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Autobiography, Autography, Fiction: Groundwork for a Taxonomy of Textual Categories*

H. Porter Abbott

I don't think anybody should write his
autobiography until after he's dead.

Samuel Goldwyn

BECAUSE IT IS MADE UP, a story ends where it ends. In this way there is a connection between the kind of shape and the kind of truth we expect in fictional narrative. When students come up after class to ask if Lady Brett Ashley or Jake Barnes is going to commit suicide, we ask them to unask the question. Were the deaths of Lady Brett or Jake Barnes at all important, Hemingway would have made them a part of the story. Students of course are free to invent more material so long as they know that what they are doing is writing their own story. But in Hemingway's story, as in any story, the last event is the last one the author chooses to give us. In this regard, fictional narrative has no futurity; it keeps happening eternally, which is why we commonly retell stories in the present tense. The policeman raises his baton, the taxi slows to a halt, Brett presses against Jake, and Jake delivers that bitter line: "Yes . . . Isn't it pretty to think so?" What follows is a vast and irrelevant plenum of pure possibility.

Conversely, were *The Sun Also Rises* supposed to be a "true story," its ending would inescapably seem false—a fictive touch. Naturally, historians have to end their histories somewhere, and, as Hayden White has argued, they draw on other conventions of storytelling besides that of an ending to render what happened in the real world. But Sartre was right when he said that there are no "true stories." Whatever is goes on forever; there is no end to give it shape. Brett

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dies, Jake dies, France devolves, the sun expands, the world turns to a cinder, and still there is the interminable decay of atoms.

If fictional narrative ends with the last event in the story, and historical narrative has no definitive end, autographical narrative (autobiography) ends with the writing of the narrative itself.¹ In effect, an autobiography is its own conclusion. Autobiographers themselves frequently acknowledge this, explicitly or implicitly. Augustine dwells on the writing of his *Confessions* during his reflections on memory in Book 10. In Book 12 of his *Confessions*, Rousseau claims that the real cause of his expulsion from Switzerland was the rumor that he was writing his confessions. My point of departure in this essay, however, is that the end of an autobiography is everywhere present in the writing of it. It is therefore not precisely an event, but an event in progress. To translate this into narratological terms, in autobiography the discourse is narrative action. It is this fact, rather than any real or presumed factuality of the events in the narrative, that makes for a meaningful difference between autobiography and its textual neighbors, history and the novel.

I

Principally, this essay is a response to the problem of defining autobiography. In the abundant work on the subject during the last two decades, there is no longer any easy acceptance of the dictionary definition of autobiography (“The history of a person’s life as written by himself”). As Germaine Brée puts it, speaking of French autobiography and referring to this definition, not one term of it—“history, person, life, writing, or self—would seem self-evident to French intellectuals today.”² Correlatively, the very elusiveness of the “form” has become the common thread of much current work on autobiography. “The more the genre gets written about,” writes William C. Spengemann at the beginning of his own effort to restore a coherent historical overview, “the less agreement there seems to be on what it properly includes.”³ It has been called, variously, the “unruly” genre, the “restless” genre, “the most elusive of literary documents.”⁴ Consequently, much theoretical effort has been devoted to redefining the concept itself, as, for example, when Northrop Frye classifies autobiography as a subdivision of the novel,⁵ or when Barrett J. Mandel calls autobiography “literature with a difference,”⁶ or when Paul de Man argues that autobiography is “not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading,”⁷ or when Georges May argues that “autobiography is neither a genre, nor a form, nor a style, nor even a language. . . .

[but] a literary attitude.”⁸ Michel Beaujour displaces the term “autobiography” altogether and, after considering such possibilities as “autographie,” “autoscription,” and “autospécularisation,” settles without enthusiasm on the term “autoportrait.”⁹ Most recently, James Olney has proposed shelving all restrictive definitions of autobiography and pursuing definitions at the level of subgenres (“autosociography, autoautography, autopsychography, autophylography, autobituography, . . . autosoteriography”).¹⁰

In this range of argument, one can locate two poles: at one end are those who not only define autobiography but find in it (or in its most successful form) repeatable narrative shape; at the other end are those who contend that autobiography is inherently indefinable. The former most commonly find the autobiographical paradigm in the narrative Augustine created in his *Confessions*, with its series of events leading to a climactic conversion in which the mature identity (which allows the autobiographer to write his or her story in the first place) is consolidated. It provides a normative guide for Roy Pascal’s classic study, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, and has recently received endorsement in Jerome Buckley’s 1984 study, *The Turning Key*: “The ideal autobiography. . . describes a voyage of self-discovery, a life-journey confused by frequent misdirections and even crises of identity but reaching at last a sense of perspective and integration. It traces through the alert awakened memory a continuity from early childhood to maturity or even to old age. . . . And as a work of literature it achieves a satisfying wholeness.”¹¹

The main difficulties with this approach are that it arbitrarily reduces the field and that it proposes a fictional norm as a descriptive standard. It takes its idea of narrative shape as much from *Robinson Crusoe* and *David Copperfield* as it does from Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*. Though Buckley, like Pascal before him, registers the fact that the “writer’s life is necessarily still in progress,” his stress is on an achieved “sense of perspective and integration.” The autobiographer, now at the end of a major curve in her development, finds, like Pip or Jane Eyre, a still point in which she can write out her life. The discourse, then, is transparent, or at least semi-transparent; it is featured not as a part of the life but as a medium through which the life is seen. This tacit assumption of discursive transparency is very closely related to the notion of an achieved life story, and one finds them together frequently in popular novels over the last 250 years.

The other pole in this range of discourse is at times conceived as a logical reduction cited from a distance by theorists who find themselves moving irresistibly toward it. Paul de Man, in an article on the inevitably tropological and disfiguring character of autobiography,

ventured that autobiography would have to include “any book with a readable title-page,” since somewhere on it “the author declares himself the subject of his own understanding.”¹² His statement echoes the widespread and justifiable uneasiness about autobiography that I have referred to above. “In talking about autobiography,” wrote James Olney in 1980, “one always feels that there is a great and present danger that the subject will slip away altogether, that it will vanish into thinnest air, leaving behind the perception that there is no such creature as autobiography and that there never has been—that there is no way to bring autobiography to heel as a literary genre with its own proper form, terminology, and observances.”¹³ Still, both the term “autobiography” and its field of study persist, and not solely out of academic inertia but out of a sense that the term refers to a literary category distinguishable from other literary categories.

Currently, the most promising alternative to these two extreme positions has been to abandon formal definition altogether and to recast autobiography not as a form but as an act. Here the landmark study is Elizabeth Bruss’s *Autobiographical Acts* (1976). Though Bruss uses the term “genre” to describe autobiography, she considers it the pirate of literary genres, raiding the other genres to fulfill itself. The body of her study is devoted to four different autobiographies from four different centuries, and in each she shows a radically different act with its own particular set of intentions and its own formal improvisation. Bruss relies on speech-act theory—in particular, the concept of the illocutionary act—to introduce her approach, trying to do for autobiography what Austin, Searle, and Strawson sought to do for the study of speech: that is, to move from a static to a dynamic conception of the field, to show how the communicative unit not only states but performs.

Bruss’s shift of perspective has been echoed in a number of studies since hers, particularly in those of Louis Renza, Janet Varner Gunn, and recently Paul Jay’s *Being in the Text* (1984). These writers stress the drama that takes place *in the writing* when the self seeks to write about itself. Jay, for example, focuses on how autobiographical writers cope with the “dissimilarity between identity and discourse. . . . the ever-present ontological gap between the self who is writing and the self-reflexive protagonist of the work.”¹⁴ In the process, he foregrounds the writing of autobiography in much the same way as psychoanalysis stresses the construction of personal history, not as an exercise in historical accuracy but as a therapeutic event in the present, a “talking cure.”

In what follows, I wish to expand on this general insight that autobiography is an act—or better, that autobiography is action—in

order to refine the meaning of autobiography in three ways: to include in that meaning what can be called the reader's autographical response; to accommodate at the same time the formal variety that usually threatens definition of autobiography; and to establish a clear distinction between the larger set, autography, and other fundamental textual categories.

II

One advantage of the view that autobiography is a form of personal action is that it accords with what many readers have implicitly understood to be the case all along. The response to autobiography is, in a very broad sense of the term, suspicion. Among students (mine, at least), this response is often accompanied by fierce passion, particularly the passion of hatred. The student who cannot STAND Benjamin Franklin or Carobeth Laird or Jean-Jacques Rousseau is usually reading their autobiographies as acts—acts of self-aggrandisement, acts of vindictiveness, acts of self-protection—carried out by the authorial subject. They are aware, in other words, of the author present in the text, pushing and shoving the facts, coloring events, in short, doing something for himself.

Conversely, the ones who love Franklin, Laird, Rousseau do not focus on the writer acting in the present as she or he writes, but accept the text's authority or representational innocence. To modify a distinction first proposed by Georges Gusdorf, they read the narrative not as an autobiography but as a biography of the author.¹⁵ Their attention is on the history of the author, not on the author in his present using that history. Whatever the personal qualities they respond to in an author, those qualities do not interfere with their sense of the reliability of the author as a historian. In terms of reader response, then, there is no significant difference between an autobiography read thus and that species of history that goes by the name of biography. There are also works now classified as fiction but originally published eponymously, like *Robinson Crusoe*, that were probably read in this way—as “biographies of the author”—when they first appeared.

Suspicion, and certainly hatred, are too limiting as descriptive terms to catch that demystified, analytic awareness of the author in action that I am proposing as the autographical response. Still, outright suspicion has on occasion been cultivated by autobiographers themselves. In Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* the author describes a contest set up for the orphaned McCarth-

ies by their odious Uncle Myers: “the prize of a dime (no, a nickel) had been offered to the one with the highest marks.”¹⁶ The naive or acceptant reader sees that parenthetical adjustment—“no, a nickel”—as a historian’s scrupulous care for the facts. But the reader whose attention rests on the writing as action wonders: Why the correction? If the prize is a nickel, and the author recalled this while she was writing, why say anything about a dime? Imagining that textual event—“a dime (no, a nickel)”—as it goes through draft after draft, from galley proof to page proof, makes even clearer its status as performance. It is altogether too smooth, and, seeing it as such, we see how the discourse in this instance is a continuing action in the tale of an actress too smooth for her own good, who eludes identity as an alcoholic eludes recovery. Suspicion, in this case, seems not only appropriate but deliberately invited by a complex author whose writing in its very polish is a request for rebuke.

Innocence—in the sense of pure representation, disengaged from a life in progress—is only possible when texts are accorded a purely fictive (or purely factual) response. The autobiography of David Copperfield, for example, can be presumed innocent because David Copperfield did not exist. But all autobiographies, even those aspiring to the Pascal/Buckley ideal of an achieved life story, are corrupted by the present. When one moves from a satisfyingly rounded novel cast as an autobiography to an autobiography cast as a satisfyingly rounded novel, one moves from fictional wholeness to the proclamation of fictional wholeness. And that proclamation is *in the language*.

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their age as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom came nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time.¹⁷

The great impact of the way in which Frederick Douglass opens his life narrative stems from the difference between the impotence and ignorance of his subject and the mastery of language in which it is cast. The exactitude and lean, declarative strength of these sentences is a proclamation of that control and self-assurance which is the present Frederick Douglass. The end of his narrative is present in its beginning. As was common in slave narratives, the writing of the narrative itself was an important challenge in the life, expressing the

triumph of literacy over ignorance.¹⁸ “Written by Himself” the title-page declares. The writing does not simply convey a life, but is itself, in every line, an act of self-assertion by the author.

The difference, then, between an autobiography and a novel lies not in the factuality of the one and fictiveness of the other but in the different orientations toward the text that they elicit in the reader. Correlatively, when an autobiography is read as factual (as a biography of the author) with the reader displacing or making transparent the act of writing, it is read in some respects much like conventional fiction. As in the well-made novel, the world in the narrative is accepted as given, it has a satisfying wholeness, it gives a sense of perspective and integration. Indeed, in the early life of the novel, there is little to distinguish representative fictions from autobiography. But in reading *autographically* everything changes. Even so whole and coherent a work as the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* acquires a certain tension as one keeps an eye on the textual action, tracking it at the same time as one tracks the life of the protagonist.

III

Autobiography’s notorious formal turbulence also derives from its status as personal action. By “formal turbulence” I mean that the classics of the genre are strikingly unlike each other. (Indeed, autobiography outdoes even the novel in the emphatic originality of its landmark texts: Rousseau’s *Confessions*, *The Prelude*, *Song of Myself*, *The Education of Henry Adams*, Sartre’s *The Words*.) Individual authors compound this turbulence in the not uncommon event of their publishing multiple versions of their life narratives. Douglass published four different autobiographies with three different titles, each absorbing and transmuting the material of its predecessor; McCarthy’s autobiography first appeared in the form of polished short stories in *The New Yorker* and *Harper’s Bazaar*.¹⁹

A common focus in efforts to account for this variety has been the ontological dilemma inherent in a textual act of self-recovery. One finds this focus with greatest concentration in studies like those of Renza, de Man, and Jay that deal closely with how the textual recovery of one’s own being is a doomed struggle with inherited literary forms. The text becomes a strange residue of that struggle. As a model of this ontological dilemma, one can take Beckett’s short piece “The End,” in which the narrator’s last memory is that of his suicide at sea. In a concluding sentence that gives new meaning to the idea of writing *d’outre tombe*, the narrator recalls the “memory” that accompa-

nied his suicide—that “of the story I might have told, a story in the likeness of my life, I mean without the courage to end or the strength to go on.”²⁰ The narrative sinks with the narrator, becoming at a stroke infinitely problematic. It raises the exotic possibility that Beckett’s oeuvre is not fiction after all but autography, and its series of extraordinary narrative deformations repetitions of essentially the same doomed effort of self-rendering.

Important as such a focus has been, it does not begin to account for autobiography’s history of formal singularities. Like the exclusive theoretical concern for autographical “disfigurement” that gives it prominence, this focus is itself historically rooted in an enthusiasm for sincerity and more particularly in Rousseau’s effort to write “la vraie histoire de mon âme.” In order fully to account for the formal variety of autobiography, however, we must follow Elizabeth Bruss and look beyond such strictly ontological difficulty to the embracing range of identity-related performative acts to which this literary enterprise is susceptible. Indeed, the *Confessions* of Rousseau itself owes its formal originality to much more than the problematics of honest self-expression: to acts of revenge, acts of self-punishment, acts even of self-concealment that combine in complex ways to generate the final shape of his text.

Ernest Hemingway provided a good example of this autographical difference and the illocutionary complexity behind it in his deceptively uncomplicated text, *A Moveable Feast*. Broadly, the difference of this autobiography lay in its being broken up into a collection of short anecdotes and tableaux with almost no narrative connection between them. This structure, however, seems so clearly to serve one motive in particular that critical response has often been overwhelmed by a narrow sense of the text’s instrumentality—seeing it, that is, as the author’s means of disclaiming the influence of now canonized literary figures and showing his superiority to all save those who represent no serious threat (the lame, the unsung, the certifiable). A structure consisting of numerous separate units, each dominated by Hemingway with one attendant figure, was an obvious way of combining scope with dispatch in completing such an act.

But this act meshed with others that exploited, while they put their stamp on, the formal difference of *A Moveable Feast*. With the end of his life quite possibly imminent, Hemingway also used his book as a device for disposing of certain difficult issues—essentially burying them by legitimating silence in their presence. The most dramatic silencing is the segment entitled “A Strange Enough Ending,” which gives an account of how Hemingway’s friendship with Gertrude Stein ended. Waiting for her to come down from the first floor of her

apartment, he hears her pleading voice: "Don't, Pussy. Don't. Don't, please don't. I'll do anything, Pussy. . . ."21 The author's blood runs cold. He tells the maid he has to go. "That," he writes, "was the way it finished for me, stupidly enough. . . . I could never make friends again truly, neither in my heart nor in my head. When you cannot make friends again in your head is the worst. But it was more complicated than that" (119).

The book is full of such endings, final statements designed to ward against going any further in one's search for cause: to say That's the way it was, and that's the way it is. As such, the book is an entombment of secret knowledge, or mass burial, just this side of the grave. And effectively to accomplish this objective, that striking feature of its architecture which we have isolated permits a continual repetition of the request for respectful silence: "But Paris is a very old city and we were young and nothing was simple there, not even poverty, nor sudden money, nor the moonlight, nor right and wrong nor the breathing of someone who lay beside you in the moonlight" (58). In the final segment, Hemingway engraves the epitaph on the most personally disturbing material from the 1920s, an episode that he had labored long and unsuccessfully during the 1950s to convert into fiction: "I worked well and we made great trips, and I thought we were invulnerable again, and it wasn't until we were out of the mountains in late spring, and back in Paris that the other thing started again" (211). His affair and eventual marriage with Pauline Pfeiffer (she is never named in the text) are sealed in perpetuity as "the other thing."

But at the same time Hemingway was seeking to put to rest, he was also seeking to give permanent life. *A Moveable Feast* was a way of giving final shape to Hemingway, or at least to the *signifié* of Hemingway (not so much for his public as for himself through his public). Again, that motive exploited the structure of the book and in the process made Hemingway's encounter with F. Scott Fitzgerald its culminating business: three late segments that form an averted or surrogate catastrophe. Many have noted that the attack on Fitzgerald is bewildering in its relentlessness. It puts one in mind of what Eliot said of *Hamlet*: that there is violence of feeling in excess of cause. But the violence is excessive only if one sees those chapters as a personal attack on Fitzgerald. To accomplish a much different act Fitzgerald is made to draw the book together. The gallery structure Hemingway developed for *A Moveable Feast* allowed him to anticipate, seriatim, the traits embodied in Fitzgerald. By the time he appears, we have seen him in pieces already: the writer who gets things wrong, the writer who prostitutes his craft, the writer dominated by women, the man who can't drink, the snob who abuses humble folk, the writer

who can't write in Paris, the Poet Marked for Death. Hemingway's Fitzgerald combines these traits in a compound image of disintegration and vulnerability which Hemingway, in the late 1950s with his own physical, and arguably mental, disintegration underway, used all his craft to avert—seeking to grant himself eternal life through a climactic series of contrasts with the Anti-Hemingway.

Autobiography, then, is the most turbulent of narrative modes because of its instrumentality in the particular historical moment of its composition. If the ontological dilemma of accurate self-representation plays its role in this turbulence, the example of Hemingway shows that a multiplicity of identity-related acts, having little to do with the desire for sincere, or even authentic, textual self-recovery, combine to twist autobiographical form in original ways.

IV

Briefly to summarize, my argument is that the major repeatable features of autobiography—in terms of both our response and its form—are keyed to the fact that autobiography does not end in the way that fiction or history do, that insofar as autobiography can be said to end its ending is the action of its discourse. But an important question remains: Are not reader suspicion and plurality of form characteristic of fictive modes as well? Suspicion these days appears to characterize our response to almost all textual objects, and theorists like Bakhtin have virtually identified the novel with the continual overthrow of conventional literary form.

To focus first on the problem of suspicion, the question more fully put is this: Given the prevalence of suspicion in current ways of reading—our tendency to displace whatever appears to be the manifest intention of a text—have we not extended autography to include what Olney and de Man suggest it might include: nearly all texts? As one reader of an early version of this argument put it, if to read autographically is to demystify, is to read in any other way to be mystified? The answer, if we restrict ourselves to the difference between autographic and fictive readings, is yes. Within limits of the term *mystify*, to write fictively is to mystify; to read fictively is willingly to be mystified. This is the same sense of fictivity that Coleridge had in mind when he wrote of “a willing suspension of disbelief.” One of the advantages of distinguishing between fiction and autography is that it preserves fiction as “made up”—free of this world and its particulars (including the author) in a way that autography is not. The distinction catches the otherness of the fictive world that authors themselves

so frequently remark—as, for example, Tolstoy when he “discovered” to his great surprise that Vronsky was going to try to kill himself after he first made love with Anna Karenina; or Faulkner when he greeted Phil Stone with the exclamation, “Guess what Flem Snopes did last night!”

The distinction between these fundamentally different modes of reading/writing can be made clearer by drawing on Paul Ricoeur’s provocative juxtaposition of Augustine’s *Confessions* and Aristotle’s *Poetics* in the first volume of his *Time and Narrative* (*Temps et récit*). Ultimately, Ricoeur is seeking a unified theory of narrative in a “rapprochement” between Augustine and Aristotle, but we can draw on the distinction he stresses without misrepresenting the full complexity of his argument. After “completing” the narrative of his life, Augustine meditates in Chapter 11 on the time in which that life appears to have taken place. He meditates in particular on the aporia of the being and nonbeing of time and determines that time past, present, and future exist only in a constant present of mind. In Ricoeur’s adumbration, they come into being, in effect, through the phenomenon of the *distentio animi*, or the soul’s capacity actively to extend itself.²² Autographical narrative, by implication, begins and ends in the present of its making. It is a narrative mode that includes an acute awareness of the present as a constancy of “passing” and therefore (to use Augustine’s terms) as a condition of our fallen state, incomplete and sharply opposed to eternity and oneness. As Ricoeur notes, “Neither the conversion recounted in Book 8, nor even the ecstasy of Ostia which marks the culmination of the narrative in Book 9, ever eliminate the temporal condition of the soul” (29). This fallen, temporal condition is accentuated by Augustine in the very discourse on time and memory that he annexes to the story of his life, thereby softening any illusion of finality that may exist in the foregoing narrative.

In sharp contrast to Augustine’s reflections on autographical narrative in Chapter 11, Aristotle’s treatise on fictional narrative, the *Poetics*, contains no reflections at all on existential time, much less any approach to a theory of time. This is because fictional narrative, for Aristotle, is something quite different from the continual distress of time passing that we experience in real life. If “Augustine groaned under the existential burden of discordance,” writes Ricoeur, “Aristotle discerns in the poetic act par excellence—the composing of the tragic poem—the triumph of concordance over discordance” (31). In contrast to the autobiographer, Aristotle’s poet owes his allegiance to the successful completion of the plot (*mythos*); and if the plot is going to be complete it must of necessity be “made up,” disengaged from

our time: “If we translate mimesis by ‘representation’ . . . , we must not understand by this word some redoubling of presence . . . but rather the break that opens the space for fiction. Artisans who work with words produce not things but quasi-things; they invent the as-if. And in this sense, the Aristotelian mimesis is the emblem of the shift [*décrochage*] that, to use our vocabulary today, produces the ‘literariness’ of the work of literature” (45).

As readers of fiction and audiences of tragedy, we too seek to finish the plot, to collaborate with what we discern to be a poetic act on the part of the author. In this sense, we are willing to be mystified, to enter into the illusion of completion that we rarely sustain in our experience of real time. Our attention is on Oedipus and the successful realization of his narrative, not on Sophocles and the act in present time constituted by *Oedipus Rex*. Viewing the play as such, we accept the exile of Oedipus as the ending of the piece and give it full retrospective force in bringing the elements of the play into shape (with its array of attendant meanings), just as, in realizing the *fictive* potential of *The Sun Also Rises*, we look away from the authorial present and allow the final moment in the text its subtle force in giving shape and meaning to the whole.

That our sense of the whole and the meanings we attribute to it may differ from those of Hemingway or Sophocles is no objection. If, to use Frank Kermode’s terms, we inevitably both overread and underread a tale,²³ giving our own stress to certain events and underplaying or eliding others, we are still playing the same game as the author and observing the same rules of fiction. We are trying to make a story, and with any luck a meaningful one. Correlatively, if we read with “suspicion” in a deconstructive sense—that is, if we show how a text produces constructions that conflict with or cancel what at first appeared to be its shape and meaning—we are also still playing the game of fiction. “Suspicion” in this sense is not suspicion of an author and his or her intentions, but suspicion of language and the infinite deferral of the signified. Like the New Criticism, such an approach aspires to a purity of fictive response, erasing the author altogether.

If such readings erase the author from the text, they also collaborate with or double the author in the sense that the reader is aligned with the author, seeking like him or her to realize the tale, however tentative its meanings. In contrast, to read autographically is not to erase the author but to keep him or her in view. It is, in consequence, not a collaboration with but a standing apart from the author. As a mode of reading, it is not so much creative as it is analytic.

Ricoeur’s pairing of Augustine and Aristotle also helps us respond to the observation that there is almost as much formal plurality in the

novel as there is in autobiography. To begin with, it encourages us to isolate a different kind of formal plurality in autobiography arising from a difference in ontology. In Aristotelian narrative, formal closure is itself a part of the ontology, something we and the author bring to the narrative. It is part of the rules, without which the fictive event is imperfectly achieved. But Augustine, standing analytically apart from his narrated self, is aware that insofar as his narrative is about himself it can have no conclusion to give it final shape. Lacking final shape, autobiography will always lack in its protagonist the kind of crisp identity one finds in characters belonging to the well-made plot. Autobiography in this sense is distinguished by its failure. The identity it seeks to express is always blurred, for the narrative can only bring the autobiographer to that continual “passing” in which he writes. Such writing is an undermining of the mythos.

Similarly, we can respond to the further point that novels, like autobiographies, may have their own historical instrumentality and thus have a formal variety that, like that of autobiographies, arises from their status as textual acts.²⁴ The key point here is that to establish fiction as fiction in the first place, to play the game of fiction, we must recognize the text as before all else an act of fiction. And we recognize the act’s fictionality by explicit or implicit indications that there has been an uncoupling or *décrochage* (to use Ricoeur’s term), releasing its realm from time, history, the life of the author—in short, from that realm that guides us in contextualizing historical acts. In contrast, autographical acts are distinguished by a proposed identity of writer and subject. This proposal cancels the fictional act and ties the narrative to time and this life. In this way, autography is immediately contextualized. It provides a tight interpretive circle when compared to the gulf that the term “fiction” proposes between author and text. It invites the special focus of an autographical reading on a textual action in progress in real time.

We can clarify this point by considering those intradiegetic situations novelists frequently devise for the narration of their stories. Reading Werther’s or Nelly Dean’s or Nick Carraway’s narrative acts, we are directly affected by our sense of who they are and what their motives of the moment must be. Considerations of this kind affect in turn the way we shape their stories in our minds, what details we feature and what meanings we find. In short, we read their narratives autographically, with the analytic suspicion appropriate to the mode. But this reading serves our creative collaboration with the authors of those larger fictions that contain these narratives. In other words, we recognize the narratives of Goethe, Emily Brontë, and Fitzgerald as all belonging to the same category of act—the overtly poetic act. As

such they are quite different from the individual personal acts of Werther, Nelly, and Nick. We can, of course, also choose to read Goethe's or Brontë's or Fitzgerald's texts as acts in their lives, but no consideration of that kind is necessary for a thoroughly successful and meaningful completion of their fictional acts.

This sufficiency of fiction—that it establishes a certain game to be played outside of time, a game that cannot be played in autographical narrative—can be true of even the most disconcertingly “open” of modern fictional texts, *insofar as they are perceived as fiction*. Even texts that seek to frustrate closure by playing with our expectations—Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le labyrinthe*, Borges's *Ficciones*, Max Frisch's *Stiller*—do so outside of the historical present in which they are written. Only when the primacy of the fictional response breaks down does the textual object change its status—as, for example, when it occurs to us that Samuel Beckett's postwar literary endeavor might not be fiction after all but autography.

The key is our willingness to play the game of endings. Perhaps nothing so vividly illustrates the insidious character of autographical awareness—the threat it carries to this game—than Rousseau's effort to write neither autography nor fiction but a history of himself that would marry the certitude of fact with the comfort of fictional wholeness. Doing all he could to ward off suspicion and maintain the factual mode of response to his *Confessions*, he ended his narrative with an account of its first reading. It was a shrewd idea. It held out the possibility of equipping his text with its appropriate response. Rousseau selected for this event an audience of the highest breeding and most exquisite sensitivity. Yet the observable effect of this reading (silence, disturbed only by the enigmatic trembling of Madame d'Egmont), with its absence of any clear indication of his auditors' internal response, only heightened the pathos of his effort to control response through the control of form. Seeing the odds against him, he opted for pathos. “Tel fut le fruit,” he comments, “que je tirai de cette lecture” (Such was the fruit of this reading).

Rousseau sought an embalmed finality in his self-portrait, but his rhetoric of sincerity and exactitude was no proof against the fact that readers of life narratives (saving idolators) will eventually read autographically. Even were his facts exact, they would not override the reader's temptation to look beyond any purely biographical intentions (as it turns out, the inexactitude of his facts has only fueled this temptation). Mark Twain, whose own autobiography was a torment of many false starts, was plagued more keenly than Rousseau by this fact, and it kept him from any kind of an ending: “An autobiography

is the truest of all books; for while it inevitably consists mainly of extinctions of the truth, shirkings of the truth, partial revealments of the truth, with hardly an instance of plain straight truth, the remorseless truth *is* there, between the lines, where the author-cat is raking dust upon it which hides from the disinterested spectator neither it nor its smell . . . the result being that the reader knows the author in spite of his wily diligences.”²⁵

V

Though my principal object in this essay has been to discriminate between autobiography and other categories of literature, such an object pursued long enough leads through a taxonomy of literary attitudes and modes. As our distinctions would imply, such a taxonomy most usefully distinguishes texts according to the standards of meaning by which they are organized. More exactly (since organization does not inhere in texts themselves), such a taxonomy divides up the field of literary texts according to the standards of meaning by which readers organize a response to a text, or which authors seek to elicit. This taxonomy makes clear what is implicit in Twain’s reference in the quotation above to two opposed kinds of truth.

Textual Attitude	fictive	autographic	factual
Broad Narrative Mode	the novel	autobiography	history
Broad Nonnarrative Mode	lyric	letter	essay
Narrative Genre	ballad	confessions	biography

My concern here is not to be complete (there is room for expansion on both the x and y axes)²⁶ but to show how such a taxonomy might fruitfully be generated. Since paradigms of this kind always suggest a cleanliness in reality which is not really there, it is worth stressing again that no textual response is unmixed. We find conceptual truth in fiction just as we find well-made plots in history. Our concern, however, is not with the interplay of literary attitudes within texts but with that embracing attitude that gives us our final purchase on a text and determines how we organize, evaluate, and give meaning to it as

a whole. That an author depends upon, and that we seek, a final orientation toward a text as fictional, autographical, or (as in this essay) factual and conceptual is I think undeniable. It establishes our sense of what kind of truth is involved. Were I, for example, to start introducing more and more references to myself in this essay, there would come a point at which your attention would shift from my argument to myself, from the truth or falsity of these contentions about literary attitudes to my character and my motives for writing these things.

The paradigm is also not meant to suggest that texts cannot be moved from one category to another. Quite the reverse. One virtue of the paradigm is its power of combining and clarifying the relationship between two ordinarily opposed kinds of textual designation: by literary response and by formal description. The formal categories (those below the first line, which can be imagined stretching downward on the vertical axis in more various and discrete subcategories until one reaches individual works) are subject to displacement from one literary attitude to another. The farther one moves down the chart, the more common this displacement is. Sometimes such a displacement entails both a strain in ingenuity and a loss of much that is interesting in the text, but frequently such shifts are brought about by factors beyond the control of either the author or the reader. When a novelist, for example, leads a noteworthy life, it is sometimes hard to keep his or her novels from shifting toward autography and away from fiction. It is only with difficulty that we can read the fiction of Hemingway *unautographically* (though the rewards of such an effort can be considerable). We have too powerful and pervasive a set of received ideas associated with the name "Hemingway."

The paradigm makes clear the utility of the term "autography."²⁷ The term not only identifies a valid literary attitude distinguishable from both the fictive and the factual/conceptual responses, but it sharpens and preserves the term "autobiography" for the more specifically *narrative* kinds of self-writing. Both in its origins and by custom, "autobiography" is closely identified with the expectation of a developing action or series of incidents implied in "a life" (bio). Like the term *novel*, itself a problematic category, autobiography seems inevitably to connote—if not denote—a long prose narrative. So strong is this association that the term is never without some strain used to refer to primarily nonnarrative self-writing—to meditative essays and to texts like Whitman's *Song of Myself*, Kafka's *Brief an den Vater*, or Valéry's *Cahiers*. Yet there is increasing pressure to include such disparate texts in the same field with autobiography. "Au-

tography” gives them that field while it preserves their nonnarrative status.

The paradigm also preserves the nongeneric status of autobiography. Just as the broad term “fiction” frees up the term “novel” for its more limited (narrative), though not yet generic, role, the term “autography” frees up the term “autobiography” for a role quite parallel to that of the term “novel”: a loose narrative structure housing a variety of genres (the novel of manners, the *Bildungsroman*; the spiritual autobiography, the slave narrative). It is at the more discrete level of genre that morphological studies of autobiography like those of Susanna Egan and M. H. Abrams have their greatest power.²⁸

To read fictively is to ask of the text before all else: How is this complete? It is to align oneself with the author in a joint project of rendering the text an artful whole. As such, it requires looking away from the author and dropping considerations of factual or conceptual accuracy.

To read factually or conceptually is to ask of the text: How is this true? It is to align oneself with the author in a project that, unlike the fictive project, does not depend on the text for its completion. When the text is finished, the author’s achievement is judged and the search for truth goes on. Successive texts will always eventually displace any particular history or treatise. Unlike great fictions, factual texts are forgotten, unless at some future date they are revived as art or autography or data in another factual and conceptual field (intellectual history).

To read autographically is to ask of the text: How does this reveal the author? It is to set oneself analytically apart from the author in a project that often succeeds in spite of him. Historical truth or falsity are important only insofar as they express the identity of the author. As it is always symptomatic, autography, unlike factual writing, is in this regard always true. And unlike fiction, which may or may not achieve an organic integrity of design, autography cannot fail to be organic and integrated, for the “author-cat” *is* there, in every line.

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NOTES

1 In this essay, I use “autography” for the broad category of self-writing, “autobiography” for its narrative subset. I shall return to this useful distinction at the end.

2 Germaine Brée, *Narcissus Absconditus: The Problematic Art of Autobiography in Contem-*

porary France (Oxford, 1978), p. 7. Note the striking exception in the methodical work of Philippe Lejeune—"DÉFINITION: Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité" (DEFINITION: Retrospective prose narrative that a real person makes of his own existence, with the stress on his individual life, particularly on the history of his personal identity). See *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris, 1975), p. 14.

3 William C. Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven, 1980), p. xi.

4 These three quotations come, respectively, from Janet Varner Gunn, *Autobiography: Toward a Poetics of Experience* (Philadelphia, 1982), p. 3; Elizabeth Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore, 1976), p. 172; James Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical and Bibliographical Introduction," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton, 1980), p. 3.

5 Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 307–8.

6 Barrett J. Mandel, "Full of Life Now," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, p. 62.

7 Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," *Modern Language Notes*, 94 (1979), 921; rpt. in de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), pp. 67–81.

8 Georges May, "Autobiography in the Eighteenth Century," in *The Author in his Work: Essays on a Problem in Criticism*, ed. Louis L. Martz and Aubrey Williams (New Haven, 1979), p. 320.

9 Michel Beaujour, *Miroirs d'encre: rhétorique de l'autoportrait* (Paris, 1980), p. 7.

10 James Olney, "Autobiography: An Anatomy and a Taxonomy," *Neohelicon*, 13, No. 1 (1986), 57–82. My thanks to Professor Olney for sending me an advance copy of this article, which was originally delivered at the "Conference on Genres in the 20th Century" (Budapest: August, 1985).

11 Jerome Buckley, *The Turning Key: Autobiography and the Subjective Impulse since 1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 39–40.

12 De Man, pp. 921–22.

13 Olney, "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment," p. 4. Compare de Man: "Just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical, we should say that, by the same token, none of them is or can be" (p. 922).

14 Paul Jay, *Being in the Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Barthes* (Ithaca, 1984), p. 29. See also Louis A. Renza, "The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, pp. 268–95, originally published in *New Literary History*, 9 (1977), 1–26.

15 Gusdorf's distinction between biography and autobiography can be found in "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography," tr. James Olney, in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, p. 31.

16 Mary McCarthy, *Memories of A Catholic Girlhood* (New York, 1957), p. 57.

17 Frederick Douglass, *The Narrative and Selected Writings*, ed. Michael Meyer (New York, 1984), p. 18.

18 Sidonie A. Smith observes that in almost all slave narratives the writing of the narrative itself was an essential act on the road to freedom. See "Flight," the first chapter of her *Where I'm Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography* (Westport, Conn., 1974), pp. 3–27.

19 For reasons implicit in my argument, this textual re-rendering of the same material is more common in autobiographies than novels. Neither should be confused, howev-

er, with the serial accumulation of narrative that goes on in the *roman*— and *autobiographie*—*fleuve*, forms which seem to be equally common.

20 Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing* (New York, 1967), p. 72.

21 Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (New York, 1964), p. 211; hereafter cited in text.

22 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 1*, tr. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Palmer (Chicago, 1984), pp. 18–21; hereafter cited in text.

23 Frank Kermode, *The Art of Telling* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pp. 138 ff.

24 See especially Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories,” in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago, 1981), pp. 209–32.

25 Mark Twain, *The Mark Twain—Howells Letters*, ed. Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gilson (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), II, 782.

26 A promising candidate for horizontal extension is what could be called the “rhetorical” or “pragmatic” literary attitude. This would include such externally oriented kinds of moral and political “textual doing” as satire and propaganda. Where the textual action of autography is perceived as a “doing for” the author, the textual action of rhetorical texts can be perceived as a “doing to” the reader. Where the autographic text can be said to end in the moment of writing, the rhetorical text can be said to end in the moment of reading.

27 The term “autography” is relatively unencumbered by recent usage, even when compared to Beaujour’s term of choice, “autoportrait,” which has gained a certain generic specificity in recent French commentary. Moreover, autography has a history of meanings that gives it connotative reinforcement for the function I propose. The first known use of the term was by Joseph Glanvill in his *Vanity of Dogmatizing* (1661): “Thus when some dayes, and nights have gone over us, the stroak of Fate concludes the number of our pulses; we take our leave of the *Sun* and *Moon*, and bid mortality adieu. The vital flame is extinct, the Soul retires into another world, and the body to dwell with dust. Nor doth the last Scene yield us any more satisfaction in our *autography*; for we are as ignorant how the soul leaves the light, as how it first came into it” (“Preface” [Hove, Sussex, 1970], p. A8). The OED identifies “autography” in this usage as an obsolete term for autobiography, but it is clear, I think, that Glanvill meant by the term something more like writing about the self (as an object of philosophical understanding). By far the commonest meanings in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are either “handwriting” or “collections of autographs” (the latter a subject to which Poe devoted a series of popular magazine articles). That one leaves a signature, or self-identifying trace, everywhere in what one writes is, of course, an assumption that underlies my use of the term *autography*. One of the few recent uses of the term is that of Gregory Ulmer who has put it through a Derridean filter in his *Applied Grammatology: Post(e)-Pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys* (Baltimore, 1985), pp. 128–32.

28 Susanna Egan, *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1984); M. H. Abrams’s discussion of Romantic autobiography can be found throughout his *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York, 1971).