankly.

What is relevant in them to American autobiography is Adams’ conviction that the revolutionary abandonment of inherited titles and aristocratic rank makes everyone compete all the more fiercely for the “*distinction*” which can only be received from other people—“to be observed, considered, esteemed, praised, beloved, and admired by his fellows.” For these kinds of attention are many, and so are the forms which emulation takes.

When it aims at power, as a means of distinction, it is *Ambition*. When it is in a situation to [be apprehensive] that another, who is now in-

ferior, will become superior, it is denominated *Jealousy*. When it is in a state of mortification, at the superiority of another, and desires to bring him down to our level, or to depress him below us, it is properly called *Envy*. When it deceives a man into a belief of false professions of esteem or admiration, or into a false opinion of his importance in the judgment of the world, it is *Vanity*.<sup>6</sup>

Only a few men seek distinction from their benevolence to others, and even in them this urge is weaker than the temptations to vice and riches, which are the much easier ways of winning attention. Yet worse than poverty and as painful “as the gout or stone” is neglect (p. 234). The poor man suffers most because “*he is only not seen*” (p. 239).

Thus a man seeks to make himself known not only from a desire for praise but from a fear of being despised and obscure. Where Adams is not so clear, or so passionate, is on the difference between imitation and emulation. The clearest differentiation he makes is in the sentence beginning, “Emulation, which is imitation and something more—a desire not only to equal or resemble, but to excel. . .” (p. 267). He seems to place them on a continuum, in which imitation is doing as well as someone else, emulation doing better. One does not try to excel by being altogether different, or choosing a different course. The course to fame is by following someone already accomplished, and accomplishing more. Indeed, this is implicit in his selection of “emulation” as his name for this great instinct— not “fame,” “ambition,” “vanity,” “pride,” or one of the other terms in the usual moral vocabulary. Any of those terms would have prejudged the desire as impure. “Emulation” is entirely neutral; its moral value is not in itself but in how it is used, or *who* is imitated and excelled. For the vice-president of the United States, writing in 1790, the way to “distinction” was in imitating other worthy men and trying to excel them!

The emulation that Adams personally practiced, however, was primarily of classical or European models. He and his friend and rival Jefferson, whose ideas about an “aristocracy of merit” were basically similar, formed their rhetoric, their *gravitas* in public duty, their “architecture,” from the most advanced improvements on the ancients. So, significantly, neither of them were autobiographers in the modern sense. Adams’ Puritan inheritance made him exquisitely self-critical and meticulous in his diaries and records of private and public affairs. Jefferson’s sense of history made him scrupulous in compiling a final record of his work. But they had not imitated the manners of the men around them, certainly not in the almost chameleon manner of Fitzgerald, and therefore could not have the same sense of being like their contemporaries. Their lives could only be important for their actions; they had not lived in order to resemble or feel like other men. Neither did they expect others to imitate them. Close imitation of one’s own life might be expected only of sons. But even sons would, like

other educated men, also model their lives on the classical orators and magistrates and generals. Plutarch had served them; he would serve later generations too.

When one emulates one's contemporaries, the self becomes much different. Our first response is to imagine that it vanishes altogether, as in Poe's short story, "The Man of the Crowd." The narrator of that story is so intrigued by an old man he has seen on the London streets that he follows him all night long. Eventually, he becomes obsessed by the man's aimlessness and pictures him as an image of modern vacuity, "the genius of great crime," the man who "refuses to be alone." One possible meaning of the story is that the narrator, in becoming the man's everpresent shadow, has become equally criminal. All the abuse he heaps on this chosen double applies to himself, and similar parables come up in many of the 19th century stories involving a *doppelgänger*. The imitator becomes like the model in vice as well as in virtue. The model knows no more than the imitator. Or the model had modeled *himself* on yet another person . . . possibly the original imitator. On the other hand, the narrator in such stories, by being the pursuer and speaker, is still different. The self may be an enigma, as hard to fathom as any other self or being whom one tries to study, but the power to describe that enigma clarifies and distinguishes. Furthermore, unlike Poe's obsessed narrator, one does not have to fasten like a shadow or leech on one other individual (or non-individual) alone. One can, like Fitzgerald, choose discriminately and still choose at least five others! Finally, whether we like it or not, the dynamics of modern society enforce these imitations on us. If we are to be different from our fathers and also different from the white marble gods they found in Plutarch, or the grizzly patriarchs they chose from the Bible, then we must imitate contemporaries. We don't want to live in our fathers' houses, even in a restored Mt. Vernon or Monticello. If we choose replicas of them, we want the most modern plumbing and air-conditioning. So we take it as a matter of faith that every generation must have its innovators, growing from native roots or coming from exotic foreign shores, and also its critics, revisers, publicists, and restorers—all of whom affect us. To have a conscience which is not one's own seems an abominable way to live. But then, when one makes that discovery or simply must go against it, one can the more easily tear it up and go to hell. And start all over.

Enigmatic as the emulative self is as a person, being both individualistic and imitative, inclined now to admiration of one person and then of someone quite different, that self may be even more complex in its behavior as an autobiographer. Later I want to look at some examples. But first let me review some of the observations so far. American autobiographers, I have noted, are mainly different from others according to the ways in which America has been different. Their works are like American houses, with many imported styles—The English Puritan, the Palladian Historical, the



Mercantile Journalistic, to suggest a few—and autobiographers mix these styles with new forms and experiences. They write also about The House, American Civilization, which has been erected so rapidly over the building site of approximately 3000 by 1500 miles. Just as important, autobiography has been an instrument in building the House and has helped create the national character by defining the methods and purposes of the builders. Autobiography has been a way for the builder to pass his work and his lessons to later generations, to “my posterity,” as Franklin said. Autobiography, therefore, has been essential in America, but it has also encouraged certain kinds of expression at the expense of others. The House has its limits.

Franklin’s large role in these developments should by now be fairly clear. The version of his life which he called his *Memoirs* was as necessary to the making of America as his other domestic improvements like the lightning rod and the “Pennsylvanian Fire-Place.” And just as he never patented those inventions but allowed anyone to imitate them (the directions printed and sent out over his efficient postal service), he had no objections to anyone’s imitating his worthy life. He wanted and expected it. Unlike Jefferson, Washington, Adams, and most of the other leaders of the Revolution, he had not emulated great classical or European models, not in public affairs, literature, or architecture. As he tells us in the *Autobiography*, his models had been plain writers like Defoe and Bunyan, improved by a little Addisonian grace. In his domestic arrangements he began as very utilitarian. And in public virtues and service he esteemed simply those men of rank whom he had observed, like Cotton Mather, Bradford the successful printer, and various colonial leaders. Franklin is so stereotyped as “self-made” that this point needs emphasis. One of the themes of the *Autobiography* is Franklin’s selection of his “consciences,” as Fitzgerald might have called them, the ideas he would live by and also some few of the distinguished men in different fields whom he imitated and from whom, as a young man, he sometimes hoped to gain favor. The balancing theme is the bad behavior of some lazy men and braggarts who are not to be imitated and several of whom go “down to Barbadoes,” out of the way in the West Indies. In between is the support Franklin exchanged with other plain young tradesmen, like the members of his Junto. As unknown leather-apron men, they recommended business to one another and, thanks to the “Standing Queries” that Franklin drew up for discussion at each meeting, kept each other abreast of new ideas, new business opportunities, and new community projects. The pattern for success used by Franklin and his friends was not virtue and industry alone; it was also to *trade* with each other in ideas as well as business and to gather around them everybody and everything which could be valuably promoted. The Junto seems to have been part *junta*, a group of intriguers, but mostly a combination of business service club and intellectual society. Appropriately, organizations of both kinds are historically descended from it.

A major intention of the *Autobiography* is to reveal this pattern and promote it for imitation elsewhere in America. In 1771, when Franklin started it, he might have told many other stories, such as the story of his scientific experiments which had won him international fame. But as James M. Cox has recently pointed out, the timing was significant. In May, 1771, he had written the Massachusetts Committee of Correspondence (Thomas Cushing, James Otis, and Samuel Adams) virtually predicting the American rebellion and its outcome.<sup>7</sup> It is natural to believe that in August, 1771, when he began writing the *Autobiography*, these and many other differences between England and America were still in his mind. Though he liked England and was enjoying the hospitality of an English bishop, that man, Jonathan Shipley, “almost alone among the bishops upheld the rights of the American colonists and of the British dissenters.”<sup>8</sup> Franklin’s tradesman’s story, though it had counterparts in England, was more common in America. To Americans it was, or would become, a version of national epic—and one that they must seek to repeat without shame. Up until he wrote (as, indeed, for long after), most successful tradesmen were still ashamed to admit humble origins and aped the upper classes. John Adams, for example, thought that the man “from obscure beginnings” had to bear “a load of sordid obloquy and envy” (*Discourses*, p. 237). But Franklin could speak plainly about his success and seek imitators. His audience was not to be his contemporaries but the generations of Americans to come. Thus his address of the opening part of the *Autobiography* to his “Dear Son”—not the actual one, who was over forty years old and governor of New Jersey—but the apprentices and tradesmen, the legions of American “sons” who might some day read him when they were just starting their businesses. When he returned to the *Autobiography* in 1784, after the Revolution, he included the letters from the two friends, one English and the other American, who explicitly urged him to continue. His life would be an example to youth, and an advertisement for America, a book “worth all Plutarch’s *Lives* put together.”

The limits of Franklin’s *Autobiography* as biography nearly all stem from the shaping of the hero to this didactic national purpose. Because the portrait of the young Franklin is so convincing and because the man writing takes such fulsome pleasure in him, despite his “errata,” it is hard to believe that the young Franklin was not pretty much as described—a precociously bright, ambitious lad who for a time wasted himself in satire, disputatiousness and occasional rowdiness, then knuckled down to work hard (and be known to work hard), to thrive, and to help others (except, of course, his competitors). But those who know the rest of his writing still know the distortion. The young man in the *Autobiography* is, patently, a boy’s Franklin (full of malice towards little boys, Mark Twain pointedly said); the boy’s way with his girls and the man’s way with girls, women, and other men barely get mentioned. His love of learning, travel, and leisure enters

mostly as the reward of early industry. His cultivated 18th century playfulness and his cunning opportunism are enough present, however, to make us wonder whether he is sometimes satirizing himself, or letting readers know that he regrets the omissions, the limits of his own self-portrait. For writing as an American, his limits were the utilitarian, mercantile culture he wished to symbolize. Once it had its fire companies and insurance plans, clean streets and street lamps, schools, hospitals, libraries, militia, and all the rest of Ben Franklin's improvements, the hero might relax a little—stop behaving like a Robinson Crusoe tirelessly lugging things in from the wrecked ship (England) in order to improve every part of his island. But this different hero would have to await the civilization of the land.

In contrast to Franklin in 1771 and after, Walt Whitman in 1855 was a nobody. His career as a schoolteacher, newspaperman, hack writer and carpenter seems to have been modest to a fault; it was in no way distinguished. In fact, Whitman might make an interesting study in the misery of the unknown, uncelebrated, ignored man John Adams described. To my knowledge, he never spoke of himself as a “nobody,” but the work carried such emotion in 19th century America that I think it fits.\* Moreover, his sadly maniacal lecture notes from the 1850s suggest how desperate he was from *wanting* to be known.

The idea of live addresses directly to the people, adm. 10¢., North and South, East and West—at Washington,—at the different State Capitols—Jefferson (Mo.)—Richmond (Va.)—Albany—Washington &c—promulging the grand ideas of American ensemble liberty, concentrativeness, individuality, spirituality &c &c.

Keep steadily understood, with respect to the effects and fascinations of *Elocution* . . . that although the Lectures may be printed and sold at the end of every performance, nothing can make up for that *irresistible attraction and robust living* treat of the vocalization of the lecture, by me, —which must defy all competition with the printed and read repetition of the Lectures.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the delusions of grandeur which are so obvious here were equally obvious to the first readers of *Leaves of Grass*—one of the reasons they found it so embarrassing and offensive, or just ridiculous. Whitman's brag was like that of a stump orator who had no reputation, no qualifications, and no shame.

Yet previous reputation has not always been the easy inducement to writing autobiography that it is now, nor lack of it a great barrier. Puritan and

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\*Consider the title of the autobiographical fragment by Louisa Catherine Adams (JQA's wife) begun in 1840, “The Adventures of a Nobody,” and Emily Dickinson's poem, “I'm Nobody, Who Are You?” Consider, too, that these are both works by sensitive, unrecognized women.

Quaker conversion narratives were written by earlier nobodies who felt that God's grace was more than sufficient subject, and Whitman has a few striking resemblances to these writers. As the "sinner" was once out of the sight of God, so the "nobody" was/is out of the sight of friends, admirers, the praise of other people. And the corollary of this is that in Whitman, America and nature and the emulation of other men replace God as the impelling agents and compelling issues for writing. As Daniel Shea has noticed,<sup>10</sup> there are intriguing connections between the beginning of John Woolman's *Journal*—

I have often felt a motion of love to leave some hints in writing of  
my experience of the goodness of God, and now, in the thirty-sixth  
year of my age, I begin this work

—and the lines Whitman added to "Song of Myself," which stressed not a divine "motion of love" and "goodness of God" but his American origins and energy and hope.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,  
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their  
parents the same,  
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,  
Hoping to cease not till death.

In a word, Whitman had not experienced the "goodness of God" but the goodness of America. It was what had formed him, so that when he began to celebrate his "self," he celebrated it. But as well as being his place of birth and nurture, America was an idea and ideal which he strove to embody. America as a land expressed his spiritual and physical muscle. It was new, unknown, wild, and untamed. He was youthful, also unknown, rowdy, and "barbaric." And since these traits were mostly identified with the West and the frontier, he identified himself with the West, too, even though living in Brooklyn and Manhattan. America as a nation stood for the revolutionary ideas of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He, as a citizen, would represent these values in "a simple separate person," one who treated all men and women equally, who resisted "anything better than my own diversity," who had this "deathless attachment to freedom," and yet uttered "the word democratic, the word *En-Masse*." The paradoxes of America, as out-of-many-one, as new-and-yet-ancient, were to be his personal paradoxes as well. He would share in all the success and suffering of the nation as a whole. He would imitate America, or rather emulate her best, and become the ideal-common man (also a paradox) whom other Americans could imitate, remember, and one day celebrate.

The ironies in these identifications are familiar enough not to need elaboration here. When Whitman set out on his ambitious program of writing the autobiography of America and becoming the eponymous voice of the

American people, he initially shrieked in registers he could not sustain. By the late 1850s he was a victim to shames and self-doubts he had not anticipated.

Opress'd with myself that I have dared to open my mouth,  
Aware now that amid all that blab whose echoes recoil upon me I  
have not once had the least idea who or what I am,  
But that before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet  
untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd. . . .

The further irony is that even as he wrote out of this anguish, in poems like "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," he never told his readers—or even left evidence to his biographers—about the precise causes of it. Was it the death of some lover? If so, was the lover male or female? Was he battling over his homosexuality? Was he undergoing some more general crisis of middle age? Despite all his earlier imperatives to be "undisguised and naked," he here became peculiarly guarded and secretive. Later, he was almost equally indirect and evasive in talking about the origins of *Leaves of Grass* and the "long foreground" to it which Emerson had wondered about. In his more factual autobiography, *Specimen Days*, which did celebrate Whitman the man, and not just an idea, he continued expressing all his care for America and his poems but simultaneously withdrew into his public persona as "the good gray poet." That title, given to him by his public relations man William O'Connor, was like a big heavy overcoat in which he could stroll about, digging notes out of the pockets and expressing various aspects of himself—some important, some utterly trivial—but in which he could also wrap himself in continued mystery.

When we talk of the Whitman tradition in American poetry, we are still wrestling with this mystery. Does he stand for a Western populism like Sandburg and Lindsay, an affirmative embrace of native themes like Hart Crane, an identification with common objects and experience like Williams, or the post-Christian poetics of Stevens? As Ginsberg asked, "Walt Whitman, which way does your beard point tonight?" Still, all these poets (and others) have attempted his identification of self with an idea. They differ, mainly, in what they construe the idea or ideas to be. American poetry is autobiographical because the ideas need embodiment in a person, and the most available person is not Columbus or Hiawatha or John Brown but the poet, standing for all heroes.<sup>11</sup>

Yet wide as the range is between Franklin the successful tradesman and Whitman the anonymous/eponymous poet, the two of them by no means encompass all of American autobiography or all the varieties of American autobiographical heroics. Although they have had many followers, there are still several other individuals and types who must be considered. How has the idea of America served and been served by the autobiographers who have not been a part of American success and have not been able to praise its

life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness? Where, if at all, have they seen their lives as representative and therefore (in Franklin's phrase) "fit to be imitated"? What of upper-class, disaffected men like Henry Adams, Henry James, and Robert Lowell, on the one hand, and of black and radical autobiographers like Frederick Douglass and Malcom X, on the other?

Henry Adams, we can clearly see, was thoroughly aware of his difference from these Franklinian and Whitmanian traditions. As grandson of presidents, he seemed to have a legacy on the White House. As heir to family wealth and power, he could hardly present himself as a common man or a success by his own efforts. He was, as he says, born in the shadow of the Boston State House and "on the summit of Beacon Hill" (or near it). From that moment on, however, the meaning of this distinguished and privileged inheritance becomes a continuing issue in his *Education*. To be a Boston, Unitarian Adams, he suggests, is comparable to being a circumcised Jerusalem "Cohen," the identity of both fixed by ancient tradition and both therefore "heavily handicapped in the races of the coming century." Such a comparison, outlandish in every sense of the word, is more than a nasty expression of Adams's anti-semitism. The stereotypical Jew, while being the racial opposite of the Boston gentile, is also a product of ancient patriarchy, indeed, the one on which the Puritan patriarchy strongly modeled itself. And in the economic and ancestral "races" of the 20th century, the "Adamses" of old New England heritage and the "Cohens" of Poland and Russia would eventually find themselves running together. To do so, both would have to unburden themselves of long-accustomed tradition. Which would adapt more readily to the new conditions of America would be one of the questions of the Darwinian battle for survival, the "free fight," the "education" of the century.

Adams' comparisons and contrasts to Jewish immigrants remind us of the immense immigration to America during the 1890s and early 1900s, which alarmed so many of the "old" Americans of his caste. Could these "hordes" be assimilated and would they learn American ways, or would they "overwhelm" the country? One answer was in Jacob Riis's *The Making of an American*, which was one of the most popular autobiographies of the period in which Adams wrote his *Education*. The scrappy but good-natured Danish immigrant Riis, who had personally worked with New York immigrants and had succeeded in journalism and reform (where Adams had previously failed) was a reassuring illustration of how America could absorb its immigrant flood if each generation helped the next and all together improved the cities and neighborhoods in which they lived. Further testimony to immigrant drive and successful assimilation came from other autobiographies of the period like Edward Bok's and S.S. McClure's. Jane Addams's *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910) looked at the problem from the other side, that of the daughter of an old established family, but she showed how

such a woman could find herself by working with immigrants and how America could increase its richness from their diversity.

Adams, as we know, "stood alone." He pictured himself as having nothing to do with the ideas of America represented by these immigrants, whether in working with them and learning from them or, God forbid, having them emulate him. And yet one of his professed purposes in the *Education* was "to fit young men, in universities or elsewhere, to be men of the world." An "education" is hardly worth describing if it does not have some instructive value, and in a way *The Education* is an even more didactic book than Franklin's. But it teaches a good deal of the time by negatives. The irony directed at "Adams," the boy in his father's study, the traveller in Europe and "private secretary" in London, the ineffectual writer of history and "pilgrim of world's fairs," is supposedly intended to warn younger men of the errors of this simple and trusting acceptance of tradition, this dilettantism, or this high-minded pursuit of reason and order. Adams the author shows the "faults of the patchwork" worn by Adams the character. A true American (one of the "sons" of Franklin) would get a sensible education in mathematics and foreign languages from a public school, would not live in Europe, would become a scientist or engineer, and would be expedient rather than idealistic in his private and public life. Learn from the efficiency of the Dynamo; the Virgin is dead. As every reasonably perceptive reader knows, however, these implied recommendations are also negatives, or are asserted in tones of such mixed affirmation and despair that the reader must at once examine more closely. Does Adams really mean this? Are America and the modern world really so dull, pragmatic and amoral? Is this the world that I, the reader, want to live in? If it is the world I live in, is not Adams' own world of elegant insinuations, of great historical vision, and of broad knowledge and vital curiosity still a better one?

The result, paradoxically, is that Adams draws us into at least a part of the world from which wealth and caste and tradition initially excluded us. On cruder levels, we envy him. He gives us enough of a picture of the bygone pleasures and securities of that "eighteenth-century" world of his grandfather that we want to know more about it. We, or the modern scholars and editors who act for us, rush to annotate him and assemble information about his famous friends and acquaintances, his house designed by H.H. Richardson, his clever wife, his travels, the books he read, and so on. Or, if this bores us and eventually seems futile, we may realize that Adams is better emulated than envied. He is a standard of excellence. His critique of modern society is one that we learn from. Even as he talks of disintegration, he possesses spiritual and intellectual integrity. And by having demolished so much of the provincial America of his own inheritance and the blind, grasping, materialistic America in which he lived, he has helped to make us attempt the broad, synthesizing visions which he told us were impossible. If he does not make us "men of the world," he does make us wish to be.

Other privileged Americans like Henry James, Edith Wharton, and Robert Lowell did not write such ambitious autobiographies as Adams did. Nevertheless, they were like him in also rejecting the confined though comfortable societies in which they grew up. As authors they almost had to, and we should remember all the uncles and cousins they describe who went on living in their tight New York or Boston upper class, collecting rents, managing trusts, and whatnot. Autobiographers are, as a group, people who have been different from the family, friends, and the people around them. They also offend or risk offending one of the basic pieties of close-knit bourgeois society—privacy, which is deemed so essential to keeping the secrets of family business and hiding scandal. But what partially sustained these writers in the rebellions against these customs—and what they implicitly appealed to in their readers' psyches—was a sense that an American life should not be confining, that it ought to be adventurous, open, and free. The higher idea of America thus helped to liberate them from the actual America in which they were raised. Henry James quoted with approval his father's letter to Emerson explaining that the children would be taken to Europe, "to absorb French and German and get such a sensuous education as they can't get here." The father had written, "get a better sensuous education than they are likely to get here," but James wanted to make the point more emphatic. And even though James hardly proposed his own unusual life as a model, he did often think of it as having made Europe and this European liberation more available to other Americans.

The theme of upper-class flight to Europe is a sort of refined variation on the ever-recurring theme in Black autobiography of flight from slavery, flight from the South to the North, and flight, also, from America abroad. Both testify, even if largely unaware of each other, to that fundamental, continuing contradiction in America between the idea of freedom and human fulfillment and the realities of oppression, conformity, and mean narrowness of spirit. They are the countermeasures to the success stories and the assimilated immigrants' proud tales of "Americanization." Indeed, the smugness and boastful patriotism of these dominant types is part of the oppression encountered by the others. National complacency affirms America as it is, making the condition of the oppressed all the harder to change.

Therefore, in Black autobiography one constantly finds refutations, point after point, of the white ideas of America, white concepts of white character, white concepts of black. Frederick Douglass's words about slave singing are a good example:

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy.



The prevalence of these kinds of corrections of white error and complacency also indicates that Douglass and other escaped slaves were writing for a white audience. That was the audience that needed to be taught. But since that audience had not been slaves (at least, in the physical sense), the author obviously did not expect it to imitate him. Its liberation had to be from political ignorance to knowledge, and therefore Douglass's goal was to teach and persuade rather than to acquire white imitators. His original experience did not represent an American ideal but an American shame which had to be changed.

Yet in another sense Douglass and other outstanding black authors *have* represented an American ideal. One of the special features of his *Narrative* is that it does not tell the story of his flight itself. That might compromise those who helped him, he says, and only help masters in preventing other escapes. With this suspenseful part of the story missing, Douglass seems to have been the more detailed in telling the stages of his resolution to escape. The long sequence of episodes in his learning how to read and write, his growing independence from his masters, his criticism of other slaves, and his blood-chilling fight with Covey the slave-breaker make a much more profound story than a narrative of escape could ever be. It is similar to religious conversion narratives, with the emergence of his own concept of himself as a free-man-to-be supplanting the stages of grace and salvation. Moreover, in this story the acquisition of a hard-won, secret and subversive education is perhaps the most important part, for it is finally the equalizer of white and black and the object which the Southern masters had guarded most closely. With an education he can not only "write my own pass" to be off the plantation (in itself a significant symbol), he can also turn upon slavery the power of language and persuasion. He can become an articulate hero, one who can tell his own story and use it in the liberation of other men and women.

Douglass's story, including this emphasis on education-as-freedom, is repeated in so many Black autobiographies—Richard Wright's, James Baldwin's, Malcolm X's—that it is truly archetypal. It also shows why autobiography has been the major kind of literature for blacks and most other oppressed Americans. The person who can write one's own story can rise from the status of the unknown and inarticulate. He and she can thus relate that story to others and to the stories of others. The assumed accuracy and authenticity of autobiography—its historicity—give it greater authority than the fictions of novels or the theater, especially since the fictions are more likely to have been written by whites or people who have not had these experiences themselves. The autobiographer, in writing his or her story, becomes the known individual most Americans want to be.

Or to return to the earlier image, the autobiographical heroes enter the House; they find homes in America.

What I have tried to do in this essay is to show the relationship between ideas of America and a number of different or even contradictory kinds of American autobiography. As I look back at them, I find that they make something roughly approximating a kind of American mandala, or a horizontal wheel with four directions, a compass rose of four significant American directions. In the East is Benjamin Franklin, looking further East to his English origins and model English writers like Defoe and Bunyan, but also looking to the West and other directions to the new Americans who would one day imitate him. In his *Autobiography* his life was a kind of instrument to be studied and adopted by other men who wished to become prosperous and useful. In the South, which is not just a geographic direction but a different condition, is Douglass, who used his life more as an instrument of persuasion. In coming from slavery and oppression, he and other black or once excluded people told a story which would change the national character, or renew it by making it responsive to conditions it had previously ignored. Properly or not, to Douglass and other former victims, the axis of America did not lie east and west, between tradition and opportunity, but between oppression and freedom. And the freedom needed renewal and redefinition as much as the oppression needed to be escaped.

In Whitman, the mythically wild and unknown West was America, an inspiration to the poet to identify himself with it and “promulge” both. A noisy mystic, he is the antithesis of the practical, famous Franklin. His “autobiography” does not tell *how to* . . . it says *start to*, then becomes the nation and man. Finally Adams represents that northern elevation that looks back on harsh simplicity but also looks in the other directions for its own escape and for new opportunity. Wealth and caste and the excellence of ancestors are a burden, but they are also critical standards and sources of independence.

As I attempt this summary, I am also aware that this essay, for reasons of economy, has given too much attention to famous autobiographies. The men and women of the frontier, the 19th century ministers and missionaries who frequently wrote their life stories, the rogues and schoolteachers and business leaders are missing. So are the memoirs of military leaders and statesmen, some of which also have the inward-looking dimension of autobiography. But there may be a final lesson in this. Neither the memoir of the public person nor the private experience of the uncelebrated person represents the ideas of America in the way that these more famous autobiographies do. As the one is apt to promote ideas to the exclusion of private life, the other chronicles private experience without so consciously identifying it with national ideas. The one is in a way too much a citizen, the other takes his citizenship more or less for granted. Thus neither has been so valuable to other Americans as the autobiographers to whom citizenship, in the broadest sense, is a major issue in their whole development. Whether we like them or not, Franklin and Whitman, Douglass and Henry Adams, John

Adams and Scott Fitzgerald have been leading architects of American character. They have built the houses in which many of the rest of us have lived. But all of them address, primarily, men, or men and boys. Henry Adams's total suppression of Clover Hooper's story—whatever the reason—now looks less like an idiosyncrasy and more like a reversion to American type. To tell the rest of the story—what went on in the house—will be a challenge for the years ahead.

#### NOTES

- 1 For two review-essays on autobiography, see Albert E. Stone, Jr., "Autobiography and American Culture," *American Studies: An International Newsletter*, 11 (Winter, 1972), 22-36; and Robert F. Sayre, "The Proper Study—Autobiographies in American Studies," *American Quarterly*, 29 (Summer, 1977), 241-262.
- 2 Gertrude Stein, "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans," in *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), pp. 139, 141.
- 3 F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York: New Directions, 1956), p. 197.
- 4 Fitzgerald, p. 79.
- 5 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), vol. 2, pp. 3, 11.
- 6 John Adams, *Discourses on Davila*, in *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, vol. 6 (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), pp. 233-4.
- 7 James M. Cox, "Autobiography and America," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 47 (1971), 261. The full text of the letter is in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. William B. Willcox, vol. 18 (Yale Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 102-104.
- 8 Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York: The Viking Press, 1945), p. 413.
- 9 Clifton Joseph Furness (ed.), *Walt Whitman's Workshop* (Cambridge, Mass., 1928), p. 33.
- 10 Daniel B. Shea, Jr., *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 255.
- 11 In this discussion of Whitman and the tradition of the poet's identification of himself with America, I have drawn on the dissertation by Lowell E. Folsom, "America, The Metaphor: Place as Person as Poem as Poet," University of Rochester, 1976.