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# American Autobiography

Retrospect and Prospect

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Edited by

PAUL JOHN EAKIN

The University of Wisconsin Press

WISCONSIN STUDIES IN  
AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

William L. Andrews, General Editor

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Retrospect and Prospect

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PAUL JOHN EAKIN

The University of Wisconsin Press

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## AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

## Introduction

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PAUL JOHN EAKIN

When I set out in the fall of 1986 to draw up a brief report on contemporary criticism of nineteenth-century American autobiography, I was quite surprised by the meagerness of my findings. Resources were scattered and difficult to locate, and it turned out that even the most frequently studied autobiographies of the period had rarely been studied *as autobiographies*.<sup>1</sup> How can so extensive a literature—I am thinking of the hundreds of entries in the listing of Louis Kaplan—have left so faint a trail in our scholarship? On consideration, however, this state of affairs is hardly surprising, for despite the lively interest in autobiography both in and out of academe at the present time, study of the genre has not yet been institutionalized in our curricula, where autobiography—and indeed nonfiction prose in general—continues as a kind of poor relation.

It is not self-evident what texts would be included in a course on nineteenth-century American autobiography. Reaching forward into the early twentieth century, we might expect to find works by Henry Adams, Henry James, and Mark Twain. Reaching back into the eighteenth century, Benjamin Franklin's autobiography and Jonathan Edwards's "Personal Narrative"—that familiar pair—would be likely to appear. But what about the century that stretches in between? Even the best-known candidates—*Walden* (1854) and "Song of Myself" (1855)—are not always recognized as autobiographies.<sup>2</sup> Slave narratives, such as those by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and others that have been featured in major recent studies by William L. Andrews, Houston A. Baker, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Henry Louis Gates, would surely make the list, but what else would round it out? Would traditional classics such as Francis Parkman's *The California and Oregon Trail* (1849) and Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840) be counted in? And what other texts would be tapped—the *Personal Memoirs of*

U. S. Grant (1885), Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences, 1815-1897* (1898), the *Life of P. T. Barnum* (1855), Lucy Larcom's *A New England Girlhood* (1889)? When it comes to nineteenth-century American autobiography, there is nothing comparable to the consensus about the canon of nineteenth-century British autobiography that is emerging in the work of Avrom Fleishman, Susanna Egan, Linda H. Peterson, and others. The fluid state of the field reflects not only a lack of knowledge of the surviving primary literature but continuing uncertainty about generic definition as well.

If the study of autobiography—American or other—is only now finding a place in our departments of language and literature, that may be just as well, for our thinking about this late arrival stands a chance of escaping some of the shortcomings of our traditional conception of American literature as a whole. Some years ago, in an essay entitled "What Is American Literature?" William C. Spengemann exposed the narrowness of our working definition of the field: "*Those few works of fiction, poetry, and the drama which have been written in any place that is now part of the United States or by anyone who has ever lived in one of these places and which now rank among the acknowledged masterpieces of Western writing*" (123). Spengemann identified the kinds of criteria informing this institutional practice as "linguistic, political, belletristic, and aesthetic" (125), buttressed by a "provincial (not to say racist) notion that the progress of Anglo-Saxon culture forms the armature of New-World history" (128). As long as they subscribe to so impoverished a definition of their field, Americanists seem doomed to increasingly stale exercises as they endlessly conjugate the features of a tiny, closed canon of masterworks. The way out of this exclusivist cultural cul-de-sac, Spengemann suggests, is not for the faint of heart, for he proposes a new construction of "American literature" in which "the word 'American' signifies everything having to do with civilization in the New World since the European discovery, and 'literature' includes every written document that will respond to literary analysis" (135). The magnitude of the subject so conceived is indeed staggering, and Spengemann contends that historical and critical analysis of so heterogeneous a literature would require as a first step an elaborate labor of bibliographic and taxonomic organization.

Following Spengemann, definition of the literature to be studied and constitution of a corpus of texts go hand in hand. Together they provide the foundation for the subsequent work of history and criticism: you need to have a working definition of the genre to serve as a principle of selection in establishing a census of the relevant texts; once you have such a census, you can use it to test and refine the criteria posited

in your initial definition.<sup>3</sup> If we were to adopt this inclusive approach in the case of autobiography, we would begin with Louis Kaplan's *A Bibliography of American Autobiographies*, which lists more than 6000 examples before 1945, and Mary Louise Briscoe's supplement, *American Autobiography, 1945-1980*, which adds another 5000 titles. The Kaplan and Briscoe volumes, however, are essentially descriptive in nature, indispensable bibliographic tools to facilitate the research of others. In themselves, they are interpretive only insofar as (1) they are based on an implied definition of autobiography that excludes some items from the list (in the case of Kaplan, for example, "most episodic accounts," manuscript autobiographies, and so forth), and (2) they include a "subject index" whose rubrics (autobiographers' occupations, where they lived, ethnic affiliation, period of publication, and so forth) suggest some of the potential uses to which the data compiled might be put.

To my knowledge, however, the resources of Kaplan and Briscoe have been little examined by scholars so far. Thomas Cooley and Lawrence Buell are notable exceptions. Through a brief review of Kaplan's listings up to 1865, Cooley sketches out a typology of the principal varieties of popular narrative in the nineteenth century—conversions, criminal confessions, captivities, and so forth. Again, Buell, in his essay on "Autobiography in the American Renaissance" for the present volume, uses Kaplan's inventory as a basis for generalizations about the nature of autobiographical practice in the period.<sup>4</sup>

The comparative neglect of Kaplan and Briscoe is a sign of the longstanding perplexity of both historians and literary critics about a kind of imaginative literature that claims a basis in referential fact. Except in the case of literary biographies of writers, however, attention to the referential dimension of autobiography is not a familiar exercise for critics and literary historians who, when they deal with autobiography at all, have been intent on demonstrating the literariness of such texts, validating their status as imaginative art. Hence it is inevitable that study of the autobiographies of writers should dominate the field.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, historians remain largely skeptical of Wilhelm Dilthey's claim for autobiography as "the germinal cell of history" (quoted in Stone 11). Facts *in* texts are one thing; texts *as* facts are quite another, and Hayden White's insistence on the *textuality* of history has been largely ignored by practicing historians, who prefer to assign White's disquieting observations about the necessarily mediated condition of all historical knowledge to some other discipline—literary theory or historiography—where they can be safely ignored. As historians turn increasingly to the practice of oral history, however, this state of suspicion may fade, for they are likely to trust themselves to gather such

data with an appropriate objectivity (never mind the dangers of the literary, the fictive, which will inevitably be present). No one better expresses the fundamental issue posed by autobiography's problematic dual status as literature and history than Albert E. Stone:

I remain uneasy over the tendency to treat autobiography chiefly as a branch of imaginative literature and thus to stress artistic creation over the equally complex processes of historical recreation, ideological argument, and psychological expression. *Life* is the more inclusive sign—not *Literature*—which deserves to be placed above the gateway to the house of autobiography. (19)

As long as we subscribe to *literature* as the sign of autobiography, assuming a traditional aesthetic construction of this governing term, most of the works recorded in Kaplan-Briscoe are likely to go unread. Lawrence Buell estimates, for example, that in the period from 1800 to 1870 only a fraction of the autobiographers recorded in Kaplan ("not more than one in ten or fifteen") "were creative writers either by trade or avocation" (see p. 48 in this work). In recent years, however, a number of scholars investigating special varieties of American autobiography—by women, by blacks, by Native Americans, by immigrants—have embraced the broadly inclusive perspective that the Kaplan-Briscoe corpus represents, and their work may serve to suggest its possibilities.

The Kaplan-Briscoe census poses a lesson in point of view: if you think you already have in hand a comfortably compact list of masterworks—the autobiographies of Franklin, Adams, and James, say<sup>6</sup>—you may be put off by the scale of such an inventory, where texts swarm in a classless state, unsorted by traditional notions of aesthetic privilege; if you are engaged in constructing a canon of previously unrecognized works, however, quantity may become a desideratum, and literary quality may be left to fend for itself. Literary quality is always a matter of relative judgment anyhow, whether we like it or not, and inevitably complicit in mainstream values that underwrite canonic exclusion in the first place. It is worth noting, in this connection, that the current emphasis on autobiography as an imaginative art has led to the neglect of the autobiography of even so archetypically American a figure as Thomas Jefferson.<sup>7</sup> It all depends on whether your field of inquiry is that of the dominant culture or that of one of the various subcultures existing at its margins. The classlessness of the apparently all-inclusive Kaplan-Briscoe census, moreover, is itself deceptive, for access to the media of communication is controlled by the literate class that governs the circulation of texts.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, no small part of the significance of the contemporary interest in oral history, the gathering in the field of the lives of ordinary and often unlettered people, as in the work of Jane

Hallowell Coles and Robert Coles, for example, in their *Women of Crisis* volumes (1978, 1980), resides in its potential to represent the otherwise textually excluded.<sup>9</sup>

In dealing with the literature of the oppressed, for obvious reasons the magnitude of the bibliographic task may seem small in total number of texts, when measured against the mass of the Kaplan-Briscoe corpus. The work of recovery may be proportionally great, however, because, given the marginal status of such authors, the survival of their texts is more likely to have been left to chance than in the case of texts preserved in what Raymond Williams terms the "selective tradition" of the dominant culture (39). This enterprise of reconstruction has proceeded most thoroughly in the areas of black American and Native American autobiography. One of the striking things to emerge from this research is evidence of the extent to which the primary texts owe their very existence to the sponsorship of members of the dominant culture, white Northern abolitionists in the case of the ex-slaves, white anthropologists in the case of the Indians. Writing about the period preceding the appearance of the first Native American autobiography (defined as the product of collaboration between an Indian informant and a white writer or editor), Arnold Krupat brings home the stark reality of the power of the literate class over the life of texts. There *were* no Native American autobiographies until the 1830s for the breathtakingly simple reason that the Indian was not recognized as a person with a *culture* in the received white construction of that term. Perceived by the whites as "wholly other" (5), "the antithesis of culture, its zero degree" (36), the Indian therefore possessed "nothing worthy of textualization" (5).

The most obvious benefit of research devoted to the marginalized literatures of autobiography, besides its implicit affirmation of the intrinsic worth of the material studied, is that it sheds new light on the perennial problem of generic definition. Elizabeth Bruss and Philippe Lejeune have exposed the limitations of the prescriptive approach to genre that has colored so much of the work on autobiography; formalist or essentialist definitions, they argue, offer an inadequate measure of constantly changing modes of autobiographical practice.<sup>10</sup> It is precisely this picture of autobiographical practice that scholars who pursue the recovery of texts inclusively and inductively are in a position to formulate. Setting aside narrow, traditional categories of aesthetic merit in favor of a broad definition of literature as the history of discourse, they are determined to read everything and report back on what was written. The value of any definition of the genre must be tested against an authoritative account of actual autobiographical practice.

Lest anyone be tempted to discount this work at the margins as marginal, without bearing on the practice of mainstream autobiography, I want to emphasize that our understanding of either member of this heuristically relational pair, *mainstream* and *margin*, is enhanced by study of the other. One of the most important contributions of this research so far has been its delineation of the values and assumptions of the dominant culture, especially its received models of self and life story. The mark of the dominant culture on the ostensibly self-authorizing performance of the autobiographical act is most tangibly preserved in collaborative autobiographies, a form that occupies a large place in the literature of the oppressed. In these products of cross-cultural exchange, the balance of power is distinctly lopsided: the informant—dispossessed Indian, enslaved black—is empowered to speak only by submitting to the terms set forth by the white member of the pair.

Slave narratives offer a textbook illustration of this play of cultural politics, as William L. Andrews has shown, for white editors and amanuenses explicitly state within these texts the rules that govern the discursive situation. For example, the white editor of the story of ex-slave Charles Ball (1836) assures the white reader that Ball's "bitterness of heart" "has been carefully excluded from the following pages" (quoted in Andrews 82). The employment of *expressives*, John Searle's term for speech acts designed to express the psychological state of the speaker, was taboo, and Andrews brings home to us again and again the irony of this *antiautobiographical* premise that governed the early slave narrative. Not until the slave narrative reached its culmination at mid-century did the black subject's memory of the truth of his experience take priority over what the white reader was prepared to accept as fact. Only gradually did blacks emancipate themselves from this discursive bondage, achieving more distinctly autonomous forms of identity and self-expression.<sup>11</sup>

Arnold Krupat's investigation of Native American autobiography tells a similar story. In such texts the presence of the Indian is displaced by white models of the Indian, and his history of this special variety of American autobiography becomes in effect a history of the *theories* that constitute part of the evolving ideology of the person in the United States: the nineteenth-century Indian as Romantic hero, Carlylian actor on the stage of world history, is supplanted by the twentieth-century Indian as the anthropologist's representative type of a vanishing culture. In texts, as in all else, Native Americans were dispossessed by the whites. Despite the pervasive presence of the dominant culture in the Native American autobiography and the slave narrative, however, it would be hasty to conclude that the voice of the other has been totally

suppressed in these cross-cultural collaborations. In an extremely suggestive phrase, Andrews speaks of reading the early slave narratives as "an exercise in creative hearing" (36), a sensitive work of recuperation dedicated to registering the "silences" of such texts. The hope, of course, would be to recover something of the nature of the identities of the oppressed, their own views of self and life story.<sup>12</sup>

In immigrant autobiography, no less than in the slave narrative and Native American autobiography, the impress of the dominant culture's models of self and life story is central and profound, for the freedom from the authorizing discipline imposed by the collaborative relation proves to be only partial.<sup>13</sup> Allegiance to authorized models has been so thoroughly internalized by these autobiographers that their representation in immigrant lives is ensured even without the mediation of a white sponsor, whether editor or scholar. William Boelhower's essay for this collection, a semiotic analysis of "The Making of Ethnic Autobiography in the United States," argues that the concept of a normative American self was "rigidly codified" by the end of the nineteenth century. *The Americanization of Edward Bok* (1920) by Edward Bok, *The Making of an American* (1924) by Jacob Riis, *An American in the Making* (1917) by Marcus E. Ravage—these and other texts document the existence of what Boelhower identifies as "the received behavioral script of the rhetorically well-defined American self" (see p. 125 in this work). The titles reflect, moreover, a conscious sense of the cultural construction of the person.

Of special interest in Boelhower's inquiry, however, is his demonstration of the reciprocity of influence in the relation between mainstream and ethnic cultures, a salutary corrective to any simplistic, one-way construing of cultural influence that "mainstream-marginal" and similar formulations might seem to promote.<sup>14</sup> Although the idea of an American self was sufficiently coherent to be perceived by aspiring immigrants as specifiable and hence available for imitation, it was nonetheless scarcely a stable concept. According to such nativist observers of the American scene as Henry Adams and Henry James, the American self was undergoing a crisis of redefinition at the turn of the century, precipitated in no small part by the very presence of the aliens who tried to embrace it. As they sought through assimilation to make themselves over as Americans, immigrants and immigrant autobiographers transformed the principle of identification itself, of Americanness, for good. Boelhower interprets ethnic autobiography accordingly as "an act of higher criticism and an instrument of cultural construction" that led to the creation of "new American types and new narrative perspectives" (see p. 138 in this work). Thus mainstream and

margin were equally subject to the fires of the melting pot. To recognize the interdependency between the national culture and any of its various subcultures, moreover, is to accept the appropriateness of a broad, inclusive conception of the canon of American autobiography. One model for the history of the genre in the United States might well be the ongoing interplay between dominant and marginal texts.

One of the risks of my emphasis on the influence of the dominant culture—its models of self and life story—on various subgenres of American autobiography is that it might seem to imply that these satellite literatures are essentially fringe phenomena, derivative in nature, lacking the kind of genuine originality, for example, that Boelhower discerns in immigrant texts. The dangers of such a cultural myopia are addressed by Carol Holly's essay in this collection on nineteenth-century women's autobiographies. Holly criticizes Estelle Jelinek's too-exclusive preoccupation with dominant male models—models of self as public figure and of life story as career—which leads Jelinek to characterize women's autobiographies in wholly negative terms, defining them by what they lack. Conceding that nineteenth-century women were indeed often victims of a patriarchal ideology of subordination that cast them as domestic helpmates and little else, Holly draws on the work of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and others to argue nevertheless that "the ideology of separate spheres also created the social space for women to exert some control in defining themselves and shaping their lives" (see p. 218 in this work). What emerges from this enabling perspective is a fresh view of women's lives as structured by an alternative model of identity, one in which affiliation rather than accomplishment, relationship rather than career, are the defining characteristics.

In sizing up autobiographies of those who are culturally marginalized by reason of class, gender, or race, we need to be careful not to repeat unwittingly in our critical practice the original injustice of domination and exclusion. To begin with, autobiography in the West is itself hardly value-neutral as a literary kind. Krupat has emphasized the mismatch, for example, between the genre's characteristic markers—"egocentric individualism, historicism, and writing" (29)—and Native American concepts of selfhood, time, and literary expression. In order to assess the Indian contribution to the literature of autobiography in the United States, he proposes accordingly, in his essay for the present volume, an alternative to the traditionally individualist cast of Western autobiography, a "synecdochic" model of selfhood to conceptualize the characteristic form of collective identity in a tribal culture. In a parallel essay in this volume, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's critique of Boelhower's model of immigrant autobiography singles out the limitations of its

Eurocentric bias. For Wong, Boelhower's exclusive concern with works by European immigrants steeped in the Judeo-Christian tradition and his commitment to an ahistorical brand of structuralist theorizing combine to produce a conception of American immigrant autobiography that fails to provide an adequate measure of the experience and texts of Chinese and other non-European ethnic groups.

To observe scholars at work on the manifold varieties of American autobiography—black, immigrant, women's, Native American—is to be reminded that the study of the genre, by its own definition a referential art, necessarily involves the study of culture. The play of models of self and life story is pervasive—in the experience of the subject, in the conventional assumptions of the genre, and (not least) in the mind of the critic—and shapes both the autobiographies Americans have written in the past, and those that Americans are writing now and in the time to come.

Although we have identified an extremely rich and comprehensive corpus of American autobiographies, thanks to the efforts of Kaplan, Briscoe, Lillard, Brumble, Jelinek, Brignano, and many others, the history of this literature in the United States remains largely unwritten. The earliest contribution is Robert F. Sayre's pioneering study, *The Examined Self: Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams, Henry James* (1964).<sup>15</sup> Sayre argues that Augustine and Franklin represent the two major traditions, religious and secular, of the American practice of self-examination in autobiography. As its title suggests, however, Sayre's perspective reflects precisely the culturally restrictive definition of literary canon that Spengemann attacks; to define a "tradition" by moving chronologically from title to title on the received short list of masterworks and to perform the work of literary history become conveniently synonymous. That Sayre should have proceeded to emplot the history of American autobiography in this way is hardly surprising, however, given the ahistorical formalism of the New Criticism that colored so much of the scholarship of that period.<sup>16</sup> The assumption that the challenge of writing a history of the genre in the United States could be met by finding a way to arrange a small number of masterpieces in a coherent sequence of some kind persisted, and various all-purpose skeleton keys to American autobiography were proposed in the years following Sayre's initial foray. These included a cultural monomyth of success (Spengemann and L. R. Lundquist, 1965); a recurring prose form, "the interpreted design" (David Minter, 1969); political unrest (James M. Cox, "Autobiography and America," 1971); and a "prophetic mode" of discourse (G. Thomas Couser, 1979).<sup>17</sup>

The most comprehensive treatment of the history of American autobiography to date is Albert E. Stone's book, *Autobiographical Occasions and Original Acts: Versions of American Identity from Henry Adams to Nate Shaw* (1982). The subtitle, which stresses a diachronic movement from Adams to Shaw, emphasizes the historical ambition of this major project. In his preface Stone credits Wilhelm Dilthey with inaugurating concern for the relation between autobiography and history, and he remains faithful to the spirit of Dilthey in his willingness to place autobiography above other modes of cultural expression as the most subtle and wide-ranging reflection of both "the diversities of American experience" and "the richness of American memories and imaginations" (1). The challenge posed by Stone is "to understand autobiography as both representative cultural history and stubbornly singular story" (18), to pursue the representative without compromising the integrity of the individual instance.

In practice, however, the broad historical purpose of Stone's project, the construction of cultural narrative from the instances of individual story, gives way to a literary criticism rather different in its aims. What the book offers is a discrete series of comparatist forays or probes into typical aspects of American autobiographical writing—women's autobiography, black autobiography, fiction in autobiography, violence in autobiography, and so forth. The two or three texts featured in each chapter are presented as representative works, exemplifying the characteristic features of the particular variety of American autobiographical writing under study. What we learn from these texts has less to do with history than with literature, less to do with American culture than with the performance of autobiography. The yoking of Stone's title and subtitle, juxtaposing performance and history, may represent an attempt to bridge this gap between his wishful historical program and his substantial achievement as a literary critic.

In suggesting the limitations of Stone's attempt to negotiate a distinctly *historical* passage between the individual and the representative significance of an autobiography, I think it is necessary to add that the notion that there is some cultural totality of American experience, whose origins could be traced and plotted, may prove in the end to be one of the most enduring of Americanists' illusions. The true history of American autobiography and the culture in which it is produced and consumed may turn out to be the history of identifiable groups within the culture and of the network of relations among them. In this sense, the cultural pluralism of Stone's book, with its multiple perspectives addressing now the texts of one group in the culture and now those of another, is especially suggestive, and may point the way for other

historians of American autobiography in the time to come. Interestingly, Sayre's thinking seems to have evolved toward something like this position: shifting away from his earlier concern with unifying a narrow canon of masterworks, he asserts in 1977 that any "adequate history of American autobiography" must be "plural in genre" and "pluralistic in subject matter" ("The Proper Study," 248–49).

If overviews of the history of American autobiography remain sketchy and highly speculative so far, work on the sources, assumptions, and practice of the genre in particular periods is a different story. Daniel B. Shea writing on colonial autobiography, Lawrence Buell on Transcendentalist autobiography, or Thomas Cooley on late nineteenth-century autobiography all represent important attempts to conceptualize distinct periods of autobiographical activity. Cooley, for example, dates the rise of modern autobiography in America from the practice of late nineteenth-century autobiographers such as Adams, Twain, Howells, and James, who abandoned the traditional, unitary concept of the self as innate and changeless in favor of a situational model of identity as "the shifting deposit of a continuing process of adaptation" (19). This difference, he believes, reflects the emergence of modern, developmental psychology, as opposed to the traditional faculty psychology that Thoreau and the Transcendentalists shared with Franklin and the Puritans.

Speaking of the New England Transcendentalists, Buell observes that "the most egoistic movement in American literary history produced no first-rate autobiography, unless one counts *Walden* as such." "Although they attached great theoretical importance to the self," he adds, "most of what they themselves wrote seems quite impersonal, including their own private journals" ("Transcendentalist," 268). Given the problematic status of the Transcendentalist literature of the first person, it is rather curious that the origins or "traditions" of this writing should have been studied repeatedly and in considerable detail. Shea's study of colonial autobiography left him convinced that Quaker and Puritan modes of self-presentation are reflected in the writings of Thoreau and Whitman, Dickinson and Adams. Similarly, Sacvan Bercovitch has made an elaborate case for the contribution of the Puritan model of selfhood to nineteenth-century American culture (*Puritan Origins*).

Whether or not the Transcendentalists' preoccupation with the life of self-culture yielded works that can be properly identified as autobiographies, however, is another matter. If Transcendentalist autobiographies do not seem very much like autobiographies to the modern reader, that may be because they derive, as Bercovitch suggests, from a "Protestant-libertarian model of the self" ("Ritual," 146) which is

"self-effacing, exemplary, and self-transcending" (142) as opposed to the "Rousseauesque self" (146), the I "affirmed as a discrete presence, essentially private and unique" (142).<sup>18</sup> In Buell's essay for the present volume, "Autobiography in the American Renaissance," which addresses the paradoxes of the Transcendentalist conception of self, he concludes, in fact, that "although the autobiographical mode strongly marks American writing from the start, especially in Puritan New England but in other regions as well, autobiography in the strictest current sense does not fully flower as a literary genre in America much before the time of Henry Adams" (47-48).

Although *Walden* inevitably remains the test case for any account of American autobiographical writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Buell is careful to contextualize it in terms of the generic practice of the period. Thus he compares Thoreau's narrative to autobiographies by Frederick Douglass, P. T. Barnum, Lydia Sigourney, John Neal, and Walt Whitman, as well as to the general features of the surviving texts recorded in Kaplan. The resulting picture of actual autobiographical practice in the period is a relatively new development, and highly significant. Whereas before the literary historical space of autobiography was a largely unvisited terrain, demarcated on one side by a highly selective (and therefore questionably representative) literary canon and on the other by the largely unread volumes in Kaplan, now a working sense of the life of texts and a concomitant sense of the tastes and expectations of the reading public in particular periods is beginning to emerge.

A large share of this work of description has been performed by scholars researching one of the various subgenres of American autobiography. For example, texts of cross-cultural provenance—the life of the ex-slave, the life of the Christianized Native American—offer a peculiarly sensitive register of the popular autobiographical conventions of the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s. Thus Krupat is able to locate J. B. Patterson's *Life of Ma-Ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak or Black Hawk* (1833) in the period context of Indian biography and western American autobiography; thus A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff can specify the distinctive features of George Copway's *The Life, History, and Travels of Kah-ge-gah-bowh* (1847) by referring to contemporary parallel developments in Indian captivity, slave, and missionary narratives. These are signs of the increasing fund of literary historical knowledge on which any authoritative, large-scale reconstruction of the history of American autobiography must be based.

The aims of this collection of essays, implicit in the preceding discussion, are soon told. In order to facilitate the study of American autobiography, I want to draw together in a single volume a wealth of

literary, cultural, and bibliographical information that is not readily available elsewhere at the present time. Taken together, the commissioned essays offer a comprehensive picture of the state of the field today. From a variety of critical perspectives, they assess the work that has already been done; they also map out new lines of inquiry, and sometimes they proceed to demonstrate them by way of example. Because autobiography is by definition a referential art, because the self that is its principal referent is in fundamental ways a construct of culture, the issues raised and the texts studied in these essays tend to reflect broadly cultural rather than exclusively literary concerns. Shifting and conflicting models of self prove to be a focal topic. The pool of representative American autobiographies is considerably enlarged and certainly differently construed from its characteristic appearance in many earlier studies. Thus, in addition to commentary on Thoreau, Adams, and James, there are readings of Lucy Larcom, William Apes, and Emma Goldman. It is especially significant, moreover, that in several essays well-known, lesser known, and virtually unknown autobiographers figure *in relation to each other* for the first time in criticism, as they once did in the day of their original publication.

The essays are divided into two major sections. In the first, Daniel B. Shea, Lawrence Buell, Susanna Egan, and Albert E. Stone characterize the practice of American autobiography in particular periods. My own division into four periods was necessarily rough and heuristic, and I abandoned any notion of coverage at the outset. Instead, I encouraged each contributor to this section to devise an approach and to demarcate temporal boundaries that seemed to make the best sense of the material available for study.

The make-up of the second section reflects my own view that the pluralist nature of American culture has been decisive in the development of American autobiography. In an effort to work toward a more inclusive picture of the variety of autobiographical writing in the United States, I invited essays on women's autobiography (by Carol Holly and Blanche H. Gelfant), Native American autobiography (by Arnold Krupat), Afro-American autobiography (by William L. Andrews), immigrant autobiography (by William Boelhower and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong), and oral autobiography (by Jane Hallowell Coles and Robert Coles). I have placed the Coles' essay last because it represents an important contrast in form, style, and perspective to the rest of the essays in the volume. Here critical and historical commentary yield to a personal testimony of an altogether different sort, in which two leading practitioners of the art of gathering life histories in the field trace the evolution of their work over a period of more than twenty years.

Appropriately, they choose the interview as their format here, for it is the medium in which they conduct their work. They argue that their success in making contact with people from radically different economic, social, and cultural circumstances has been directly a function of their willingness to abandon the constraints of narrowly defined academic and professional postures.

The various subgenres represented in the second section, however, give only a partial portrait of the hugely various practice of American autobiographical writing today. Most readers will easily identify significant categories that are not treated here: Chicano autobiography, working-class autobiography, gay autobiography, "as-told-to" autobiographies by celebrities, autobiographies by veterans, by convicts, and so forth. I should add that I did not seek to impose on the contributors any single, unifying definition of "American autobiography" of my own design. The potential futility of such a move, moreover, is suggested in several of the essays, notably those by William Boelhower, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, and Arnold Krupat, which explore the vexed issue of generic definition. What the contributors have done, collectively, is to describe the practice of autobiographical writing of various kinds by various kinds of Americans. It remains for others, in the time to come, to situate American autobiographical writing in the larger context of the history of the genre as a whole. To undertake this task will be to avoid the risk of positing a narrowly national teleology to the development of American autobiography.<sup>19</sup>

Any reader of this volume will recognize the size of the subject and how much remains to be done with it. For my own part, I want to thank all of the contributors, who have both individually and collectively enlarged my sense of the richness of the field. Martha Banta and Susan Gubar made important suggestions about the book in its early stages, Rebecca Hogan gave wise and timely advice later on, and William L. Andrews advised and encouraged throughout. Lawrence Buell, Carol Holly, Arnold Krupat, and Albert E. Stone read the introduction with care, and I hope I have put their criticism to good use. Barbara Hanrahan and Raphael Kadushin of the University of Wisconsin Press have been invaluable in guiding these pages into print. Needless to say, any shortcomings in the governing conception and program for this project are my own.

## NOTES

- 1 See Eakin, "L'autobiographie." Commentary on nineteenth-century American autobiography has been greatly enriched by the appearance in 1989 of three new books: G. Thomas Couser, *Altered Egos*; James M. Cox, *Recovering Literature's Lost Ground*; and Joseph Fichtelberg, *The Complex Image*.
- 2 See Granger, for example, who applies Philippe Lejeune's well-known definition of the genre to *Walden*, and concludes that it is not an autobiography.
- 3 Philippe Lejeune's current project to compile an exhaustive inventory of all of the autobiographies written in France in the nineteenth century illustrates both the problems and the promise of adopting Spengemann's inclusive stance. For Lejeune's account of this project, see "Cote Ln 27"; for additional commentary, see Eakin, "Foreword." For an illustration of Lejeune's procedure and his findings to date, see "Autobiography and Social History in the Nineteenth Century." Lejeune adopts membership in a social group as the only possible organizing principle for the otherwise baffling heterogeneity of his corpus of nineteenth-century French autobiography. Lillard, Kaplan, and Briscoe also feature an individual's occupation as a principle of classification.
- 4 For a more manageable sample than the hundreds of entries in Kaplan, see Carlock's list of more than a hundred titles published between 1840 and 1870.
- 5 Daniel B. Shea's work on colonial autobiography is an exception here, to be explained in part by the fact that the scholarly territory was opened up for settlement by Perry Miller, who placed a premium on the broad social and cultural context of the literature to be studied.
- 6 See, for example, Sayre, *The Examined Self*.
- 7 See Cox, "Recovering Literature's Lost Ground." Renza joins Cox in noting the tendency of contemporary criticism to stress the fictive, literary dimension of autobiography, attenuating "autobiography's explicit, formal claim to be a legitimate personal-historical document" (273).
- 8 See Lejeune, "The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write," 198.
- 9 Lejeune ("The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write"), Patai, and others emphasize the shaping hand of the dominant culture at work in the gathering of oral history.
- 10 See Bruss, and Lejeune, "Autobiography and Literary History." For examples of the formalist approach, see Fleishman, Lejeune (in his early books and essays), May, and Spengemann.
- 11 No other variety of American autobiography has been studied in greater depth and with more sophistication than the slave narrative. For a comprehensive account of the scholarship, see William L. Andrews's essay in this collection.
- 12 In "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," Raymond Williams reminds us that the hegemony of the dominant culture, by which he understands "a central system of practices, meanings and values" (38),

is neither total nor static. In particular, he directs attention to the existence of "alternative" and "oppositional" cultures, "those practices, experiences, meanings, values which are not part of the effective dominant culture" (40). Arnold Krupat directed my attention to this essay, which articulates a theoretical model that could be applied to the relation between "dominant" and "other-than-dominant" texts.

- 13 See also working-class autobiography for a parallel instance of cultural influence. Regenia Gagnier's study of nineteenth-century British working-class autobiography reminds us that the individualist bias of the models of self and life story in traditional bourgeois autobiography was ill-equipped to express the typically collective nature of working-class experience. For some of Gagnier's subjects, the very act of presuming to write an autobiography in the first place felt like a betrayal of class solidarity. Scholars such as Gagnier, David Vincent, Nan Hackett, and Simon Dentith have demonstrated the richness of the field of British working-class autobiography. American working-class autobiography, on the other hand, remains largely unexplored, and it was one of my chief disappointments in preparing this collection that I could not locate anyone—literary critic or labor historian—to tackle this subject.
- 14 Boelhower's emphasis here parallels that of Werner Sollors, who stresses "the cultural interplays and contacts among writers of different backgrounds, the cultural mergers and secessions that took place in America" (*Beyond Ethnicity*, 14–15). See also his critique of the concept of cultural pluralism, which, he argues, tends to interfere with proper recognition of the fact that "American culture . . . abounds in ethnogenesis on the basis of trans-ethnic contacts" ("Critique," 276).
- 15 William L. Andrews has called my attention to the existence of an earlier volume than Sayre's, *Witnesses for Freedom: Negro Americans in Autobiography* (1948), by Rebecca Chalmers Barton. See his essay in this collection.
- 16 Sayre makes a similar assessment of *The Examined Self* in the revised edition published in 1988.
- 17 It is hardly surprising that literary critics are not necessarily suited by taste and training to undertake the work of history, and studies of autobiography are no exception. Lejeune has noted that most attempts to write the history of the genre have yielded a series of disconnected chapters or monographs on individual masterworks (*L'Autobiographie*, 48), and even the best of these, *The Value of the Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography* (1978) by Karl Joachim Weintraub, does not escape this belletristic tendency to accept the classic, canonized mastertext as conveniently representative, a comprehensive synthesis of the dominant features of its cultural context. The easy metonymies of privilege and power that rationalize the part (the class, the gender, the race) as equivalent to the whole (the country, the culture) are fast losing their once unquestioned authority to persuade. Lejeune's discussion in *L'Autobiographie en France* of the problems of writing the history of autobiography remains the best introduction to the subject. Avrom Fleishman's succinct but illuminating summary of the history of the genre

from Augustine to the nineteenth century is exemplary in its wary avoidance of untested commonplaces.

- 18 Quentin Anderson shares Bercovitch's stress on the difference between the comparatively abstract and absolute individualism embraced by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman and the more politically engaged, historically contingent variety espoused by Rousseau and the English Romantics. For Anderson, however, Transcendentalist autobiography represents not a conservative tradition dedicated to "transforming the energies of radical individualism into a force against social change" as Bercovitch would have it ("Ritual," 149), but rather a bold, doomed project of single, separate persons "to make it alone because they were faced by a society they could find no other way of dealing with" (Anderson, 30).
- 19 In raising this last point, I am echoing the words of Lawrence Buell, who underscored the limitations of an exclusively Americanist perspective in a letter he wrote in response to an earlier draft of this introduction.

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## PART I

### Four Centuries of American Autobiography

## The Prehistory of American Autobiography

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DANIEL B. SHEA

Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even Science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit, and must fix on a point in the stars' unceasing journey when his sidereal clock shall pretend that time is at Nought . . . . No retrospect will take us to the true beginning; and whether our prologue be in heaven or on earth, it is but a fraction of the all-presupposing fact with which our story sets out.

George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*

In the beginning (as it were), autobiography had no America. If autobiography is memory's form, and if "America" in the Renaissance was an icon of the future that focused errant Anglo-European imaginings about the New World, then early American autobiography is a hopeless solecism. Autobiography, itself in the process of being invented, would have to wait until 1809 to take its proper name, and America, while claiming a national identity in 1776, would take generations more to earn and define one. In this earliest period one does as well to think of Shakespeare's Miranda as the very figure of an American autobiography conceived but not yet born. "Oh brave new world that has such creatures in't," she says in *The Tempest*, confronting the representatives of a fallen Old World. Innocent of the kind of history known to her father, she can understand the past only as a version of the future. " 'Tis new to thee," Prospero responds indulgently (V.i.182-84). Her brief autobiography is a wonder indeed, the effort of a purely prospective imagination to give shape to wisps of dimly remembered experience. " 'Tis far off," she pleads, "And rather like a dream than an assurance

that my remembrance warrants" (I.ii.44-46). The writing of American autobiography, properly speaking, would be left to the New World descendants of Miranda and Ferdinand.

And yet America, as the explorers came upon it, was not vacant of memory and imagination and did not lack for peoples whose calling forth of their past was a life source for them in the present. To stipulate a beginning for a form of Anglo-European writing on the American continent is to invent in George Eliot's words an "all presupposing fact" that ignores the pre-existent oral literature of a multitude of Indian tribes. Our access to that continuity of song and story comes primarily from its later emergence into print, a process begun in the nineteenth century that eventually resulted in such a recognizable artifact as the Indian autobiography.<sup>1</sup> To inquire about Indian autobiography in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, as we count them, is to court a further solecism. What we seek did not exist in the form in which we have learned to seek it. What was there we can know about only through a kind of archaeological inference. As Arnold Krupat has pointed out, it is a difficulty of knowing not only what was said but of "how they said it" (3). In an oral, tribal culture the autobiographical act (to speak anachronistically) would have been literally performative, beyond the ken of (because prior to) our intricate theories about metaphorically performative texts. From our familiar (because familial) idea of autobiography, we should have to subtract notions of the individual and of the self's motivation and teleology and dispense with much of our accustomed formal sense of narrative causation and closure; and even then, having made appropriate subtractions, we should still not have begun the positive work of archaeological recovery.

Such attempts, as they have begun to appear in contemporary studies of Indian autobiography, admittedly have the quality of rough sketches, a static representation of those preliterate voices that had risen and fallen through a chromatic range whose colors and limits we cannot know unmediated. The attempt, nevertheless, is an act of imaginative sympathy that has begun to yield rewards. Looking through the medium of later, published narratives, H. David Brumble has given some estimate of the shape of original tellings. Granting the full complexity of tribal variations, he distinguishes six kinds of preliterate autobiographical narratives: the "coup" tales, by which warriors elaborated their triumphs in striking the enemy; less formal and usually more detailed tales of warfare and hunting; self-examinations; self-vindications; educational narratives; and tales of the acquisition of shamanic powers (22-23).

It is possible, of course, to shape these categories into shadowy primitive reflections of Anglo-European ideal forms. The coup tales then become a version of the classical vaunt or Anglo-Saxon hero's *beot* (boast); self-examinations and self-vindications take their place in the literature of confession; the educational narratives of Indian tribes appear continuous with all autobiography that has posterity as its most important audience; and narratives recounting the acquisition of mysterious, enabling powers may seem to have something of the pattern, less individually self-conscious, of the saint's coming into grace or the growth of a poet's soul. Critical imperialism, however, is self-defeating; assimilating strangeness by familiarizing it leaves the would-be knower sunk in his or her original ignorance. And given the ultimate equality of cultures as cultures, the notions of original and reflection are meaningless because they are always reversible. One could as easily maintain that Indian stories of origins are the type of all autobiography; to speak of the earth's manifold becomings and narratively, communally, to trace them to their root becomes in an alternative view the great human act distortedly mirrored in that addiction of modern Western civilization, its endless rewritings of Genesis in the first person.

In developmental terms, the New World offered a kind of evolutionary "niche" favoring the growth of the parent culture's autobiographical tendencies. Both Renaissance and Reformation were fertile in forms of what evolutionary biologists call *preadaptation*, which, in concert with a hospitable environment, would result in an eventual flourishing of American autobiography. The evolutionary metaphor means most when it is most strictly limited. It has, in particular, no teleological implications, as if somehow certain strains of Anglo-European literature aspired internally to the condition of American autobiography. But two strains, notable for their adaptive survival in the New World, deserve notice against the implicit selectivity of the host environment.

The first is the flourishing of the Renaissance idea of the self as microcosm in a period when the discovery and exploration of the macrocosm seemed to offer transformative possibilities directly to the person of the explorer. The conjunction of outward and inward exploration, a union of vehicle and tenor familiar from the "Conclusion" to *Walden*, has a long prehistory, one characterized by dialectical attempts to accommodate the impact of literal exploration to assumptions about human nature, and to adjust figural representations of the self to physical discovery.<sup>2</sup> The hypothesis to be tested, William Spengemann has pointed out, was "the Renaissance traveler's generally unspoken but nevertheless strongly felt sense that a voyage to the New World made a new man" (30).