

# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 86

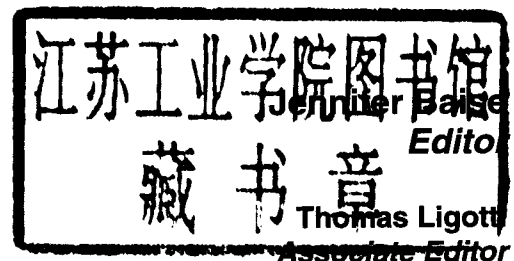
TOPICS VOLUME



# Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

## Topics Volume

**Excerpts from Criticism of Various Topics  
in Twentieth-Century Literature, including Literary  
and Critical Movements, Prominent Themes and  
Genres, Anniversary Celebrations, and Surveys  
of National Literatures**



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# Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities, and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” *TCLC* “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many libraries would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

## Scope of the Series

*TCLC* is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1960 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of this period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey of an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics. These topic entries widen the focus of the series from individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

*TCLC* is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, which reprints commentary on authors now living or who have died since 1960. Because of the different periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC*. For additional information about *CLC* and Gale's other criticism titles, users should consult the Guide to Gale Literary Criticism Series preceding the title page in this volume.

## Coverage

Each volume of *TCLC* is carefully compiled to present:

- criticism of authors, or literary topics, representing a variety of genres and nationalities
- both major and lesser-known writers and literary works of the period
- 6-12 authors or 3-6 topics per volume
- individual entries that survey critical response to each author's work or each topic in literary history, including early criticism to reflect initial reactions; later criticism to represent any rise or decline in reputation; and current retrospective analyses.

## Organization of This Book

An author entry consists of the following elements: author heading, biographical and critical introduction, list of principal works, reprints of criticism (each preceded by an annotation and a bibliographic citation), and a bibliography of further reading.

- The **Author Heading** consists of the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If an author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the real name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Also located at the beginning of

the beginning of the introduction to the author entry are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose languages use nonroman alphabets.

- The **Biographical and Critical Introduction** outlines the author's life and career, as well as the critical issues surrounding his or her work. References to past volumes of *TCLC* are provided at the beginning of the introduction. Additional sources of information in other biographical and critical reference series published by Gale, including *Short Story Criticism*, *Children's Literature Review*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, and *Something about the Author*, are listed in a box at the end of the entry.
- Some *TCLC* entries include **Portraits** of the author. Entries also may contain reproductions of materials pertinent to an author's career, including manuscript pages, title pages, dust jackets, letters, and drawings, as well as photographs of important people, places, and events in an author's life.
- The **List of Principal Works** is chronological by date of first book publication and identifies the genre of each work. In the case of foreign authors with both foreign-language publications and English translations, the title and date of the first English-language edition are given in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Critical essays are prefaced by **Annotations** providing the reader with information about both the critic and the criticism that follows. Included are the critic's reputation, individual approach to literary criticism, and particular expertise in an author's works. Also noted are the relative importance of a work of criticism, the scope of the essay, and the growth of critical controversy or changes in critical trends regarding an author. In some cases, these annotations cross-reference essays by critics who discuss each other's commentary.
- A complete **Bibliographic Citation** designed to facilitate location of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- Criticism is arranged chronologically in each author entry to provide a perspective on changes in critical evaluation over the years. All titles of works by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type to enable the user to easily locate discussion of particular works. Also for purposes of easier identification, the critic's name and the publication date of the essay are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the journal in which it appeared. Some of the essays in *TCLC* also contain translated material. Unless otherwise noted, translations in brackets are by the editors; translations in parentheses or continuous with the text are by the critic. Publication information (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of works) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.
- An annotated list of **Further Reading** appearing at the end of each author entry suggests secondary sources on the author. In some cases it includes essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights.

## Cumulative Indexes

- Each volume of *TCLC* contains a cumulative **Author Index** listing all authors who have appeared in Gale's Literary Criticism Series, along with cross references to such biographical series as *Contemporary Authors* and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. For readers' convenience, a complete list of Gale titles included appears on the first page of the author index. Useful for locating authors within the various series, this index is particularly valuable for those authors who are identified by a certain period but who, because of their death dates, are placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald is found in *TCLC*, yet a writer often associated with him, Ernest Hemingway, is found in *CLC*.

- Each *TCLC* volume includes a cumulative **Nationality Index** which lists all authors who have appeared in *TCLC* volumes, arranged alphabetically under their respective nationalities, as well as Topics volume entries devoted to particular national literatures.
- Each new volume in Gale's Literary Criticism Series includes a cumulative **Topic Index**, which lists all literary topics treated in *NCLC*, *TCLC*, *LC 1400-1800*, and the *CLC* year-book.
- Each new volume of *TCLC*, with the exception of the Topics volumes, includes a **Title Index** listing the titles of all literary works discussed in the volume. In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a **Special Paperbound Edition** of the *TCLC* title index. This annual cumulation lists all titles discussed in the series since its inception and is issued with the first volume of *TCLC* published each year. Additional copies of the index are available on request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the following year's cumulation. Titles discussed in the Topics volume entries are not included *TCLC* cumulative index.

## Citing Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume in Gale's literary Criticism Series may use the following general forms to footnote reprinted criticism. The first example pertains to materials drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books.

<sup>1</sup>William H. Slavick, "Going to School to DuBose Heyward," *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined*, (AMS Press, 1987); reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Garipey (Detroit: Gale Research, 1995), pp. 94-105.

<sup>2</sup>George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," *Partisan Review*, 6 (Winter 1949), pp. 85-92; reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Vol. 59, ed. Jennifer Garipey (Detroit: Gale Research, 1995), pp. 40-3.

## Suggestions Are Welcome

In response to suggestions, several features have been added to *TCLC* since the series began, including annotations to critical essays, a cumulative index to authors in all Gale literary criticism series, entries devoted to criticism on a single work by a major author, more extensive illustrations, and a title index listing all literary works discussed in the series since its inception.

Readers who wish to suggest authors or topics to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to write the editors.

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# American Autobiography

## INTRODUCTION

Following a model established by the spiritual self-examination of the *Confessions of St. Augustine* in the late fourth century, a work of autobiography typically comprises a prose exposition of the significant experiences in an individual life as recalled by its subject. In American literature these tales have taken such forms as slave narratives, stories of religious conversion, memoirs of successful political and commercial figures, and the self-analyses of prominent writers and thinkers. Reflecting the changing mood of the American national culture over time, these various forms have emphasized the individual's outward experiences, spiritual life, public achievements, or intellectual development. In the twentieth century, American autobiography has evolved into an acknowledged imaginative art, which is characterized as much by the use of the forms and techniques of fiction as by the candid rendering of genuine emotions and events.

The main current in American autobiography stems from the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1868) and extends through Henry David Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854) and *The Education of Henry Adams* (1918) to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1966). An early example of the "rags to riches" theme in American autobiography, Franklin's memoir was originally published in installments between 1791 and 1798 and covers his many intellectual pursuits in addition to detailing his early life as a printer's apprentice and his ascent to political office. *Walden*, although it focuses only on Thoreau's life at Walden Pond from 1845 to 1847 rather than providing a historical account of his life, exemplifies the introspective nature of autobiography and is considered among the seminal works in American literature for its keen observations of nature, perceptive social commentary, and compelling prose style. Henry James, in such volumes as *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), and *The Middle Years* (1917), discussed the shaping influences on his aesthetic development and his decision to pursue a literary career, and in his *Education*, Henry Adams focused on intellectual development as the most meaningful aspect of the story of one's life. In the mid-twentieth century, Gertrude Stein effectively created a new form in her *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), reflecting herself through the ostensible autobiography of her secretary and companion. Initiating the subgenre of mock-autobiography, Stein's volume gave rise to numerous experiments in the genre, including Frank Conroy's highly-regarded *Stop-Time* (1967), an impressionistic account of the early life

of a thirty-year-old writer of no particular significance. Considered one of the most important works of autobiography in American literature, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* synthesizes various facets of the genre by combining religious, political, and race issues while utilizing the forms and techniques of fiction.

Among the key critical issues surrounding American autobiography in the late twentieth century is the difficulty distinguishing autobiography from fiction, a situation caused in part by such blended forms as the autobiographical novel and by the trend toward the impressionistic exploration of emotions rather than the accurate depiction of events. As a result of experiments in the genre, the unique, defining characteristics of autobiography have become more difficult to delineate. For some critics, autobiography no longer signifies anything more than a work whose subject is also its author, with no reference to scope, narrative form, or historical accuracy. Since the early 1970s, critics have argued for the acceptance of autobiography as an imaginative art that can be discussed in terms of critical criteria in much the same manner as drama, poetry, and fiction. These commentators view such issues as the selection (or omission) of material and the presentation of a "persona" in a work as two literary aspects of autobiography that strongly affect the work that results. In addition, such previously marginalized works as women's and Native American autobiography have begun gaining recognition from critics of the genre.

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## REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

Henry Adams

*The Education of Henry Adams*, 1918

Maya Angelou

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1970

*Gather Together in My Name*, 1974

*Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, 1976

*The Heart of a Woman*, 1981

Russell Baker

*Growing Up*, 1982

Henry Bibb

*Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave*, 1849

- Black Elk and John G. Neihardt  
*Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*, 1932
- William Wells Brown  
*Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown*, 1852
- Stephen Burroughs  
*The Memoirs of the Notorious Stephen Burroughs of New Hampshire*, c. 1800s, reissued 1924
- Eldridge Cleaver  
*Soul on Ice*, 1968
- Ciyé Cochise [with A. Kinney Griffith]  
*The First Hundred Years of Niño Cochise*, 1972
- Frank Conroy  
*Stop-Time*, 1967
- Malcolm Cowley  
*Exile's Return*, 1934
- Frederick Douglass  
*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, 1845, reprinted, 1960
- W. E. B. Du Bois  
*Dusk of Dawn: The Autobiography of a Race Concept*, 1940, reprinted, 1968
- Charles Eastman  
*Indian Boyhood*, 1902, reissued, 1971
- Olaudah Equiano  
*The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African*, 1789
- F. Scott Fitzgerald  
*The Crack-Up*, edited by Edmund Wilson, 1945
- Benjamin Franklin  
*The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 1868
- Hamlin Garland  
*A Son of the Middle Border*, 1917
- Geronimo  
*Geronimo: His Own Story*, edited by S. M. Barrett, 1906, rev. ed., 1970
- Lillian Hellman  
*An Unfinished Woman: A Memoir*, 1969  
*Pentimento: A Book of Portraits*, 1973  
*Scoundrel Time*, 1976  
*Maybe: A Story*, 1980
- Ernest Hemingway  
*A Moveable Feast*, 1964
- John Dunn Hunter  
*Memoirs of Captivity among the Indians of North America*, 1824
- Henry James  
*A Small Boy and Others*, 1913  
*Notes of a Son and Brother*, 1914  
*The Middle Years*, 1917
- Maxine Hong Kingston  
*The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 1977
- Lame Deer, John (Fire), and Richard Erdoes  
*Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*, 1972
- Lucy Larcom  
*A New England Girlhood*, 1889
- Norman Mailer  
*The Armies of the Night*, 1968
- Malcolm X and Alex Haley  
*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 1966
- Mary McCarthy  
*Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, 1957
- Vladimir Nabokov  
*Speak Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, 1966
- Solomon Northrup  
*Twelve Years a Slave*, 1854
- Philip Roth  
*The Facts: A Novelist's Autobiography*, 1988
- Gertrude Stein  
*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, 1933
- Henry David Thoreau  
*Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, 1854
- Mark Twain  
*Life on the Mississippi*, 1883  
*Mark Twain's Autobiography*, 2 vols., edited by Albert Bigelow Paine, 1924
- John Updike  
*Self-Consciousness: Memoirs*, 1989
- Booker T. Washington  
*Up from Slavery*, 1901
- George Webb  
*A Pima Remembers*, 1959
- Tobias Wolff  
*This Boy's Life: A Memoir*, 1989
- Richard Wright  
*Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*, 1945  
*American Hunger*, 1977

## OVERVIEWS

Albert E. Stone

SOURCE: "Autobiography and American Culture," in *American Studies*, Vol. XI, No. 2, Winter, 1972, pp. 22-36.

[In the following essay, Stone identifies major works of American autobiography, offers a definition of the genre, and discusses some leading critical approaches to the subject.]

One of the striking and promising developments in recent American studies is the new exploration of autobiography. This concern, a product largely of the past decade, is currently being pursued with an energy and sophistication which virtually constitute a rediscovery of the manifold possibilities of the genre. As a cultural document providing unique insights into history, social and individual experience and identity, and cultural change, the autobiography has, of course, long been used by social scientists and historians. As a prime form of the American imagination also, autobiography engages the attention of literary critics and scholars for whom Franklin, Thoreau, Henry Adams, and Gertrude Stein are distinctive names, among others, in the history of American consciousness. Both groups find in the 6377 items listed in Kaplan's *A Bibliography of American Autobiographies* (1), as in its more selective predecessor, Lillard's *American Life in Autobiography, A Descriptive Guide* (2), a wealth of cultural information quite literally unparalleled in other sources. Moreover, the number of autobiographies increases astronomically; it has been estimated that more than 10,000 life stories by Americans have now been published in the United States. Hardly a week passes but the newspapers announce that another American like Frank Sinatra or Gwendolyn Brooks has written his or her story.

"This most democratic province in the republic of letters," as William Dean Howells called it in 1909, is open to all; nearly anyone, it seems, who writes "the sincere relation of what he has been and done and felt and thought" (3) is assured of an audience. To this genre have been drawn public and private figures: poets, philosophers, prizefighters; actresses, artists, political activists; statesmen and penitentiary prisoners; financiers and football players; Quakers and Black Muslims; immigrants and Indians. The range of personality, experience, and profession reflected in the forms of American autobiography is as varied as American life itself. Barriers of literacy, education, and taste which usually divide a culture into "low" and "high" seem almost to disappear in this case. As Lillard reminds us, "autobiography is as near as mankind gets to a unified, lasting, prima facie version of what happens in an individual's lifetime."

## PAPERBACKS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Because of the natural and widespread interest in a form of literature thus varied, personal, and illuminating, paperback publishers thrive on autobiography. The availability of classic, new, and neglected autobiographies in inexpensive editions is one factor in the increased attention paid by readers, teachers, and scholars. Sales of such works have so increased of late that traditional estimates of readership as a reflection of cultural significance or influence have been upset. Thus it is probably more dangerous to cite sales figures as meaningful indices of the importance of autobiographies than is the case for most other documents. Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (4), the book that begins the American tradition in autobiography and which remains one of the most famous works in American literature, may never have sold as many copies as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (5), the most impressive of recent autobiographies and, as Carol Ohmann has pointed out, a literary descendant in important respects of Franklin's masterpiece. (6) Both, however, may be eclipsed by autobiographies riding the crest of a purely temporary popularity.

Memoirs and autobiographies like footballer Jerry Kramer's *Instant Replay* (7) or entertainer Sammy Davis, Jr.'s *Yes I Can* (8) have an apparent appeal but actually offer limited insights to the cultural critic. How to distinguish the permanently valuable from the Madison Avenue product of the moment, how to establish, for instance, the immense superiority of an Indian autobiography like *Black Elk Speaks* (9) over an imitation like *The Memoirs of Chief Red Fox* (19), or of Shirley MacLaine's *Don't Fall Off the Mountain* (11) over *Yes I Can*, calls not only for familiarity with the range of American autobiographies now available but also for an awareness of essential definitions, distinctions, and standards in this fast-changing field. These criteria—not all of which are highbrow or academic—are now being established by a number of scholars who approach autobiography freshly from a variety of fruitful perspectives, including traditional English and European literary criticism, historical American Studies, social psychology and psychoanalysis, and Black Studies.

## WHAT IS AUTOBIOGRAPHY?

Before any distinctively American emphases or aspects of autobiography can be described or accounted for, some general definitions are needed. These may be found in abundance in the classic discussions of autobiography by Georg Misch (12), André Maurois (13), Arthur Melville Clark (14), Wayne Shumaker (15), Georges Gusdorf (16), Roy Pascal (17), Jean Starobinski (18), and James Olney (19). Among these critics—most of them European or British in origin or concern—there is wide agreement that autobiography, as roughly distinguished from journal, diary, memoir, or reminiscence, is the retrospective account of an individual's life, or a



significant part thereof, written by that person with the avowed intent of telling the truthful story of his or her public and private experience. Autobiography thus describes a content not a form. Three hazy areas can at once be detected in this consensus definition, each of potential importance for American autobiography. These are: "a significant part thereof"; "written by that person"; and "avowed truth." Given the pace of modern experience and the still widely shared belief that ordinary individuals can participate meaningfully in extraordinary events, many topical autobiographies or memoirs appear. Sometimes it is difficult to see any generic difference between, for instance, two contemporary works like Kramer's *Instant Replay* and Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* (20). Both chronicle brief portions of the authors' recent lives. Yet Kramer's subtitle, *The Green Bay Packer Diary*, justly removes it from the category of autobiography, whereas Mailer's even more restricted narrative of the October, 1967 peace march on the Pentagon is true autobiography. Two critics who argue Mailer's case most persuasively are Richard Gilman (21) and Warner Berthoff (22).

A second problem for the student of American autobiography is authorship. Many modern autobiographies, though not "written by that person," still make available the experience of inarticulate lives. Are their efforts invariably to be denied the status of "true autobiography"? So many slick and superficial fabrications of pseudo-identity and experience have been published that one is tempted to reply categorically yes—until one turns to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or *Black Elk Speaks*. Both were written in collaboration yet create vividly and powerfully the personality of a man. Other instances of similar triumphs over the ghostwriter suggest that readers should proceed case by case and not by rule.

A brilliant essay by F. R. Hart takes precisely this empirical, inductive approach in discussing the knotty problem of "truth" in autobiography. (23) Taking issue with Shumaker and others who insist that autobiographers always want to be taken as writing nothing that is not literally and factually true, Hart quotes Renan ("ce qu'on dit de soi est toujours poésie") and cites many autobiographers who acknowledge the necessarily fictive element in the genre. In reference to Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* (24), perhaps the most poetically evocative of all immigrant or emigré autobiographies, Hart properly observes, "The historicity of the recreation is imperative, *even though* the autobiographer knows the terrible elusiveness of that historicity." Autobiography is a species of history but it is also a form of fiction; like history, it is descriptive and subject to verification, but like fiction it is inventive and lays claims to veracity. The reader of autobiography knows that he can never wholly separate the two. What he must learn is a sophisticated reality-testing, a point argued by Norman Holland in an important psychoanalytic essay on non-fiction. "Any given paragraph could be fiction or non-fiction—it is our different expectations

from fiction and non-fiction rather than the texts as such that differentiate our degrees of involvement. Non-fiction usually asks us to do more reality-testing than fiction." (25) Though all readers may not share Holland's belief in Freudian reality, most recognize that autobiography overlaps history, literature, and psychology and can be properly understood only by reference to the coinciding concerns and criteria of all three disciplines. Thus it is a natural interdisciplinary study.

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND AMERICAN HISTORY AND MYTH

One of the first historical dimensions of autobiography as an American act is a fact James M. Cox emphasizes in an important essay (26): the very term "autobiography" in its modern sense was coined only in 1809, and the new phenomenon to which Robert Southey applied it was a product of what R. R. Palmer calls the Age of the Democratic Revolutions. Franklin shares with Rousseau the honor of creating modern autobiography. The two classical forms of autobiography—the memoir and the confession—persist in their original titles but were transformed into secular, private, democratic, and psychological modes by the American and the Frenchman. Each invented the literary analogue to the revolutionary changes in their respective societies. Even earlier than Franklin, however, the spiritual autobiographies composed by Puritan and Quaker colonists had assumed a subtly different content if not a different form from their European prototypes. In *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* (27), Daniel B. Shea, Jr. examines a number of the colonial followers of Bunyan and Fox, including Thomas Shepard (28), Jonathan Edwards (29), and John Woolman (30). Shea concludes that these Americans departed very early from the narrow narrative of conversion; their autobiographical accounts often include a very wide range of experience that bore on their spiritual condition. The same inclusive approach can be seen in the first great black autobiography associated with American literature, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African* (31). Conversion, adventure, and abolitionist propaganda are almost equally prominent themes in this remarkable Nigerian's story.

Cox's thesis that America and autobiography arose together and under the stimulus of similar forces suggests that this democratic literary genre has much closer, more immediate links to political and historical events than do fiction, poetry, or drama. Light on this hypothesis comes by checking in Kaplan the publication dates for a number of important autobiographical works. An unusual clustering does seem to occur at the time of the American Revolution (Woolman, Franklin, Crèvecoeur (32), Vassa); in the pre-Civil War years (slaves' narratives, Thoreau (33), Whitman (34)); just before or after World War I (Henry Adams (35), Mark Twain (36), Henry James (37), Alexander Berkman (38), Mary Antin (39), Andrew Carnegie (40), Theodore Dreiser (41), Louis Sullivan (42)); during the Great Depression (Gertrude Stein (44), Black Elk, Lincoln

Steffens (43), Clarence Darrow (45), W. E. B. DuBois (46)); and in the post-World War II era (Richard Wright (47), Conrad Aiken (48), Nabokov, Whittaker Chambers (49), Malcolm X, Claude Brown (50), Mailer, Eldridge Cleaver (51)). Periods of relative social or political calm—pre-Stamp Act America, the early nineteenth century, the Gilded Age—seem to have been times when fewer important autobiographies appeared. Yet Robert Cantwell, in an essay on the state of autobiographies that appeared around 1938, warns of the dangers of making such simple connections between parts and ages of a culture. (52) Because autobiography is, in Starobinski's terms, both past history and present discourse, it is necessarily a double reflection of attitudes and values. Thus *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant* (53), which appeared in 1885, is a far more significant document of the Civil War than of the Gilded Age, to which Grant scarcely makes a single reference. Conversely, Lucy Larcom's *A New England Girlhood* (1889) (54) chronicles family life in the New England of the 1820s and 30s, but her nostalgia reflects more properly emotional values shared with Howells and Thomas Bailey Aldrich.

An alternate way to relate autobiography and history is proposed in a pioneering essay by William C. Spengemann and L. R. Lundquist. (55) These critics assert that because autobiography is an imaginative art it "has nothing to do with factual truth," so cannot be used descriptively to illuminate historical events or eras. The truth, and therefore the use, of autobiography is mythic; "the writer explains his life by depicting himself according to culturally evaluated images of character. As he turns his private experience into language he assumes one of the many identities outlined in the myth and so asserts his connection with his culture."

Spengemann and Lundquist describe "the" American myth as "a pilgrimage from imperfection to perfection." An adaptation of Christian mythology to the changing problems and possibilities of American life, this increasingly secular myth defines roles for Americans which are assumed and acted out in the exemplary autobiographies of our culture: the Prophet (Whitman, Norman Mailer); the Hero (Franklin, Carnegie); the Villain (P. T. Barnum (56), Whittaker Chambers); the Outcast or Outsider (Mae West (57), Caryl Chessman (58); the Disenchanted (Fitzgerald (59)). Thus autobiographical form is controlled by cultural belief in "an integrated, continuing personality which transcends the limitations and irregularities of time and space and unites all of one's apparently contradictory experiences into an identifiable whole. This notion of individual identity, in fact, may well be the central belief of our culture. With all its ramifications—personal responsibility, individual destiny, dissent, vocation and so forth—it forms the core of our being and the fabric of our history."

This is a broad and challenging thesis, but rests upon the prescriptively narrow assumption that all significant

autobiographers settle upon a central self or an accepted role. For Spengemann and Lundquist, the writer "must adopt some consistent, overriding view of himself and his part. He must identify the 'I' which unites all his past experiences." A critic like Hart might reply that writing autobiography is often a far more protean act of self-discovery, many of whose American monuments display discontinuities and fragmentations of self and society more clearly than consistent identities and clearly defined roles.

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

At present there is no critical history of American autobiography as a branch of American literature. Several recent books and a number of essays offer partial views of the whole landscape or detailed looks at particular works, but no comprehensive survey has yet been written. (Both Robert F. Sayre and Spengemann and Lundquist are apparently at work on such a project; there are no doubt others.) James M. Cox's essay (26) is presently the best brief discussion, but treats only Franklin, Thoreau, Whitman, and Henry Adams, with a final glance at Gertrude Stein.

A far fuller treatment of Franklin, Adams, and Henry James is provided by Sayre's excellent work, *The Examined Self* (60). Sayre rejects the reduction of autobiography to biography and history and attempts instead what he terms proper "autobiographical criticism." This means not merely tracking "fictional" episodes back to their "real life" sources, but, more importantly, relating each part of an autobiography to the writer's changing need for appropriate form and image. Sayre's literary analysis draws illuminating parallels between the forms of fiction and autobiography (in the picaresque Part One of Franklin's *Autobiography*) and suggests themes and techniques shared by the novels and autobiographies of an artist like James or by the histories of Henry Adams and his *Education*, probably the greatest of American autobiographies. Sayre's approach offers many possibilities for viewing representations of American experience in terms more purely literary than Spengemann and Lundquist employ. Thus works like James's *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and Brother* might be seen as imaginative rediscoveries of childhood and youth to be stylistically and structurally compared to similar stories by Lucy Larcom, Louis Sullivan, Richard Wright, or James Baldwin (61) but also to novels like *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *What Maisie Knew*.

This imaginative and comparative approach is carried even further by David L. Minter in *The Interpreted Design* (62). Here Minter traces a recurrent theme, design, and metaphor in American fiction and autobiography—the juxtaposition of two characters, a man of bold design who acts and a man of interpretation through whose consciousness the story of the other comes to us. In fiction the classic examples are *The Blithedale Romance*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Absalom! Absalom!* In autobiography

Jonathan Edwards, Franklin, Thoreau, and Henry Adams model their life-stories on this pattern. This emphasis upon design in life and art leads Minter to read Part Two of Franklin's *Autobiography*, in which the plan for moral perfection is recounted, as the work's core. Through the eyes of the older, observing Franklin we see both the idealism and the naive egotism of the younger Franklin who tries on one active role after another in search of both worldly success and the humility of Jesus and Socrates. Similarly, Adams as an older writer looks back on the little manikin who is his historical self, and in recording the failure of his attempts to master history and nature makes of the *Education* a work of art, a "supreme no to chaos and disorder."

Aside from Cox, Sayre, and Minter, however, there remains chiefly a growing list of individual essays, chapters, and introductions which treat American autobiographies as separate works of art. Many of these criticisms are couched in cultural rather than narrowly aesthetic terms; in this their authors reflect the influence of American Studies training as well as the inevitably interdisciplinary nature of autobiography itself. What follows is a selective sampling of useful commentaries on certain of the best-known American autobiographies.

Of the many studies of Franklin published in recent years those by Charles Sanford (63), David Levin (64), and John William Ward (65) should prove helpful, but no reader can afford to neglect the riches of the Yale Paperbound edition with its extensive historical and biographical materials. Significant criticism of the eighty-odd slave narratives published in pre-Civil War America has been contributed by Arna Bontemps (66), Gilbert Osofsky (67), C. H. Nichols (68), and John F. Bayliss (69). Certain of these narratives stand out for their imaginative recreation of the horrors of slavery, the excitement of escape, the achievement of freedom and manhood. Historians and critics, both black and white, return most often to the narratives of Gustavus Vassa, Frederick Douglass (70), Henry Bibb (67), Solomon Northup (67), Father Josiah Henson (71), and Harriet Jacobs. (72)

No one has contributed more than J. C. Levenson to our appreciation of *The Education of Henry Adams* (73). A brilliant recent study of Gertrude Stein and her two autobiographies is Richard Bridgman's *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (74). Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, the most poetically powerful of all black autobiographies, has been perceptively discussed by Ralph Ellison (75), George E. Kent (76), and Robert Bone (77). The triple nature of Conrad Aiken's *Ushant* as autobiography, essay and novel is sensitively traced by Jay Martin. (78)

Though *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is now widely appreciated as the imaginative equal of *Black Boy*, its literary form and relation to earlier black writing have not been fully established. Warner Berthoff (22) has written of it from a white perspective, but Richard Gilman (21) has argued that proper criticism of works

like *Malcolm X* and Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* must come from black critics. Materials for such appreciation of *The Autobiography* may be found in J. H. Clarke's *Malcolm X* which contains an interesting essay by the young Egyptian-American scholar, A. M. Elmessiri (79). One reason why we have not had more literary discussions of autobiographies like *Malcolm X* may be that many militant black intellectuals remain profoundly suspicious not only of formal literary criticism but also of autobiography as a traditional European genre explicitly committed to individualism—all can be seen as white cultural threats to black consciousness and community. V.S. Pritchett, the English critic, has commented on a similar ideological attack on Western autobiography by Communist critics. Such works, in this view necessarily enhance the private ego and thus are proof of bourgeois social decay. Pritchett disagrees, asserting instead that autobiographies are significant expressions of a "revolutionary" egoism and "the necessary civilising force in mass society." (80) Thus literary analysis of autobiography shades imperceptibly into ideology and the cultural critic can refine his awareness of the inevitability of this fact by reading Frederick Crews' thoughtful essay "Do Literary Studies have an Ideology?" (81)

#### AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Psychology, psychoanalysis, anthropology and sociology are the social sciences most directly involved in the study of the subjective dimension of culture. The proper use of human documents in the discovery and testing of social data has been an issue at least since the publication of Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (82), one part of which is the analysis of an autobiography by Władek a Polish immigrant to the United States. Thomas and Znaniecki's famous description of autobiography as "the perfect type of sociological material" has since been criticized, most acutely by Herbert Blumer (83). Despite their fullness of detail about the personal experience of social process, autobiographies never can fully meet, either singly or in collection, the three criteria for scientific evidence: representativeness, adequacy, reliability. Moreover, as Blumer points out a personal document as individual and imaginatively self-contained as an autobiography bears a double relationship to any scientific theory. Speaking of Thomas and Znaniecki's theory of "social becoming" in light of Władek's narrative Blumer observes "while the experiences have a tough independent character which enables them to be a test of a theoretical conception, at other times they seem, metaphorically speaking, to be helpless before the imposition of a theoretical view." Blumer concludes that while personal documents lend themselves to diverse interpretations they grow less satisfactory as the interpretation grows more abstract. "At best, these materials only enable one to make a case for the theoretical interpretation."

Gordon W. Allport accepts Blumer's critique but still vigorously defends the use of autobiography as a legitimate

and necessary idiographic tool. In *The Nature of Personality* (particularly in the challenging final essay "Personality: A Problem for Science or a Problem for Art?") (84), Allport counters arguments of scientific objectivists and urges the use of various quantitative and non-quantitative methods of validation of theory by means of autobiographies. Allport extends his case in *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science* (85). Here he concludes: "Acquaintance with the particular case, a sense of its patterned character and its individualized laws of action, stand at the gateway of generalized knowledge and at its terminus at the point of application . . . The positivist who dreads the subjectivity of the process of understanding needs as much as does the intuitionist to settle down to the task of finding out how his own mind, the most sensitive recording machine in existence, is capable of registering multiple variables and discerning relationships between them."

A promising technique for doing this which has developed since Allport and Blumer first wrote is value analysis. The pioneering study is Ralph K. White's examination of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (86) by means of alternating impressionistic and statistical analyses. White redraws the picture of Wright's personality in the light of both kinds of reading, in comparison to eight very different white life-stories, within a Freudian framework. Like Blumer, White accepts *Black Boy*'s imaginative integrity which by turns, fits, and tests, evades his hypotheses. His analysis has, however, limitations for the cultural critic looking for help from the social scientist. Thus White downplays the issue of fundamental differences in identity and psychosocial development between blacks and whites. (This important area is currently being explored, through insights derived in part from black autobiographies, by Erikson (87), Silberman (88), Hauser (90) and others.) Also, White tends to ignore the historical dimensions of Wright's autobiography. For example, he underestimates the influence of Wright's Communist experiences in the 1930s as a factor affecting the narrative treatment of family, black community, and self in *Black Boy*.

Although anthropology is also a biographically-based science, many American anthropologists once neglected life-histories as idiographic instruments. With the recent emphasis on culture-and-personality interpretations, however, anthropologists are following the lead of Kardiner, Hallowell, Lewis and others in using biographies and autobiographies as significant sources in the study of internalization and motivation. L. L. Langness presents the best case for the relevance of autobiography in *Life History in Anthropological Science*. (89)

In this interface of history and psychology within autobiography the most significant recent work has been done by Erik Erikson, whose *Childhood and Society* (91) provides one of the most flexible neo-Freudian contexts for studying American autobiography. Erikson's later studies of Luther and Ghandi are built upon a deep and sensitive awareness of individual experience as

somatic, social, and historical and of individual expression as conditioned by form, language, and convention. "There is always some naive self-revelation in any outpouring of autobiographic data," he writes of Ghandi's *Autobiography*. "Yet each given medium (diary, conversation, or autobiography) has its own formal laws and serves tradition and personal style. As to unconscious motivation, we must always remember that the autobiographer has not agreed to a therapeutic contract by which he promises to put into words his 'free associations,' so that we may help him to compare them with inner and outer 'reality.'" (92) Erikson enumerates the factors to be considered in "helping" an autobiographer; one must keep in mind "the stage of the recorder's life," and "the course of his whole life history" and the "historical process" of which any moment is but a stage. Moreover, the interpreter must never forget that he himself is subject to the "mood of his own life" and is heir to a given "lineage of conceptualization." *Ghandi's Truth* (93) demonstrates how well Erikson has balanced these factors to illuminate both a man and his autobiography.

Finding links between individual and group experience is as much the historian's task as the social scientist's, and many American historians today find Erikson the most stimulating exemplar of new ways to "do history" in relation to psychoanalysis. H. Stuart Hughes summarizes in *History as Art and as Science* (94) the coinciding concerns of the two disciplines: history and psychoanalysis both "believe in the radical subjectivity of human understanding"; both seek for systematic generalizations for dealing with individual consciousness as the "final datum, the bedrock of what we know." Hughes concludes that historians and psychoanalysts "have finally realized that the individual can be understood in his full cultural context only if his spiritual biography is viewed in relation to the lives of others with whom he has deep-seated emotional affinities; . . . the path to the fuller understanding of the individual lies through the group—and vice versa. In both cases, the explanation of motive runs from the single human being to others comparable to him, and then back to the individual once more, as the ramifying thought and action of both are gradually illuminated. This reciprocal method is the ultimate concern that history and psychoanalysis share." Hughes' reference to the importance of "spiritual biography" in tracing this process suggests the role that autobiography may continue to play in the future development of American history as a social science and an art.

#### SUGGESTED READING

Author's Note: In addition to the traditional journals serving the disciplines of literature, history, and social sciences, there are several others which the student of American autobiography should consult. Besides those with an obvious interdisciplinary focus (e.g. *American Quarterly*, *Literature & Psychology*, *Phylon*), there are two new journals of special interest: *New Literary History*, published at the University



of Virginia, and *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, published at MIT. The following documents are referred to in the essay. Soft cover editions (\*) are listed in all instances where they are available.

(1) Louis Kaplan, *A Bibliography of American Autobiographies* (Madison, Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1961).

(2) Richard G. Lillard, *American Life in Autobiography, A Descriptive Guide* (Stanford, Stanford Univ. Press, 1956).

(3) William Dean Howells, "Editor's Easy Chair," *Harper's Monthly* 119 (October, 1909), p. 798.

\*(4) *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, eds. L. W. Labaree, R. L. Ketcham, H. C. Boatfield, H. H. Fineman (New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 1964).

\*(5) Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York, Grove Press, 1966).

(6) C. Ohmann, "The Autobiography of Malcolm X: A Revolutionary Use of the Franklin Tradition," *American Quarterly* 22 (Summer, 1970), pp. 131-49.

\*(7) Jerry Kramer, *Instant Replay: The Green Bay Packer Diary*, ed. Dick Schaap (New York: New American Library, 1968).

\*(8) Sammy Davis Jr. and Jane and Burt Boyar, *Yes I Can, The Story of Sammy Davis, Jr.* (New York, Pocket Books, 1966).

\*(9) *Black Elk Speaks, Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*, as told through John G. Neihardt (Lincoln, Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1961).

\*(10) *The Memoirs of Chief Red Fox* (Greenwich, Conn., Fawcett, 1971).

\*(11) Shirley MacLaine, *Don't Fall Off the Mountain* (New York, Bantam, 1970).

(12) Georg Misch, *The History of Autobiography in Antiquity* (Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1951), Vol. I, chap. 1.

(13) André Maurois, *Aspects of Biography* (tr. S. C. Roberts) (New York, Ungar, 1966).

(14) Arthur Melville Clark, *Autobiography, Its Genesis and Phases* (Edinburgh, 1935; reprinted Folcroft Press, 1969).

(15) Wayne Shumaker, *English Autobiography: Its Emergence, Materials, and Forms* (Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1954).

(16) Georges Gusdorf, "Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie," in *Formen der Selbstdarstellung*, eds.

G. Reichenkron and E. Haase (Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 1956), pp. 105-23.

(17) Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1960).

(18) Jean Starobinski, "The Style of Autobiography," in *Literary Style, a Symposium*, ed. S. B. Chatman (New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 285-96.

(19) James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton, Princeton Univ. Press, 1972).

\*(20) Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, The Novel as History* (New York, New American Library, 1968).

\*(21) Richard Gilman, *The Confusion of Realms* (New York, Random House, 1970).

(22) Warner Berthoff, "Witness and Testament: Two Contemporary Classics," in *Aspects of Narrative*, ed. J. H. Miller (New York, Columbia Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 173-98.

(23) Francis R. Hart, "Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography," *New Literary History*, I (Spring, 1970), pp. 485-511.

\*(24) Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory, An Autobiography Revisited* (New York, Pyramid Books, 1966).

(25) Norman N. Holland, "Prose and Minds: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Non-Fiction," in *The Art of Victorian Prose*, eds. G. Lavine & W. Madden (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 314-37.

(26) James M. Cox, "Autobiography and America," in *Aspects of Narrative op. cit.*, pp. 143-72.

(27) Daniel B. Shea, Jr., *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* (Princeton, Princeton Univ. Press, 1968).

(28) Thomas Shepard, "The Autobiography of Thomas Shepard," ed. A. B. Forbers, *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* Vol. 27 (1932) pp. 345-400.

\*(29) Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative in The American Tradition in Literature*, eds. S. Bradley, R. C. Beatty, and E. H. Long (New York, W. W. Norton, 1967) I, pp. 124-36.

\*(30) John Woolman, *The Journal of John Woolman* (New York, Corinth Books, 1961).

(31) *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself in Great Slave Narratives*, ed. A. Bontemps (Boston, Beacon Press, 1969).