The Art of Life

Studies in American Autobiographical Literature

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University of Texas Press Austin & London

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To Randy

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Introduction
The Form of History and the History of Form

A GOOD PART of American literature may be characterized as autobiographical, and while this study is not a survey of American autobiography, it is to a certain extent an examination of autobiographical literature in America. In choosing to consider Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," Henry James's Prefaces, Henry Adams's *The Education of Henry Adams*, William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*, and the poetry of Frank O'Hara, I have tried both to represent the variety of autobiographical literature and to indicate a corresponding variety of approaches to it. As my choice of examples suggests, the term "autobiographical" here does not imply any particular standard of "truth" to the "facts," since the recording of a life necessarily represents the fictionalization—to a greater or lesser degree—of the life lived. In my usage, "autobiographical" refers to works in which the hero, narrator, and author can be identified by the same name. I am not interested so much in the motivations of strictly autobiographical recordings as in the structures and dynamics of writers' creating literature out of their historical selves.

This interest has led me to choose *Walden* and "Song of Myself" as my starting points. Yet the predominance of the autobiographical mode in American literature suggests that this subject is in some way distinctively American, and the works that I study are related to earlier manifestations of the autobiographical impulse in Puritan spiritual autobiographies, on the one hand, and in Benjamin Franklin's story of his archetypal worldly progress, on the other. As various readers have pointed out, a work like *Walden*—with its innerness and all-consuming self-consciousness—can be traced back to a work like Jonathan Edwards's

Personal Narrative. But this is not all of *Walden*: the Thoreau persona is also a shrewd, calculating Yankee, who is closer to a Ben Franklin than to an Edwards. "Song of Myself" has likewise been placed in the tradition of Puritan and Quaker spiritual autobiographies. Yet "Song of Myself" is also an expression of an extremely fluid environment and the archetypal chameleonlike hero that this environment inspires—a process first enacted and recorded by Franklin's elusive hero.

The range of such possible connections suggests that in tracing a tradition of personal literature in America one is dealing less with direct influences and more with a series of responses to essentially similar social, spiritual, and literary experiences. For example, the enduring fluidity of the American environment fosters a kind of isolation that makes the writer turn inward and explore, as Thoreau puts it, "the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being alone." At the same time, the writer's relation to the reader has to become more or less didactic, as the inner experience—sometimes its very inwardness itself—becomes a public example in being communicated. In this way, autobiography has proved to be a congenial form for American writers, because it asserts both their spiritual power to create or regenerate themselves and their potentially political power to change hearts and minds. The two strains of American autobiography—the spiritual or religious and the worldly or political—come together in Thoreau and Whitman, who offer us simultaneously spiritual instruction and worldly lessons in survival. The two kinds of instruction are inseparable in Thoreau and Whitman because their exemplary personal experiences were not their sole way of communicating some truth that transcended the history of the self. Instead, the self—the "simple separate person"—and its history and communication had become their literary subject, their American material. Unlike Edwards or Franklin, then, Thoreau and Whitman were primarily artists and saw themselves as such.

I have chosen to begin this study with the first examples

of autobiographical literature that we have, for my purpose is not to provide a definitive theory of autobiography in America but to define the critical approaches that autobiographical literature demands. Indeed, my primary purpose is to develop a method of talking about literature as a totality—a method that would render terms like "subject," "form," and "style" exactly convertible to each other. Autobiographical literature is particularly suited to my purpose, for it reveals the dynamics of its creation more readily than other kinds of literature and thereby gives us a chance to observe the literary work as the whole that it is at its inception. I intend, then, to explore the process of creation—the process by which history becomes conscious and consciousness becomes form. And autobiography actually enacts the conversion of history into form not just once but continuously, because the "I" in its self-consciousness constitutes at the same time the historical subject, the shaping form, and the personalizing style of autobiography.

Thus autobiographical literature has the status of a metaliterature, because it reveals the process by which history and form become convertible. As literature, such a work embodies a dialog with its tradition and models—with the history of its form and language. For example, *The Education of Henry Adams* is deliberately cast as a conscious dialog with its tradition, for it represents a completion of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, a rebuttal of the *Confessions* of Jean Jacques Rousseau, and an inversion of *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. Moreover, part of the significance of works like *Walden*, "Song of Myself," and *Paterson* derives from their experimental forms, which embody their respective dialogs with English and American literary tradition. Even an apparently unprecedented undertaking like James's Prefaces may be seen in the context of such models as Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition," and Hawthorne's and Melville's various prefaces, for any literary work exists as a dialog with tradition, whether this dialog is consciously articulated or not.

We could say that the history of literature represents a continual self-transcendence—a continual surpassing of what has become convention.[1] Yet the momentum of form alone cannot explain the departures from tradition that make for art. The fact that a particular departure or transformation becomes conceivable, possible, or necessary at a given time attests to the artist's involvement in another dialog, which is extraformal and has its own momentum. This second dialog is with history or with the artist's temporal experience in the context of his or her perception of the total collective experience. As such, the artist's history includes his or her consciousness or the very appropriation and transcendence of history; as a result, we could even speak of an antiformal dialog and regard the work as a clash between the conservatism of form and the radical nature of consciousness, which exists as continuous change and self-transcendence. The literary work, then, may be seen either as form informing history or as history transforming form.

Autobiography records this transaction while enacting it. To begin with, the subject of autobiographical writing is the self becoming conscious of itself in and as history. Although this statement most obviously characterizes *Paterson* and O'Hara's poems, it applies equally to the most closed work under consideration. The Prefaces of Henry James also constitute a transformation of the private self into a public hero, since the simple act of self-consciousness itself involves the recognition of oneself as representative and, therefore, as functioning in and as history. After all, recognition of one's identity as consciousness attests to one's identity with all conscious beings. Second, the inclusive form of autobiography embodies the interaction of history and consciousness. The "I" becomes the organizing principle, for it is in being perceived by the "I" that diverse phenomena become related. Moreover, the "I" provides not only the formal center but the very form of the work. For example, the cyclical progression of *Walden*, the self-transcending evolution of "Song of Myself," the self-destructive

degeneration of *The Education of Henry Adams*, and the "dissipation" of *Paterson* are formal patterns that reflect exactly the personal needs of their respective authors. Finally, style is not only self-expressive but has a historical function as well: as O'Hara's career demonstrates most dramatically, it is style that makes the "I" an "I"—a continuous, publicly enduring entity. Thus, although subject, form, and style in autobiography are so many mirrors reflecting each other, it is also true that autobiography transcends this solipsism, for not only has the self-recording consciousness developed within a particular historical context, but the formal patterns and the style that shape and reshape this development, as well as the narrative and the language that record it, are modes of organization and communication that are shared by the culture as a whole. Autobiography, then, represents a self-examination that is at the same time private and public, for the interaction of personality and collective life that autobiography embodies is reflected in the author's personal appropriation of the language of the times. Since autobiography thus bridges public and private life, the hero of autobiography is the paradoxical private-person-as-public-hero. As we shall see, it is in being communicated or in being made public that introspection—the inner ordeal—becomes heroic. Therefore, just as history becomes conscious and achieves form in autobiography, consciousness itself becomes history in achieving form.

Since the subject and form of autobiography meet in the historical experience of its author-hero, the genre naturally remains quite protean. As the variety of my examples illustrates, the forms of its expression are created by each writer out of personal needs. Thus autobiographical literature is particularly suitable for a study of the interaction of history and form, because it is this kind of literature that retains the closest ties to its roots as a space-time event. If a literary work is seen as an event, history and literature, content and form, and public language and style become useless distinctions. Maurice Merleau-Ponty complains that

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the Museum detaches works of art from the chance circumstances of their creation and leads us to believe that the artist's hand was guided from the start by fate: "the Museum converts this secret, modest, non-deliberated, involuntary, and, in short, living historicity [of the creation] into official and pompous history."[2] Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre accuses the Library of making "messages" of what were originally gestures. This kind of transformation, which alienates the work from its historicity and its life as an event and makes of it a "relic," parallels the dissection of the work into form, content, language, and style. Yet Merleau-Ponty's statement needs to be qualified. If we approach the completed work as we approach any past event, the work will be seen to consist of both freedom and fate. Only within the context of fate can the past be retrieved *as* the set of possibilities that it was, not simply because it has already become an undeniable present but because only the present—the fate of the past—can provide a clue to the range of past possibilities. Thus the completed form may be seen as the fate of the work's historicity. Just as autobiography records the conversion of history into form, as literature it also embodies this conversion in reverse, since its form is necessarily historical. As a result, autobiography bridges art and history and represents a denial both of art as an absolute activity and of history as metaphor and meaning. Art and history are thereby personalized, and the experience of time is reintroduced as the center of each. Thus I am interested in finding an approach that would relate writers as persons in history to their art and, at the same time, would stay clear of psychological and historical interpretations alike. While the psychological emphasis discounts the public history and the function of art as rhetoric, the historian's approach subordinates the private history and the private problems that the work creates as well as solves. Moreover, both of these approaches minimize the momentum of form or the dialog with its tradition that the work embodies; an ideal approach would attempt to comprehend this dialog also.

Seen as event, literature reverts to drama or, more accurately, to ritual. In autobiographical literature as ritual, the artist may be seen to enter into formal communication both with the age or history and with the past, which includes literary tradition as well as one's personal past. As each of the works under consideration demonstrates, autobiography provides one with a way of placing oneself in history. If we regard literature as formal communication, however, we can no more use it to learn about its age than we can account for its forms with our knowledge of the period, since as a ritual experience the literary work exists as the confluence of public *and* private significances. The work represents the point at which a particular relation between the self and the collective experience can be marked in—and preserved from—time, for the time structure that a literary work creates makes a niche in time and marks a point or moment, much as a cathedral makes its mark not only in the space of art history but in geographical or real space. Similarly, the point that the literary work marks in historical time is essentially nonrepeatable, but the point that it marks in physical time is repeatable even now, because physical time is always present. As in ritual, then, the originating context and experience are essentially nonrepeatable, because they arise from a subjective appreciation of a particular moment in time. As form, however, the literary experience is eminently repeatable, because the work is equally accessible to all users of its language. When the literary work is seen as formal communication, even content becomes form—that is, it becomes a *locus of events* and ceases being particular and unique. It is for this reason that a single form is able to accommodate diverse experiences or events. When seen as history, each experience is unique; when seen as form, it becomes similar to a whole class of experiences. As a result, literature requires very few forms in order to make a limited number of statements again and again. Yet each form is always discovered anew, because each statement is always arrived at personally out of each writer's needs.

When we regard literature as a ritual event, we can reconcile the idea of art as a response to a specific historical—psychological and public—context or as a "strategy for living"[3] and the idea of art as drama or as a purely formal conversion of private time into history. As ritual event or, more simply, as gesture, the work has a historical context but a repeated and repeatable form. Susanne Langer sees ritual as originating in "gestures," which are "natural actions" transformed into formal actions through self-conscious repetition. Similarly, we could say that in being transformed into art the artist's acts become gestures. As such, the artist's acts become deliberate, for they are no longer, in Langer's terms, "emotional *acts*" that are "subject to spontaneous variation"; instead, they are "bound to an often meticulously exact repetition, which gradually makes their forms as familiar as words or tunes."[4] Thus the artist's act is transformed from emotional expression into pure drama and thereby becomes *our* ritual. Although the experience in drama is formally and objectively defined and delimited, its reenactment, which represents its fulfillment, is necessarily an experience in the history of the reader, and its significance, therefore, is necessarily subjective.

In this way, art comes to transform history, which is the avowed enemy, so to speak, of anyone who writes autobiography. And history ranges from being simply unreal in the experience of Thoreau and Whitman to being a nightmare in the extreme experience of Adams. Unreal and chaotic, history is a dream, for in its essence it escapes the mind's grasp—that is, in its essence it is unrepeatable. Only temporal phenomena that repeat themselves and thus coincide with biological time can be appropriated as myth. History becomes myth only upon being abstracted into repeatable messages, and since repetition itself is cohesive, history-as-myth makes for cultural cohesion. This transformation of history into myth constitutes the basis of cultural identity in America, and Whitman's poetry, for example, is partly a response to and partly responsible for this

mythicizing of history. Autobiographical literature represents one more attempt to make the unrepeatable repeatable or, in other words, to make the uniqueness of history partake of the recurrence of myth.

As literature, then, the autobiographical work is dramatic in its repeatable form; as semihistorical recording, however, it is a strategy for living, for its subject is the repetition of one's life. D. H. Lawrence writes that "one sheds one's sickness in books—repeats and presents again one's emotions, to be master of them."[5] Yet repetition is curative in a more basic way. By reliving the passively suffered dream of history, one makes it real and comprehensible, since repeating one's history is a way of mastering it. For this reason, Freud regards repetition compulsion as stronger than even the pleasure principle; however painful the experience that one once suffered passively, one is compelled to relive it over and over in order to master the situation.[6] This compulsion, which may be seen, say, in children's playing doctors or teachers and thereby actively mastering unpleasant situations, informs the autobiographical impulse as well. For example, Whitman's catalogs represent his attempts to come to terms with the disorder and the discrepancies in what he perceives, for the catalogs retain something of the chaotic element that initially made his experience less than totally pleasurable. Similarly, twentieth-century urban poets like Williams and O'Hara also repeat in their work what most resists mastery—the chaos, violence, and speed of city life. Moreover, from Thoreau's re-cycling of nature in his *Journal* and *Walden* to James's minute re-visionings and Adams's reconstruction of his career, this mastery through repetition is the object of autobiographical writing. When the particulars or facts of history form a system of relations in a work of art, they become repeatable and therefore constitute a comprehensible experience. On the other hand, old newspapers, for example, are unreadable and essentially incomprehensible, because the particulars remain too close to their roots in the chaos of history.

The relations that autobiography establishes do not necessarily derive from an external system or theory that is imposed on experience; instead, the life simply *is* this particular configuration of these particulars. Thus the relations between experiences are historical or temporal relations, and temporality organizes as well as informs the experience in autobiography. For autobiography is not a static meditation on the self. As Roy Pascal argues, the self is so elusive that it can be grasped only through a historical narrative, not analytically.[7] Although Whitman, for example, rejects narrative in favor of an evolutionary progression, even he employs a historical or temporally irreversible order in shaping his history. The relations, then, are those of the telling; or since the telling, the style, the form, and the person are one in autobiography, the relations are those that personality establishes, and particulars that are related to a personality are related to each other. Since the repetition is formal, however, and since the relations are established in language, they are not private relations. Not only does their significance become public, but they *are* public at their very inception, for language and the structures of narrative embody connections and patterns of relation that are shared by the entire culture.

In making history repeatable, art denies time. Like science and the writing of history, art is a ruse for escaping history, because it works with repeatable time. As a result, the novel is, in Roland Barthes's words, "a Death; it transforms life into destiny, a memory into a useful act, duration into an orientated and meaningful time."[8] This statement, which O'Hara's "In Memory of My Feelings" corroborates for poetry, applies equally to autobiography, which in the hands of Thoreau and Adams actually becomes an anticipation of death. As repetition-in-reverse, however, anticipation represents another strategy for gaining control over history. For instance, Whitman masters the future by anticipating in the 1855 "Song of Myself" the very person he was to become. Similarly, when James recollects his career in the Prefaces and sees himself as anticipating all

along the artist that he has become, he is mastering his past. Autobiography, then, is repetition: either it repeats life, as, say, in the case of Adams, or life repeats it, as in the case of Whitman. Better yet, as Thoreau, James, and Williams illustrate, both processes go on simultaneously.

The principle of repetition also informs the peculiar economy or essential narcissism of autobiography. Beginning with the Romantic period, poets see their authority diminish and their range of subjects shrink to the extent that, eventually, they can speak only about themselves. When one casts oneself as the center of reality, however, one becomes committed to continuous self-scrutiny. For the "phantom of life" that the poet seeks resides nowhere; like Narcissus, the poet knows that should one turn away from this incessant self-contemplation, one would become no one. Consequently, the poet or author has to turn to personal literature, in which author, narrator, and hero—one's form, style, and subject—become mirrors contemplating and endlessly repeating each other. As a result, repetition becomes a structural or an organizational principle as well. Yet this literary solipsism, which reflects Narcissus's straits, is potentially self-destructive. And the death wish that informs Narcissus's experience informs as well the experience of the autobiographer, for the wish to return to an inorganic state is, in Freud's terms, the ultimate expression of the repetition compulsion.[9] Moreover, in transforming life into destiny—in resurrecting the past as necessary—autobiographers in effect anticipate death, because they deny their continuing historical natures in order to repeat the past. Anticipating death, however, is a strategy for overcoming it, and the author plays dead, so to speak, only in order to be reborn. It is for this reason that each of the works to be considered—even as suicidal a work as *The Education of Henry Adams*—ends on a note of resurrection.

As event, then, autobiographical literature becomes a strategy for transcending one's historical essence. Seen as

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