

Touching the World

REFERENCE IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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PAUL JOHN EAKIN

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This book has been composed in Linotron Janson

FOR MARION, EMILY, HALLIE, AND HUGH

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DO I NOT know that, *in the field of the subject, there is no referent?*” (Barthes, *Barthes* 56). This question reads like one of those conundrums in philosophy, prompting the reflective to ask, “Who is this ‘I,’ then?” As an instance of discourse in an autobiography, it seems doubly problematic, for autobiography is nothing if not a referential art, and the self or subject is its principal referent. This line and the book whose essence it has seemed to epitomize, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), have come to serve as a touchstone for assessments of the state of contemporary autobiography. Thus Germaine Brée, for example, captures the subversive drift of Barthes’s self-portrait when she identifies it, along with André Malraux’s *Antimémoires* (1967) and Michel Leiris’s *La Règle du jeu* (1948–1976), as an “anti-autobiography” (*Narcissus* 9). Again, for Dorothy Kelly, the book illustrates the fate of autobiography in the age of poststructuralism, when “deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis have exploded both the concepts of representation and of the self” (122). Moreover, the condition of contemporary autobiography, in its turn, is held by Michael Sprinker and others to represent “a pervasive and unsettling feature in modern culture,” namely, “the gradual metamorphosis of an individual with a distinct, personal identity into a sign, a cipher” (322).

A change of this magnitude in received assumptions about the nature of subjectivity would amount to something like a paradigm shift in Western culture, and it is precisely the history of this shift as reflected in the development of modern autobiography from Wordsworth to Barthes that Paul Jay proposes to chart in his recent study, *Being in the Text* (1984). Jay’s thesis is that changing views of the nature of the self have been registered in parallel changes in autobiographical form, culminating in the “strange mimesis” of self-referential works by Paul Valéry and Barthes, in which the reality of subjectivity, a sense of the self as divided and dispersed, lacking a central core, is mirrored in an equally fragmentary and discontinuous text.¹ Although Jay is, I think, ultimately right in positing a mimetic dimension to Barthes’s autobiographical practice, Barthes’s proposition about the subject and its referent is itself considerably more radical and disabling when it comes to representation than Jay’s account of it as mimesis allows.

¹ See Jay, *Being* chapter 6, and Wylie Sypher, Robert Langbaum, and Eugene Goodheart as presented in Eakin, *Fictions* 205–6.

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Barthes does go out of his way to undercut the notion that the discourse of autobiography is supported by a structure of reference. What I want to suggest, however, is that the “strangeness” of self-representation in this book derives not only from its concerted, self-conscious difference from more conventional models of the genre, but also from the unsettled—even contradictory—nature of Barthes’s views on the experience of subjectivity and on the possibility for its expression in language.² The autobiographical practice of Roland Barthes really does not illustrate as decisively as some commentators would make out the demise of classical autobiography and its concern with the self. When the austere tenets of poststructuralist theory about the subject came into conflict with the urgent demands of private experience, Barthes turned for solace, as we shall see, to photography, which he regarded as the supremely referential art. I shall present this mismatch between theory and experience in the case of Barthes with a view to establishing him as a representative contemporary autobiographer, but of a rather different sort from that proposed by Paul Jay, Dorothy Kelly, Paul Smith, and others.³ Barthes’s profound ambivalence about the self and language suggests that it is time to reopen the file on reference in autobiography.

I. THE MARK OF THE SQUID IN *ROLAND BARTHES BY ROLAND BARTHES*

Barthes’s arresting dictum on the subject appears comparatively early in the sequence of entries that constitute the text of *Roland Barthes*, under *c*, that is, in an approximately alphabetical arrangement running from *a* to *t*. The heading of the passage is “Coincidence,” and Barthes begins with his curious experience of listening to recordings of himself playing the piano. In making these tapes he has proposed to “*hear myself*” (*Barthes* 55), but that is not what actually takes place:

² My own thinking about these issues as reflected in Barthes’s autobiography has been importantly shaped by Gratton’s essay on Barthes, which I shall discuss later on in this Introduction.

³ Several twentieth-century autobiographers have recorded the consequences of the life led too strictly in conformity to a theory of some kind—Jean-Paul Sartre in *The Words* and André Gorz in *The Traitor* offer striking instances. Paul Smith’s recent study of contemporary theories of the subject indicts poststructuralism for its deterministic view that fails to include an adequate conception of human agency. For an interesting recent study of Gorz, see Mundhenk.

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What is it that happens? When I listen to myself *having played*—after an initial moment of lucidity in which I perceive one by one the mistakes I have made—there occurs a kind of rare coincidence: the past of my playing coincides with the present of my listening, and in this coincidence, commentary is abolished: there remains nothing but the music (of course what remains is not at all the “truth” of the text, as if I had rediscovered the “true” Schumann or the “true” Bach). (*Barthes* 56)

In the moment of (re)expression, playings (or utterings) past and present seem to “coincide,” and “commentary” (on what has been) is “abolished”—“there remains nothing but the music”—and any trace of himself as player has vanished. The project of “*bearing myself*” has been defeated.

As the meditation continues, Barthes discovers in his unexpected experience with music an analogy for the creation of *Roland Barthes*: “When I pretend to write on what I have written in the past, there occurs in the same way a movement of abolition, not of truth.” The displacement of “truth” by “abolition” as the central dynamic of engagement in self-reference (listening to himself playing, writing about his writing) is a bold stroke in the history of a genre whose practitioners and critics from Rousseau to Roy Pascal have always accorded the central place to truth, however variously defined. As Barthes insists on the difference between his own conception of his specular project (writing on what he has written) and traditional (or “classical”) views of autobiography or self-portrait, the nature of the absent referent “*in the field of the subject*” becomes absolutely clear:

I do not strive to put my present expression in the service of my previous truth (in the classical system, such an effort would have been sanctified under the name of *authenticity*), I abandon the exhausting pursuit of an old piece of myself, I do not try to *restore* myself (as we say of a monument). I do not say: “I am going to describe myself” but: “I am writing a text, and I call it R.B.” I shift from imitation (from description) and entrust myself to nomination. Do I not know that, *in the field of the subject*, *there is no referent?* (*Barthes* 56)

In this remarkable declaration of independence Barthes serves notice that the “R.B.” of *Roland Barthes* has nothing to do with reference, with retrospect, with the self, with mimesis of any kind. If the bravado of Rousseau’s pledge—“I have displayed myself as I was”—can be taken as the foundation of two hundred years of modern autobiographical practice in

the West, Barthes can be said to turn it on its head, making a pact with his reader that is truly fitting for an “anti-autobiography”: the identity of name shared by author, narrator, and protagonist has no referential consequence whatsoever. (So much for Philippe Lejeune’s attempt to bring autobiography, always a wayward and contrary animal, to heel!)⁴

Barthes’s reasoning about the absent referent in the field of the subject seems to derive, paradoxically, from the very ease with which language (dupliciously) promotes the illusion of an absolute correspondence between signifier and signified, between language and the real, a correspondence that spells defeat for the transaction of reference in the very moment of apparent success. From the perspective of this deconstruction of reference, language, as it were, is too good to be true! “The fact (whether biographical or textual),” Barthes states, “is abolished in the signifier, because it immediately *coincides* with it.” This is to say that Barthes sees himself as operating within a wholly self-contained signifying system, so any question of reference is moot. What is happening, then, is literally what is happening (“coincidence”): “I am writing a text,” and in this extreme valorization of the autobiographical act as linguistic process the “I” of the text is understood to be—inevitably—linguistic and textual in nature:

Writing myself, . . . I myself am my own symbol, I am the story which happens to me: freewheeling in language, I have nothing to compare myself to; and in this movement, the pronoun of the imaginary, “I”, is *impertinent*; the symbolic becomes literally *immediate*: essential danger for the life of the subject: to write on oneself may seem a pretentious idea; but it is also a simple idea: simple as the idea of suicide. (*Barthes* 56)

Barthes’s performance in “Coincidence” is a bravura high-wire act, and it is hardly surprising that his evocation of autobiography as an art of self-abolition has attracted an admiring crowd of poststructuralist spectators. He wants, after all, as he observes a bit later on, “to side with any writing whose principle is that *the subject is merely an effect of language*” (*Barthes* 79). Yet, in the entry entitled “The person divided?” he is prepared to attribute this sense of the subject’s elusiveness, its disappearance or “abolition” in expressive acts, to the fact that the subject to be expressed is itself “dispersed,” lacking “a central core” (*Barthes* 143).⁵ This dispersal, this dis-

⁴ For Lejeune’s concept of the autobiographical pact, see “Autobiographical Pact.”

⁵ For additional discussion of Barthes’s suspicion of plenitude, see my treatment in chapter 2 of his views on the proper name.

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placement, is manifested in the instability of pronominal categories that keep shifting into each other “like the reflections of a watered silk” (*Barthes* 168). Although Barthes stresses the discontinuity and dispersal of the subject at the level of proposition, “*at the level of his body,*” by contrast, he gives an experiential account of subjectivity that insists on the continuity of consciousness. This is how the passage reads from the entry called “My head is confused”:

And yet: *at the level of his body,* his head never gets confused. It is a curse: no value, lost, secondary state: always consciousness . . . recovering every morning, upon waking, a head swimming a little, but whose interior remains fixed (sometimes, falling to sleep with something worrying me, upon first waking it has disappeared: a white minute, miraculously stripped of meaning; but the worry rushes upon me, like a bird of prey, and I find myself altogether back where I was, *just as I was the day before*).

Sometimes he feels like letting all this language rest—this language which is in his head, in his work, in other people, as if language itself were an exhausted limb of the human body. (*Barthes* 176–77)⁶

Subject and subjectivity are intimately connected to language, then, at both the level of propositions and the level of the experiencing body; at the heart of consciousness is the incessant play of “all this language.” Inevitably, this “book of the Self” (*Barthes* 119) is a book about language, which poses for Barthes a double problem in his autobiographical project.

Barthes may wish for a moment’s respite from the play of language that seems to drive consciousness forward, yet when it comes to attempting to

⁶ Although Barthes does not draw analogous inferences about the nature of the self, his evocation of the ineluctable continuity of consciousness resembles William James’s in *The Principles of Psychology*: “When Peter and Paul wake up in the same bed, and recognize that they have been asleep, each one of them mentally reaches back and makes connection with but *one* of the two streams of thought which were broken by the sleeping hours. . . . Peter’s present instantly finds out Peter’s past, and never by mistake knits itself on to that of Paul. Paul’s thought in turn is as little liable to go astray. The past thought of Peter is appropriated by the present Peter alone. He may have a *knowledge*, and a correct one too, of what Paul’s last drowsy states of mind were as he sank into sleep, but it is an entirely different sort of knowledge from that which he has of his own last states. He *remembers* his own states, whilst he only *conceives* Paul’s. Remembrance is like direct feeling: its object is suffused with a warmth and intimacy to which no object of mere conception ever attains. This quality of warmth and intimacy and immediacy is what Peter’s *present* thought also possesses for itself. So sure as this present is me, is mine, it says, so sure is anything else that comes with the same warmth and intimacy and immediacy, me and mine” (1: 238–39). I am grateful to James Olney for directing my attention to this passage.

“render” someone’s voice, he chooses as an instance a voice in which he detects “the threat of aphasia,” “the exhausting collapse of the subject without language.” Commenting on his failure to find “the right metaphor” for such a voice (*Barthes* 67), he writes, “So great is the gap between the words which come to me from the culture and this strange being (can it be no more than a matter of sounds?) which I fleetingly recall at my ear” (*Barthes* 68).⁷ Not only is the “gap” between “words” and “being” alienating, making the familiar “strange,” but language itself belongs to others. Thus, if he should engage in any discussion of his “*private life*,” his discourse would inevitably be governed by some variety of “*Doxa*” (Barthes’s term for received public opinion) of the right or left (*Barthes* 82). Language, then, is hardly the obedient servant of an autonomous and controlling subjectivity, as traditional views of self-expression in autobiography would have it. Thoughts of the alienation that invades the voice and the private life it would express prompt Barthes to wish, as he does here, for an unmediated speech, or even, as we shall see, for a discourse (of bodies) unmediated by speech—in other words, for an experience of pure presence. When it comes to the nature of the subject and its relation to language, the testimony of *Roland Barthes* is distinctly ambivalent: the subject is merely linguistic, “an effect of language,” a product of expression in discourse; the subject (with or without a center) has an existence beyond language that language fails to express.

“Freewheeling in language”—these are the words Barthes uses to describe the act of fashioning “R.B.,” the act of writing *Roland Barthes*. Free, yes, but to what degree? How to appropriate the medium for himself? It becomes, in fact, one of the principal tasks of the book to define Barthes’s language as distinctive, different from the language of the tribe and its “*Doxa*.” The numerous passages on language (certainly the largest group of entries devoted to any single topic in the book), on the parts and figures of speech, on etymologies, on favorite terms and neologisms, constitute collectively a veritable primer of Barthes-speak.⁸ Yet this very assertion of difference undercuts itself, for in this work of definition Barthes is in effect operating for the benefit of others, providing them with a lexicon with which to understand what might otherwise seem mandarin, rare, or precious in his discourse, a private speech accessible only to the initiated.

⁷ In this same passage Barthes observes that “the voice is always *already* dead,” and his position seems to parallel Derrida’s. For a brief discussion of Derrida’s notion of *s’entendre parler*, see Eakin, *Fictions* 223–24.

⁸ Kelly observes in this connection, “He has constructed his own ‘language of the self’ whose basic unit is the *alphabet*” (126). See *Barthes* 162–64.

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Accompanying Barthes's deep-seated desire for a private language of his own in this text is a recurring anxiety about the separation from others that the possession of such a language would necessarily entail. In "The fear of language" Barthes displays the dark contrary of the "freewheeling" pleasure he experiences elsewhere in the play of language: "What if all his life *he had chosen the wrong language?*" As the passage unfolds, Barthes displays the shifting moods generated in him by the tension between languages public and private:

He is all the more readily overcome by this panic here (in U.) where, staying home at night, he watches television a good deal: here is continually represented (remonstrated) a public language from which he is separated; this language interests him, but this interest is not reciprocal: to the television public, his own language would seem entirely unreal (and outside of aesthetic delight, any unreal language is likely to be ridiculous). Such is the trajectory of language's energy: in a first impulse, to listen to the language of others and to derive a certain security from this distance; and in a second, to jeopardize this retreat: to be afraid of what one says (indissociable from the way in which one says it). (*Barthes* 115)

Roland Barthes offers ample evidence of both phases of this "trajectory of language's energy," for counterbalancing the magisterial affirmation of his difference, of which his language is the principal marker—"his place (his *milieu*) is language" (*Barthes* 53)—is his persistent fear of exclusion. Although Barthes is always skittish when it comes to assigning origins or causes, he is emphatic about "the minority situation of R.B. himself," who "has always belonged . . . to some margin—of society, of language, of desire, of profession, and even of religion" (*Barthes* 131). Roland Barthes's "R.B." is an inveterate outsider, and in the most elaborate of the several meditations on "the *Doxa*," a long fragment entitled "Medusa," he presents himself as a conflicted witness at the primal scene of language. Medusa, he reminds us, "petrifies those who look at her," and her "repulsive" appearance, he recalls, is the consequence of Minerva's revenge, for Neptune had "ravished and wed her in the temple of Minerva." For Barthes, Medusa is "a gelatinous mass which sticks onto the retina," associated with an unpleasant adolescent memory of swimming at Malo-les-Bains and emerging from the water "covered with stings and blisters" from "the kind of jellyfish we call medusas" (*Barthes* 122).

The cycle of attraction and repulsion, of fear and desire, that informs Barthes's voyeuristic presentation of the "*Doxa*" as Medusa culminates in the lines that follow:

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Medusa, or the Spider: castration. Which *stuns* me, an effect produced by a scene I hear but do not see: my hearing is frustrated of its vision: I remain *behind the door*.

The *Doxa* speaks, I hear it, but I am not within its space. A man of paradox, like any writer, I am indeed *behind the door*; certainly I should like to pass through, certainly I should like to see what is being said, I too participate in the communal scene; I am constantly *listening to what I am excluded from*; I am in a stunned state, dazed, cut off from the popularity of language. (*Barthes* 123)

The insistent, obsessive repetition of both language and substance here speak for themselves, and the opening and concluding lines framing the passage make clear that to be “cut off from the popularity of language” is tantamount to “castration.” The distinctiveness of his discourse, the principal mark of his difference, shows here as lack and wound. From this perspective the “I” who writes a language of his own is less than zero.⁹

Juxtaposed against this figurative evocation in “Medusa” of Barthes’s fear of exclusion from “the popularity of language,” and as if to provide it with a gloss, is “A memory of childhood” (on the preceding page) in which he offers a personal etymology of what it means “to be excluded” from the others. There is nothing here of the rich, allusive texture of “Medusa.” Instead, the style is—for Barthes, at any rate—stripped down and direct, an utterance of raw emotion in which the urgency of a traumatic memory of abandonment and rejection seems to inhibit his characteristic impulse for linguistic invention (his customary display of power):

When I was a child, we lived in a neighborhood called Marrac; this neighborhood was full of houses being built, and the children played in the building sites; huge holes had been dug in the loamy soil for the foundations of the houses, and one day when we had been playing in one of these, all the children climbed out except me—I couldn’t make it. From the brink up above, they teased me: lost! alone! spied on! excluded! (to be excluded is not to be outside, it is to be *alone in the hole*, imprisoned under the open sky: *precluded*); then I saw my mother running up; she pulled me out of there and took me far away from the children—against them. (*Barthes* 121–22)

“Against them”—in these words the child’s *exclusive* possession of the mother is sealed with an almost audible sigh of relief: in this wishful reversal, to be excluded from the others, to be “alone in the hole,” is ex-

⁹ Barthes’s interest in castration is pervasive in his work, most prominently displayed in his analysis of Balzac’s novella *Sarrasine* in *S/Z*.

changed for a plenitude of union in separation, a paradoxical and utopian “third term” or condition to which Barthes resorts here (and so often in these pages) to escape entrapment in the irreconcilable polarities of experience.¹⁰

In “Jubilatory discourse,” Barthes develops a fantasy version of this place apart to which he is conducted by his rescuing mother in “A memory of childhood,” a place where all of the deficiencies of language and desire would be made good once for all. Even the exchange of love, however, which would seem to be the ideal refuge from exclusion and solitude, is revealed to be a precarious transaction, for Barthes’s deconstructive eye detects in the “whole paroxysm of love’s declaration”—“*I love you, I love you!*”—a “*lack*,” even though he images it “welling up from the body” like a force of nature: “We would not need to speak this word, if it were not to obscure, as the squid does with his ink, the failure of desire under the excess of its affirmation.” Barthes dreams, accordingly, of “some forgotten corner of the logosphere” where “language should at last become the primary and somehow *insignificant expression* of a fulfillment.” The process of signification, the great central subject of Barthes’s *Mythologies* (1957), *The Fashion System* (1967), *S/Z* (1970), and so much else in his work, shows here as the enemy, the adding of meanings a testimony to the incompleteness of the signified. Except, notably, in the case of “the Mother” (and God), the problem becomes how to counteract the embarrassing “demand” that “*I love you*” necessarily betrays.¹¹ In Barthes’s fan-

¹⁰ As I write these lines, professing to discover in this “memory of childhood” a special significance, I recognize that I am obeying what is for Barthes one of the fundamental laws of subjectivity, the “rage to make the simplest facts signify” (*Barthes* 151). Barthes himself seeks in *Roland Barthes* to deflect this irrepressible drive toward meaning in the presentation of his featured topics: “Perhaps in places, certain fragments seem to follow one another by some affinity; but the important thing is that these little networks not be connected, that they not slide into a single enormous network which would be the structure of the book, its meaning” (*Barthes* 148). To illustrate his resistance to the tyranny of imposed meaning, he presents several pages of “anamneses,” brief evocations of childhood memories intended by the retrospective subject to be “more or less *matte*, (insignificant: exempt of meaning)” (*Barthes* 109–10). By contrast to the “anamneses,” there is nothing “*matte*” about “A memory of childhood” (“Un souvenir d’enfance”), which follows them several pages later, surfacing as if with a will of its own out of alphabetical sequence in the midst of the rubrics under *m* (“Le mariage,” “Au petit matin,” “Méduse”). The experience “*in the hole*” is about meaning, about the way in which meaning in language is defined by experience.

¹¹ Barthes furnishes in one of the photographs featured in the opening section of *Roland Barthes* an image that captures the depth of the subject’s need for love. The caption reads, “The demand for love,” and the photograph of the eight-year-old “R.B.” held in his mother’s arms suggests in the very size of the child—too big to be carried—something of the pathos involved. See *Barthes* 4–5.

tasy solution, speech defies the laws of gravity that customarily define it as the mark, the cry, of the isolate subject, its lack suspended in a magical moment of perfect reciprocity with the other: “the (improbable but ever hoped-for) case when two *I love you*’s, emitted in a single flash, would form a pure coincidence, annihilating by this simultaneity the blackmail effects of one subject over the other: the demand would proceed to *levitate*” (Barthes 112).¹²

Barthes’s model, then, for an unmediated primary speech is the discourse of love, which, in this idealized exchange, exactly opposes the nightmare encounter of linguistic sexuality in “Medusa” in which “R.B.” emerged covered with blisters and stings, castrated, the voyeur punished with a wound in the eye. The union of language and body is decisive for Barthes, and he is even led in a playful bit of pseudo-anthropology to see language and love as twin effects of human physical evolution, permitting “a simultaneous use of speech and kissing” that could eventually become the foundation of a Barthesian utopia in which people “will then do nothing but discourse and make love!” (*Barthes* 141).

This notion of bodies expressing, of discourse “welling up” from the body, underlines the body’s importance in Barthes’s conception of the subject, and it is interesting in this regard that he identifies “body” as a “mana-word” in his “lexicon,” “a word whose ardent, complex, ineffable, and somehow sacred signification gives the illusion that by this word one might answer for everything” (*Barthes* 129). It is almost as though the characteristic attributes of the “self” of classical autobiography have been displaced onto the “body” here, and Barthes speaks elsewhere of the body as “the irreducible difference,” “the principle of all structuration,” distinguishing him from others, recognizing as he does so the “individualistic” tenor of his notion of bodily discourse (*Barthes* 175). The self or subject may lack a central core, but the body with its ability not only to desire insatiably but (as word) to “answer for everything” in discourse seems to go far toward filling the absent center of the subject.¹³

The *embodiment* of the ideal solution to the discord that splits the Barthesian “logosphere” surrounding the subject and his body, in which two languages—the “jubilatory discourse” of lovers and the dangerous speech of the “*Doxa*”—contend for mastery, is to be found in “R.B.”’s

¹² Barthes pursues his reflections on “the amorous apostrophe” in the next two entries, and again what he longs for is a language commensurate with desire, “an unheard-of speech . . . in which the speaker and the lover finally triumph over the dreadful *reduction* which language (and psychoanalytic science) transmit to all our affects” (*Barthes* 114).

¹³ For additional commentary on Barthes and the body, see Paul Smith 111.

relation to his mother. For Barthes, the connection between women and language (mother : “jubilatory discourse” :: Medusa : *Doxa*) is deep-seated and instinctive, almost genetic in derivation. In the sketchy genealogy which accompanies the opening photographs he suggests that the Barthes clan was a kind of “matriarchy” in which “language belonged to the women” (*Barthes* 13); both grandfathers “had no part in language” (*Barthes* 12). Again, when he speaks of “the mother tongue,” he relates that “he never feels in a state of security in his own language”: “sometimes, listening to French people in the street, he is amazed to understand them, to share with them a part of his body,” for “the French language is nothing more or less for him than the umbilical language” (*Barthes* 115–16). With this notion of language as “umbilical” bond, we come full circle back to the mother who rescues the boy “*alone in the hole*,” the mother with whom he is not “embarrassed” by the “demand for love,” the mother with whom he shares a perfect union of body and speech, a refuge “against them,” the Medusa-threat of the others.¹⁴

I have suggested that in the Barthesian “logosphere” two distinct languages emerge as possible constructions of the relation between the isolate subject in his body (“*alone in the hole*”) and the other(s). One is a “jubilatory discourse,” “welling up from the body” of the subject like ink from the squid, seeking some ideal union of reciprocal desire. The other is the hostile discourse of “the *Doxa*,” endowed, like the medusa, with the power to harm, perpetuating the painful reality of exclusion. In “The [squid] and its ink”¹⁵ Barthes aligns the language of his autobiography with “jubilatory discourse” when he likens his performance of the autobiographical act to that of the squid: “I am writing this day after day; it takes, it sets: the [squid] produces its ink: I tie up my image-system (in order to protect myself and at the same time to offer myself)” (*Barthes* 162). The “I” who writes is motivated simultaneously by contrary impulses toward concealment and display (the fundamental dynamic, I might add, that structures so much of the literature of confession). In an adjacent passage, “The shifter as utopia,” Barthes develops his notion of the paradoxical, squid-like potential of language (notably in the discourse of the first person) *not* to communicate in the very moment of expression: “The shifter thus appears as a complex means—furnished by language itself—of breaking

¹⁴ In a caption to a photograph of the members of a seminar he taught at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes in 1974, Barthes speaks of the seminar as an alternative community of lovers (*Barthes* 171).

¹⁵ Richard Howard translates *seiche* as “cuttlefish” here, obscuring the important connection with Barthes’s allusion to the squid in the passage “Jubilatory discourse” (*Barthes* 112).

communication: I speak (consider my mastery of the code) but I wrap myself in the mist of an enunciatory situation which is unknown to you: I insert into my discourse certain *leaks of interlocution* (is this not, in fact, what always happens when we utilize that shifter *par excellence*, the pronoun *I*?)” (*Barthes* 166).¹⁶

Interestingly, a good deal of the commentary on *Roland Barthes* (by Paul Jay and others) has stressed the motion of concealment at the expense of the motion of display, citing the dictum that the referent is absent in the field of the subject and adducing other passages in which Barthes speaks of the absence of any central core in his sense of himself as subject (e.g., *Barthes* 92–93). Yoked, however, to this cerebral side of “R.B.” is another, “alive, pulsing, pleasure-seeking—my own unique body” (*Barthes* 175), and in italics, below the final entry in the alphabetical series (which by its date reveals itself also to be the first entry in the order of composition), Barthes pursues the following thought, “*To write the body*” (*Barthes* 180). Facing these words, moreover, is an illustration from Diderot’s *Encyclopedie* entitled “Anatomie,” showing the “stems of the vena cava with their branches dissected in an adult body” (*Barthes* 186), a nice figure for the subject as body.

The final bound page of the volume, following the apparatus appended to the main text of photographs and fragments, may serve as an admirably succinct and suitably graphic emblem of Barthes’s divided views of the subject’s nature, its expression in language, and the possibility of reference. On the recto appear two doodles, together with the caption “Doodling . . . or the signifier without the signified” (*Barthes* 187).¹⁷ On the verso these lines appear in a facsimile of Barthes’s own handwriting:

And afterward?

—*What to write now? Can you still write anything?*

—*One writes with one’s desire, and I am not through desiring.* (*Barthes* 188)

The “I” who writes is one with the “I” who desires; “R.B.” is the squid offering himself in his ink, producing in his homely fashion a “jubilatory discourse.” In this sense *Roland Barthes* is “R.B.”’s “demand for love.”¹⁸

¹⁶ In the rest of the passage Barthes goes on to develop his idea of a linguistic and sexual utopia in which, thanks to the operation of the shifter, subjects would enjoy a “freedom and . . . erotic fluidity” of bonding (“collectivity”) while maintaining a “*vagueness of difference*” untrammelled by the constraints of reference (“saying . . . without referring to anything legal whatsoever”).

¹⁷ In the original French edition the arrangement of the concluding apparatus is somewhat different and the striking recto-verso configuration is diluted.

¹⁸ Barthes and Walt Whitman may seem like an unlikely pair, but this equation of writing

As for the representation of his handwriting, Barthes speaks in one of the autobiography's later entries of the inevitability of the "*signature*": "I display myself, I cannot avoid displaying myself" (*Barthes* 166). Roland Barthes was canny enough to see the contradictory forces—recto and verso—of the performance of the "I" who writes: writing can be a defense mechanism, positing the absence of any referent in its urge to conceal; writing, nonetheless, like it or not, always displays, uttering here the lyric cry for love of the subject "*alone in the hole*."

For another characteristic instance of Barthes's double view of the subject and its referent, consider his various invocations of the *Argo* and the Argonauts in *Roland Barthes*. In the final instance in the series of *Argo* passages, in "The [squid] and its ink," the ship *Argo* stands as the analogue for the text, *Roland Barthes*, in which Barthes's "utterances" "spontaneously" arrange themselves into a "structure" or "repertoire which is both finite and perpetual, like that of language" (*Barthes* 162). In the first instance in the series, "The ship *Argo*," Barthes analyzes his attraction to this figure, finding in it "the allegory of an eminently structural object" in which identity and difference are paradoxically reconciled through the processes of "*substitution*" and "*nomination*." Barthes's conception of *nomination* here illustrates his difference from theorists like Philippe Lejeune ("Autobiographical Pact") and Elizabeth Bruss who look to the proper name as the guarantee of the transaction of reference in autobiography. For Barthes, "The name is in no way linked to the stability of the parts": "by dint of combinations made within one and the same name, nothing is left of the *origin*: *Argo* is an object with no other cause than its name, with no other identity than its form" (*Barthes* 46). Functioning as Barthes's *Argo*, *Roland Barthes* and "R.B." are only *nominally* linked to Roland Barthes.

If nomination and substitution in language mask the fundamental discontinuity of experience, the subject, unreconciled, demands nevertheless that language represent the continuity of desire. Thus, in a third instance

and desire leads each to a distinctly organic conception of his creativity, and in each the fundamental link between writing and sexuality, together with an emphasis on the central place of the body in subjective life, is explicit and insistent. In Whitman's case, the analogue for the ink welling up in the squid (which Barthes is careful to associate with the "whole paroxysm of love's declaration") is the ejaculation ("jetting" is Whitman's characteristic term) of seed in the male orgasm. Similarly, as "So Long," the final poem in *Leaves of Grass* (ever since its first appearance in the third edition of 1860) reveals, Whitman makes clear in his parting address to the reader that "the demand for love" is central to his art; his, too, is a "jubilatory discourse": "It is I you hold and who holds you, / I spring from these pages into your arms."

in the series of allusions to the *Argo*, in “The word’s work,” Barthes suggests his wish to participate in the illusion of stability that nomination promotes. Here “the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name” becomes the ideal type of “the subject in love” who performs in his reutterings of “the amorous apostrophe” (“the demand for love”) “a long task through the course of one and the same exclamation, gradually dialecticizing the original demand though without ever dimming the incandescence of its initial address” (*Barthes* 114). This is the ultimate gratification, an “initial” or “original” love that manages to be “forever new,” defying the dispersal and change that oppose any possible stability and integrity of the subject. As Argonaut or squid, writer or lover, Barthes seeks to create “an unheard-of speech” in which sameness and difference can coexist, a paradoxical discourse that could make good an identity of language and desire. In the image of the *Argo* we find superimposed in a kind of double exposure two opposing strains in Barthes’s presentation of the subject and its referent: on the one hand, nomination and substitution in language mask the fundamental discontinuity of experience and the impossibility of reference; on the other, the subject, unreconciled, demands that language represent the continuity of desire.¹⁹

My own reading of the tensions that structure Barthes’s self-portrait has been inspired by Johnnie Gratton’s masterful essay “*Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes: Autobiography and the Notion of Expression.*” Gratton’s point of departure is Barthes’s statement, “Do I not know that, *in the field of the subject, there is no referent?*” and he detects in it a fundamental ambiguity of intention, “as if somewhere along the line there were a *vouloir* at odds with this *savoir*, a resistance to the authoritative thrust of such an assertion” (58). Following Gratton’s analysis of Barthes’s shifting definition of, and attitude toward, expression, we see Barthes not as the cool Olympian theorist of postmodernism but as a more troubled, unquiet figure struggling against “the general indifference of language to our desire for self-expression.” Reviewing Barthes’s various formulations of the relation between the subject and language when it comes to expression, Gratton distinguishes three positions:

- (a) a pre-critical subject, for whom expressivity remains a natural function of language; (b) a critical subject, who calls into question both the efficiency of the expressive process and the credibility of a self predating it, dispensing ready-made contents into it; and (c) a post-critical subject

¹⁹ For Barthes on nomination, see also Kelly 123–24.

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. . . who prizes the act of writing for its salutary dispersal of the ego-ideal and who experiences that dispersal as an ecstatic undoing of limits.

“The dominant tension informing Barthes’s work after *Le plaisir du texte* [1973],” he argues, “lies increasingly in the play-off between subjects (a) and (b)” (62).

In the brilliant conclusion of Gratton’s essay, in which every move of Barthes’s “twist-and-turn poetics” (61) is subjected to a scrutiny too intricately reasoned to render here in detail, Barthes emerges as an autobiographer in spite of himself. *Roland Barthes* may be designed, he suggests, as “a text which will seek to assume and expose the fictional process at work inside autobiographical writing,” yet Barthes (as well as his readers) is left when all is said and done “with no reliable mark, internal or external, by which to gauge or identify fictionality, that is to say, by which to read autobiography against itself” (that is, to read it as fiction): “The logic of his demonstration leaves him . . . stuck with autobiography” (64).

Gratton’s anatomy of the Barthesian subject and his vexed relation to language and reference is rigorously textual, and he does not venture any biographical speculations to account for the tensions at work among the precritical, critical, and postcritical avatars of the subject that he identifies. Gratton claims that the “confessional curve” he traces in Barthes’s oeuvre “from intellectual repudiation to writerly desire . . . discloses not the writer’s personal secrets or unspoken dissensions from his own ideas, but, in the words of Serge Doubrovsky, the very mechanisms of his writing” (59).²⁰ In observing this distinction between public and private, Gratton and Doubrovsky maintain a separation of realms that squares with Barthes’s doctrine that the referent is absent in the field of the subject.

J. Gerald Kennedy, however, discerning the same “confessional curve” in the work of Barthes’s final years, argues that Barthes came to abrogate this doctrine as he moved toward a new view of the subject and its relation to writing, abandoning the idea of “an absolute disjunction between self and text” (383). To illustrate the anti-essentialist views of the earlier Barthes, he cites John Sturrock, who attributes to Barthes “a philosophy of disintegration, whereby the presumed unity of any individual is dissolved into a plurality” (390). In striking contrast to this view is the “resolute conception of essence” (390) that informs Barthes’s final work, *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (1980), published in the year of his

²⁰ The passage in Doubrovsky (“Ecriture”) is on 348. See also the section “Ecrire pour être aimé” (351–52) for Doubrovsky’s commentary on the relation in Barthes between the act of writing and the demand for love.

death. (*La Chambre claire* has been translated in English as *Camera Lucida* [1981].) Several features of the writing in this book on photography reflect a major shift in Barthes's approach to the subject: Kennedy notes a new "centering of consciousness in the use of a single voice" (391) and a new mode of bourgeois sentimentalism, to which I would add a new vocabulary, whose central words—*essence*, *identity*, *soul*—signal a return to the discourse of classical autobiography. It will come as no surprise to any reader of *Camera Lucida* that Kennedy traces this revolution in Barthes's ontology to his relation with his mother, especially as crystallized in her final illness and death in 1977.

To support this biographical thesis, Kennedy draws on three sources, Barthes's seminar, "Préparation du roman" ("Preparation of/for the Novel"), which Kennedy attended at the Collège de France in 1978–1979, and two texts written in the last year of his life, "Délibération" and *Camera Lucida*. Kennedy reports that Barthes opened the course in October of 1978 with a lecture that contained a startling retraction: he confessed a desire to "'escape from the prison house of critical metalanguage' and through simpler, more compassionate language to close the gap between private experience and public discourse" (383). Following in the vein of this new orientation, Barthes announced to the seminar on December 9, 1978, that he was writing a novel of memory, connected with a recent sorrow and with his deepening sense of his own mortality. Then, in what seems to have been a revelation of the incident behind his October confession, Barthes related to the seminar a "mortality crisis" he experienced near Casablanca in April 1978 in which he was overwhelmed by "a powerful consciousness of his own impending death" (384) and by "remorse about his career, perceiving an absolute rupture between his emotional life and his mental life" (385). He had lived to his cost, that is, the consequences of his austere theory about the absent referent in the field of the subject.

Barthes's novel of memory was, apparently, never written, but Kennedy argues that in two final works, "Délibération" and *Camera Lucida*, Barthes accomplished what would doubtless have been the objective of the novel, the display of his relation to his mother. In each work Barthes stresses the importance of bearing witness to the existence of the beloved—in writing, in photography—and I think it is quite significant to note in this connection that Barthes proposes in *Camera Lucida* an aesthetic of photography founded precisely on this bearing of witness. Photography is for Barthes the most referential of all the arts, testifying authoritatively to the existence of what it displays. In the field of the lens, we might

say, there is always a referent, and Barthes beholds in photographs the truth that these referents have really existed: “Every photograph is a certificate of presence” (*Camera* 87).

This theory of photography as a referential art follows—and seems to have been generated by—an extraordinarily intimate private experience that Barthes relates in the opening sections of the book’s second part: one evening in November 1977, shortly after his mother’s death, he visits her apartment and, reviewing her photographs, he searches in each picture of her the reality of her “*being*,” her “essential identity, the genius of the beloved face.” This “Sisyphean” effort to ascend to the place of origin (*Camera* 66) is rewarded in his discovery of “the truth of the face I had loved” in the earliest of the surviving images, “the Winter Garden Photograph” displaying his mother as a child of five in the conservatory of her home (*Camera* 67). Barthes says of this *Ur*-photograph, “It achieved for me utopically, *the impossible science of the unique being*” (*Camera* 71).

Barthes affirms his belief in the power of photography to refer and to achieve the representation of being in the most absolute terms. Adapting Mallarmé’s famous line that concludes his sonnet on the tomb of Edgar Poe, Barthes writes, “I discovered her *as into herself* . . . [*... eternity changes her*, to complete Mallarmé’s verse]” (*Camera* 71). The intensity of Barthes’s elemental hunger for presence is revealed in a later passage in which he speaks of his desire to penetrate to a yet deeper level of being beneath the surface of the beloved “Winter Garden Photograph”: “I live in the illusion that it suffices to clean the surface of the image in order to accede to *what is behind*: to scrutinize means to turn the photograph over, to enter into the paper’s depth, to reach its other side” (*Camera* 100). In marked contrast to his posture in *Roland Barthes*, where he attempts to separate the world of private experience from the world of public discourse and theory, Barthes declares his intention here at the heart of *Camera Lucida* to derive from his encounter with the “Winter Garden Photograph” the guiding principle, the “Ariadne” (*Camera* 73), for his research into the nature of photographic art in the rest of the book.

Kennedy experiences these pages in *Camera Lucida* on Barthes’s relation to his mother as “a moment of pure autobiography,” presenting “the revelation of his innermost self” (397), and I think that Barthes himself makes absolutely clear why the moving evocation of his mother’s life may stand as a fitting emblem of the subjective reality of his own existence, why her biography may serve as his own autobiography. Reflecting on his retrograde quest back through time to the beginning of her life and the “Winter Garden Photograph” and recalling her childlike weakness as he nursed her

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in her final days, he could say of their exchange of roles, “She had become my little girl, uniting for me with that essential child she was in her first photograph”: “I who had not procreated, I had, in her very illness, engendered my mother” (*Camera* 72). If we, in turn, recall the haunting photograph in *Roland Barthes* of the boy of eight in his mother’s arms, captioned “The demand for love,” we can see the perfect existential reciprocity of their intense relation demonstrated by this moving reversal. In this identity of identities, in which her life and being become one and interchangeable with his, the logic of mortality is inevitable and determining, requiring an absolute concordance of origins and ends, and Barthes beholds in his mother’s death the inscription of his own:

Nothing to say about the death of one whom I love most, nothing to say about her photograph, which I contemplate without ever being able to get to the heart of it, to transform it. The only “thought” I can have is that at the end of this first death, my own death is inscribed; between the two, nothing more than waiting; I have no other resource than this *irony*: to speak of the “nothing to say.” (*Camera* 93)

For Barthes, then, the expression of love (as in “jubilatory discourse”) and of loss, inextricably intertwined, are equally attended by a profound sense of lack, of the insufficiency of expression itself, and yet I get a sense of plenitude, even though shadowed by irony and paradox, from Barthes’s conviction of his very betrayal by language (his charge, finally, that even the “Winter Garden Photograph,” like any photograph, “cannot *say* what it lets us see” [*Camera* 100]). Perhaps, then, the figure of the squid as the emblem of the Barthesian autobiographical subject is absolutely right: the motive to conceal is not the contrary or counterimpulse of the motive to display but its double and complement: the words, the language, all the ink, are the only sign we have for what we cannot say. And so, in order to illustrate what he has shown and what he cannot show, Barthes deliberately omits the “Winter Garden Photograph” from the collection of photographs that illustrate *Camera Lucida*. The referent of the absent photograph, the alpha and the omega of his existence, is by definition ineffable, unspeakable, and only by concealment may it be displayed. It is, truly—and this is a fitting tribute to the sufficiency of Barthes’s insufficient art—the most memorable photograph in the book.

In contrast to *Roland Barthes*, recognized by some as the quintessential postmodernist autobiography (or “anti-autobiography”), *Camera Lucida* may seem, in its own way, to be a second autobiography, espousing assumptions about the self and reference of a much more traditional sort. In

fact, when one rereads the earlier work in the light of the later one, it is hard not to find the burden of the latter already present in the pages of the former, especially in the opening section of photographs. Barthes's initial remark about the album of pictures evoking the world of his childhood in Bayonne ("Bayonne, Bayonne, the perfect city" [*Barthes* 6]) is disarming: "To begin with, some images: they are the author's treat to himself, for finishing his book" (*Barthes* 3), he observes, as though the photographs represent something extra, a kind of whimsical indulgence, a spontaneous supplement.

Of course, the photographs may well not have been part of Barthes's original plan for the project, but there they are in the finished work, like the return of the repressed. As if to ensure the recognition of this afterthought as *underthought*, Barthes goes on to stress that he has retained "only the images which enthrall me, without my knowing why," images that "rivet" and "fascinate," for they put him "in a relation with my body's *id*" (*Barthes* 3). Barthes may well assert in his presentation of the illustrations in *Roland Barthes* a theoretical separation between "the image-repertoire" of his childhood in Bayonne and "the image-repertoire" of "the hand that writes" (*Barthes* 4) that punctuates the later, written section of the book, but he discovers in the photographs of himself as a child "everything which is still in me, by fits and starts; in the child, I read quite openly the dark underside of myself" (*Barthes* 22). It is suggestive that Barthes's discovery of this principle of continuity connecting child and adult is announced in a caption to a snapshot of himself as a three-year-old carrying a sand pail ("on a little beach at Ciboure, no longer in existence, around 1918" [*Barthes* 185]), his face completely obscured by a large sombrero-like sun hat—an early moment in his own biography analogous to the identity-revealing moment of his mother's biography that he discerns in the "Winter Garden Photograph" of 1898 taken at an equally early age.

In "Barthes puissance trois" (Barthes to the third power), Barthes's review of *Roland Barthes* in *La Quinzaine Littéraire* of 1975, he could not resist drawing attention to the maternal bond informing his autobiographical project. Thus he comments as follows on the portfolio of photographs that opens the book:

It is not for nothing, it seems to him, that the imagery of *Roland Barthes* (gathered together symbolically before the text begins) is almost exclusively the imagery of a childhood. It is not for nothing that the book is punctuated three times by the image of the Mother: first radiant, representing the only *Nature* recognized by a subject who has endlessly de-

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nounced the “natural”; then overwhelming, holding close a sad child in a dual relation, marking him with an eternal “demand for love”; posed finally beside, in front of, and behind the Mirror and founding from that moment the imaginary identity of the subject. (“Puissance trois” 5)²¹

In giving this final image of the triptych a Lacanian caption in the text of *Roland Barthes*—“The mirror stage: ‘That’s you’” (*Barthes* 21)—Barthes prompts recognition of the all-encompassing mother’s determining position (“beside, in front of, and behind the Mirror”) not only in the genesis of his own (“imaginary”) identity but, proleptically (as in the case of the “Winter Garden Photograph”), in the creation of the specular doubling in the autobiographies he would eventually live to write.²² Subverting the truth he discovers in this founding image of mother and child in the mirror, Barthes characteristically asserts the impossibility of positing a meaning for a work that programmatically refuses meaning, or, at any rate, the impossibility of Barthes himself doing what he seems to be doing, since “he is the only one who can’t speak *truly* about himself.” In order to symbolize the failure of self-reflexive display—“no matter what name he might sign it with—were it the most tested of pseudonyms: his own name, his Proper Name” (“Puissance trois” 5)—Barthes invokes, predictably, the sign of the squid (*la seiche*) obscuring itself behind a cloud of ink. Nomination and signature, deconstructed and displaced, return in the mark of the squid.

It is a curious fact of literary history that at the end of the 1970s, at the very moment when critics like Michael Sprinker and Paul de Man were announcing the death of the self, the deconstruction of reference as illusion, and the end of autobiography, Barthes was turning toward reference, autobiography, and a more conventional (even bourgeois) view of the subject.²³ In her prescient essay of 1978, to which I have already alluded, Germaine Brée made out in Barthes, Malraux, and Leiris, her exemplars of the new mode of “anti-autobiography,” a countercurrent or resistance that would link them to a line of autobiographers stretching back to Montaigne: “There is no sign that among men of letters, Narcis-

²¹ The translation is mine. Barthes’s review of *Roland Barthes* suggests a further parallel with Whitman, who achieved his own “puissance trois”—times three!—by writing not one but three reviews of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

²² For commentary on the relation of the mirror stage and the “demand for love” photographs, see Brée, *Narcissus* 22.

²³ See “The unfashionable” (*Barthes* 125) for Barthes’s commentary on his unfashionable feelings, including filial devotion.

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sus, whether denounced, fragmented, prohibited, or concealed, is not secretly as fascinated as ever with his own image” (*Narcissus* 24). Moreover, it would be hard to argue that the case of Barthes is merely a sport, for the 1980s have witnessed a veritable return of the self in a quarter where we might least have expected it, in Paris and in the camp of the *nouveaux romanciers*. One by one the New Novelists, celebrated in the 1960s for their attack on the conventions informing the bourgeois novel of character and the misguided, romantic anthropomorphism that sustained it, have turned to the literature of autobiography: Nathalie Sarraute, in *Enfance* (1983); Alain Robbe-Grillet, in *Le Miroir qui revient* (1984); and Marguerite Duras, in *L'Amant* (1984) and *La Douleur* (1985).²⁴ When we consider these works in the context of each writer’s individual development, however, the turn to autobiography seems much less surprising, much more a fulfillment of artistic imperatives that provide the logic of an entire career.²⁵

As for Barthes himself, even at his most “anti-autobiographical,” his most aggressively fictional, he does not shake free from the pull of reference: opening *Roland Barthes*, the reader finds these words (on the inside cover of the original French edition), “It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel,” and they are inscribed in Barthes’s own handwriting. Barthes the structuralist had announced in 1966 that “the one *who speaks* (in the narrative) is not the one *who writes* (in real life) and the one *who writes* is not the one *who is*” (“Introduction” 261), and Barthes the autobiographer seems to follow suit here by ruling out any simple correspondence between “R.B.” and himself. So “R.B.” is a character in a novel? But with a signature? And trailing an album of photographs, and (in the elaborate appendixes of the French edition) a capsule biography, a bibliography, and a list of citations from his earlier work? The epigraph is, rather, one more mark of squid-like concealment and display, betraying in the signature the very affiliation with the world of reference that the words purport to deny.

²⁴ Some twenty years after the publication of his manifesto, *Pour un nouveau roman* (1963), Alain Robbe-Grillet appeared as a guest speaker in a seminar at the Ecole Normale Supérieure on May 18, 1985, discoursing on the problems of reference and autobiography as posed by *Le Miroir qui revient*. His views were surprisingly conventional, focusing on the notion of a “new autobiography” that would focus its attention on the act of composition in the present rather than on the truthful description of the past. For commentary on the relation of autobiography to the work of yet another New Novelist, see Pugh. For a useful overview of the relation between the New Novelists and autobiography, see Lejeune, “Nouveau Roman.”

²⁵ E.g., see Vercier on Sarraute.

II. PHILIPPE LEJEUNE AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PACT

The tension between theory and desire that structures Barthes's performance as an autobiographer carries over into the practice of contemporary criticism on autobiography as well, notably in the case of Philippe Lejeune. In "The Autobiographical Pact (bis)," Lejeune revisits the concept of the autobiographical pact on which he founds his understanding of the genre, the notion of a contract between author and reader in which autobiographers explicitly commit themselves not to some impossible historical exactitude but rather to the sincere effort to come to terms with and understand their own lives. The formal mark of this commitment to autobiographical discourse is the identity posited among author, narrator, and protagonist, who share the same name. Sincerity has always proved to be a slippery criterion for generic definition, an endless source of difficulty for theoreticians of autobiography, and Lejeune's pact about pacts in this essay, his confession about confessions, is no exception: to believe, to believe the contrary, and to claim to believe—the rhetoric of sincerity sounds rather strained.

Lejeune's moment of truth about autobiographical truth comes heavily guarded with self-protective irony, parody, and equivocation. I quote Lejeune here at some length because I suspect that his troubled state of mind, with its shifting mix of knowing credulity and not altogether convincing doubt, is representative of the uneasy, conflicted view of autobiography held by many others at the present time.

It's better to get on with the confessions: yes, I have been fooled. I believe that we can promise to tell the truth. I believe in the transparency of language, and in the existence of a complete subject who expresses himself through it; . . . I believe in the Holy Ghost of the first person. And who doesn't believe in it? But of course it also happens that I believe the contrary, or at least claim to believe it. Whence the fascination that *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975) has held for me; it seems to be the anti-Pact par excellence. . . . "In the field of the subject there is no referent." . . . We *indeed know* all this; we are not so dumb, but, once this precaution has been taken, we go on as if we did not know it. Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as complete subject—it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing. ("Autobiographical Pact [bis]" 131–32)

The interest of Lejeune's posture here is that it dramatizes the *operative force* of the notion of the complete subject in the performance and reception of autobiography even as it contests it: willing to concede the fictive status of the self, he nevertheless insists on its functioning as experiential fact.²⁶ "We go on. . . ." Indeed we do "go on" with autobiography, genre or not, true or not, and it is the manner of our doing so, the structure of our belief, that I want to examine in the rest of this book.

Most critics today would concur with Lejeune's enlightened view of the nature of autobiographical truth, which recognizes that autobiography is necessarily in its deepest sense a special kind of fiction, its self and its truth as much created as (re)discovered realities. In this matter of reference and truth, however, Lejeune's own posture with regard to autobiographical practice is instructively ambivalent. Distancing himself from any fundamentalist allegiance to the verifiable facts of a life, Lejeune has been outspoken in his mocking rejection of simplistic biographical and historicist paradigms as models for the nature of reference in autobiography. Like the Barthes of "Coincidence," Lejeune, too, has celebrated the free play of language in the autobiographical act, inspired by the example of Michel Leiris, yet another of Germaine Brée's "anti-autobiographers."

Yet, for Lejeune, there are limits to this freedom from conventional models of reference in autobiography. His response to the "*autofictions*" of Serge Doubrovsky is indicative of his attitude toward this complex question. Doubrovsky claims that reading Lejeune's anatomy of the possible permutations of the autobiographical pact confirmed his own desire to create in *Fils* (1978) a narrative *fiction* in which protagonist, narrator, and author would all, nevertheless, share the same name. Doubrovsky insists that "all the facts and acts of the narrative are literally drawn from [his] own life; places and dates have been meticulously verified." "The contribution of novelistic invention," he continues, "is limited to furnishing the frame and the circumstances of a pseudo-day, which serves as a convenient holdall for memory." "Neither autobiography nor novel, then, in the strict sense," he concludes, "[*Fils*] functions in an in-between realm" ("Autobiographie" 69–70, my trans.). I would add that autobiography "in the

²⁶ See Paul Smith, who observes, "None of us lives without a reference to an imaginary singularity which we call our 'self'" (6), and Kelly, who comments on Barthes's autobiography in this connection: "Thus Barthes's autobiography accurately reflects our modern paradox: we know that the self is split and ununified, but we must still believe (in a practical sense) in the unity of the self" (127). It is precisely this "practical sense" that poststructuralist theorists of the subject too often ignore.

strict sense” is largely a fiction created by generic theorizing; autobiography, as Doubrovsky puts it, is an entity of an in-between sort.²⁷

Lejeune freely acknowledges the originality of Doubrovsky’s experimentation, even though Doubrovsky’s subversive move renders Lejeune’s instrument for generic identification inoperative—how can the reader tell, then, regardless of the pact, whether Doubrovsky’s text is an autobiography or a novel? He confesses, however, that he read the book referentially. How could it have been otherwise, for even though *Fils* is subtitled “novel,” the text presents a narrator and principal character who are linked to the author not only by shared initials but by a network of referential allusion that Lejeune, as it happens, was himself in a position to recognize? Consequently, he reports that when he read Doubrovsky’s commentaries on the novel’s composition and discovered that the identity posited by Doubrovsky’s autobiographical pact was only an effect of “*trompe-l’oeil*,” he was disturbed by Doubrovsky’s cavalier treatment of the referential pact he seems to make in the text: even though Doubrovsky guarantees that the primary materials are authentically biographical, he confirms that the sequence in which they are narratively combined and developed is fictive. Lejeune resolves the matter by deciding that Doubrovsky is essentially a novelist, to be distinguished from autobiographers like Leiris who are haunted by an ethical concern for truth.²⁸

Doubrovsky’s *Fils*, though, with its semblance of an autobiographical pact, is not merely a novel but, like Barthes’s *Roland Barthes*, a kind of “anti-autobiography” that tests the boundaries of generic definition. If Doubrovsky manages to demonstrate the limitations of Lejeune’s concept of the pact, it is, of course, the very existence of this convention that enables him to do so. In the case of the reader, the pact’s limitations are immediately obvious, for he or she can rarely know—as Lejeune did not in reading *Fils*—whether such a pact, once made, has been kept.

Less obvious, perhaps, are the limitations of the pact from the autobiographer’s perspective. The fallibility of memory is probably the most familiar of these difficulties,²⁹ but there are others that derive from the very

²⁷ See my discussion of William Maxwell’s *So Long, See You Tomorrow* in chapter 1.

²⁸ For a detailed exposition of this complex case, see Lejeune, “Autobiographie, roman et nom propre.” See also Eakin, “Foreword,” for an extended presentation of these and other issues as they develop in Lejeune’s career. I discuss Lejeune’s shifting attitude toward Leiris in chapter 3.

²⁹ In chapter 2 I discuss the problem of memory in autobiography with reference to Henry James.

nature of the autobiographical act. For Louis Renza, autobiographical writing is an essentially alienated activity in which both writer and his or her intended reader are “estranged” (“Veto” 21), both “phenomenologically absent from the signified references” (20) of autobiographical discourse. The autobiographical pact, which posits for the account of a life some basis in potentially verifiable fact, seems upon examination to promise a rendering of biographical truth impossible in practice to fulfill. Why, we might well ask, with its pretensions to reference exposed as illusion, does autobiography as a kind of reading and writing continue and even prosper? Why do we not simply collapse autobiography into the other literatures of fiction and have done with it?

Although answers to such questions are hard to come by, Lejeune’s concept of the autobiographical pact does offer some promising leads, despite its difficulties in dealing with such limit-testing cases as Doubrovsky’s *Fils*. In focusing on the identity of the proper name shared by author, narrator, and protagonist as the distinctive signature of autobiography, Lejeune seeks to shift the fulcrum of the genre from the extratextual state of authorial intention to the sign of that intention *present in the text*. The advantage of this move is that it seems to obviate setting up the reader as judge of a finally unknowable authorial consciousness. No one has yet come forward with a more satisfactory account of what it is in a text that triggers our recognition of it as an autobiography. The problem of intention, however, persists, as Lejeune’s intricate account of his response to Doubrovsky’s *Fils* makes clear: the presence of the pact *in the text* led him to believe he was reading an autobiography, but when Doubrovsky’s commentaries about the book subsequently disconfirmed the intentions Lejeune had attributed to him, Lejeune repudiated the work as an autobiography.

The beauty of the emphasis on the identity of the proper name is that it seems to locate the problem of generic definition safely in the text, free from any messy extratextual involvement with the ethic of sincerity that has bedeviled the poetics of autobiography since Rousseau. The importance of the autobiographical pact in the text, nevertheless, resides in the fact that it is willy-nilly the sign of an intention. The articulation of such a pact is, after all, a move that some authors choose to make in working with the materials of their personal lives, and others, significantly, do not—Joyce and Lawrence are suggestive instances here. It is a choice, moreover, that only the author can make; no amount of critical ingenuity can transform *The Scarlet Letter*, for example, or *David Copperfield*, into an

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autobiography after the fact.³⁰ Even though we cannot usually know very much about the intentions that play into the making of such a choice, the fact of the choice is itself decisive. It signals to the reader an intended fidelity of some kind to a world of biographical reference beyond the text.

It is precisely the nature of this fidelity that I investigate in chapter 1. In the age of poststructuralism we have been too ready to assume that the very idea of a referential aesthetic is untenable, but autobiography is nothing if not a referential art. In order to illustrate the genuine complexity of this aesthetic as the driving force for a strenuous and introspective act of self-representation, I shall examine *Childhood* by Nathalie Sarraute and *So Long, See You Tomorrow* by William Maxwell. Subsequent chapters will explore some of the major contexts of reference in autobiography: the biographical (chapter 2), the social and cultural (chapter 3), the historical (chapter 4), and finally, underlying all the rest, the somatic and temporal dimensions of the lived experience of identity (chapter 5).

³⁰ See Spengemann 119–65, and cf. Fleishman 201–18.

The Referential Aesthetic of Autobiography

THIS INQUIRY into the referential aesthetic of autobiography attempts to answer a question that has haunted me for a long time: why should it make a difference to me that autobiographies are presumably based in biographical fact? This is really another way of asking why people read autobiographies, a question intimately linked to the question of why people write them. There seems to be no doubt that readers do read autobiographies differently from other kinds of texts, especially from works they take to be “fictions.” All who have studied the reading of autobiography agree that reference lies at the heart of this felt difference.¹ In fact, the most successful attempts to date to establish a poetics of the genre—by Elizabeth Bruss and Philippe Lejeune (“Autobiographical Pact”)—focus precisely on the reader’s recognition of a referential intention in such texts and its consequences for their reception.

Reference in autobiography remains, nonetheless, a rather forbidding subject now that poststructuralist theory claims to have demonstrated its undecidability once and for all.² Concern with the issue in our enlightened day is easily associated with the dark ages of autobiography studies when the presumed model of reading was governed by a simplistic notion of the nature of autobiographical truth. Those were the days when autobiography was ranged along with biography and history as one of the artless literatures of fact. Since then, in the last twenty years, the pervasive initiative has been to establish autobiography as an imaginative art, with special emphasis on its fictions. This shift in perspective from fact to fiction has been accompanied by the poststructuralist critique of the concept of the self (autobiography’s principal referent) and of the referential possibilities of language.³

What remains to be reckoned with after theory has run its course is the experience of the reader reading autobiography. Jonathan Loesberg con-

¹ Among those who testify to this felt difference in the experience of reading autobiography are Cox (“Recovering”), Hart (“Notes”), Holland (“Prose”), Mandel (“Full”), Pascal, and Renza (“Veto”).

² For a summary of the deconstruction of reference in autobiography, see Loesberg.

³ See de Man, Sprinker, and especially Paul Smith.

tends that what Elizabeth Bruss terms “truth-value” has been “all but abandoned by autobiographical theorists” (173), but then to define autobiography as merely another form of fiction, he concedes, “affront[s] our intuitive notion that autobiographies do not feel to the reader precisely like fiction” (174). What is all the more remarkable, readers and the autobiographers who write for them seem prepared to defend the existence of a generic boundary between autobiography and fiction despite knowledge that this distinction—or at any rate its basis—may well partake more of fiction than fact. As the instances of Roland Barthes and Philippe Lejeune indicate, however, it is not enough to dismiss this persistence as a mark of critical naïveté. It is, rather, a response to what I shall describe in this chapter’s conclusion as a kind of existential imperative, a will to believe that is, finally, impervious to theory’s deconstruction of reference as illusion. The presumption of truth-value is experientially essential; it is what makes autobiography matter to autobiographers and their readers.

Just as Barthes’s filial devotion to his mother, the motive for his turn to photography as an art of the real, is “unfashionable” (*Barthes* 125), so is allegiance to reference in autobiography. This is hardly surprising, for the history of the recent rise of autobiography studies is the story of the transfer of autobiography from its comparative critical neglect as an artless literature of fact (along with history and biography) to its present esteem as an imaginative art. This shift in perspective has been so decisively accomplished that James M. Cox complains, “There is a distinct tiresomeness about the ease with which literary critics assure themselves that ‘mere’ fact has little to do with the art of autobiography” (“Recovering” 34). What, finally, does belief in the importance of “mere” fact come to in the case of autobiography? What are the motives for embracing a referential aesthetic and what are the consequences of doing so?

Poststructuralist criticism of autobiography characteristically—and mistakenly—assumes that an autobiographer’s allegiance to referential truth necessarily entails a series of traditional beliefs about self, language, and literary form. Summarized schematically, these beliefs could be stated as follows: (1) the self is a fully constituted plenitude preexisting language, and capable of being expressed in it; (2) language is a transparent medium of expression, permitting unmediated access to the world of reference beyond the text; and (3) a chronologically organized biographical narrative is the “natural” form for an autobiography.⁴ I shall refer to Nathalie Sarraute’s autobiography, *Childhood*, to suggest that these corol-

⁴ For a characteristic formulation of these assumptions, see Lang. Paul Jay (“What’s the Use?”) cites the concern with reference and with the status of the subject as the key points

laries need not follow from an autobiographer's commitment to a referential pact. Then, taking up a second objective, I shall turn to William Maxwell's *So Long, See You Tomorrow* to show that pursuit of a referential aesthetic need not preclude a prominent role for fiction in an autobiographical text. To the contrary, I shall argue for the presence of an antimimetic impulse at the heart of what is ostensibly a mimetic aesthetic. I have already observed that autobiography is nothing if not a referential art; it is also and always a kind of fiction. Enlarging our understanding of the paradoxical nature of autobiography, Sarraute and Maxwell demonstrate that the constraint of fact is not necessarily a limitation of artistic freedom, and conversely, the invention of fiction in autobiography may be undertaken in the pursuit of biographical truth. Together they point to the moral that in the literature of reference we can take neither fact itself nor its form for granted.

I. THE TROPISMS OF NATHALIE SARRAUTE: "LITTLE BITS OF SOMETHING STILL ALIVE"

What happens when a writer of experimental fiction turns to the task of self-representation in autobiography? Nathalie Sarraute presents her commitment to a referential pact as the governing motive of her autobiographical project; she proposes that the degree of her fidelity to her remembered experiences is the criterion by which we are to measure the success of *Childhood* (1983). I want to defer until chapter 2 any detailed discussion of whether and in what way the past can be said to exist for an autobiographer. For the present I would simply acknowledge that the survival of the past is an assumption that Sarraute makes. If all autobiography is an art of retrospect, hers is preeminently so, and I have chosen it precisely because of the apparently conventional nature of her objectives.

Sarraute herself dramatizes this issue of convention at the very beginning of the book in the form of a dialogue with herself about her intentions, a running debate that structures her engagement with memory throughout the text:

—then you really are going to do that? “Evoke your childhood memories” . . . How these words embarrass you, you don't like them. [. . .]

—Yes, I can't help it, it tempts me, I don't know why . . .

of intersection between poststructuralist theory and autobiographical practice. I shall discuss the place of chronology in autobiographical narrative in chapter 5.

—It could be . . . mightn't it be . . . we sometimes don't realize . . .
it could be that your forces are declining . . . (1)⁵

Even stronger than this nagging skepticism, however, is Sarraute's determination to probe the stratum of consciousness where, she believes, materials of her past yet survive, "little bits of something still alive" (3).

It would be easy to interpret the constraint imposed by a referential pact like Sarraute's as antithetical to imaginative freedom. If the content of the past is given, ready-made, and its form already latent within it, where is the opportunity for art? Who would not prefer to shake off the trammels of fact in order to soar "freewheeling" in language like Leiris and Barthes? It is frequently assumed, moreover, as I have just mentioned, that commitment to biographical truth entails certain additionally constraining corollaries: that a fully constituted self or subject and a teleological narrative furnish the models for the protagonist and plot of a life history.⁶ As Sarraute's case illustrates, however, these supposed corollaries do not necessarily follow from commitment to a referential aesthetic. Of course, as I shall demonstrate in chapter 3, autobiographers inevitably draw on models of identity supplied by the cultures they inhabit, but some of them—Sarraute is one, and Sartre another—devise models of their own in answering the fundamental questions of experience and identity posed by any attempt to represent the history of one's subjectivity.

For all its founding referential premise, Sarraute's practice is determinedly anticonventional. In *Childhood*, it is not character or plot—the staples of so many autobiographies—that constitutes the reality of remembered experience but rather, as Gretchen R. Besser defines, "the myriad subconscious and rapidly-shifting reactions to external stimuli which Sarraute has dubbed 'tropisms' by analogy with the instinctive movements of primitive organisms in response to heat or light" (155). Sarraute makes clear the distance between her own conception of subjective reality and that predicated by the history of modern autobiography since Rousseau, for tropisms are certainly not to be interpreted as the marks of a unique individuality: "I am persuaded that at the level where tropisms are located, everyone experiences in the same way. These sensations are identical, like the movement of blood in the veins or the beatings of the heart" (quoted in Besser 157; my trans.). The lesson of Sarraute's example is that

⁵ The many ellipses present in Sarraute's text are indicated in it by three unspaced periods. These appear here as three spaced periods. My own ellipses in quotations from Sarraute are bracketed.

⁶ For a full-scale elaboration of such views, see Jay, *Being*.

neither form nor content nor ideology may be inferred with any certainty from the evidence of a commitment to a referential pact.

Like most thoughtful autobiographers, Sarraute is deeply ambivalent about the role of language in her reconstruction of the past. To begin with, language is an alien medium, for the tropisms she seeks to preserve are nonlinguistic in essence, and to attempt to represent them in language is to risk a possibly fatal denaturation: “It’s still vacillating, no written word, no word of any sort has yet touched it, I think it *is* still faintly quivering . . . outside words . . . as usual . . . little bits of something still alive” (3). At the same time, in the work of preservation it is language or nothing: “But it is these words and images that enable us to grasp, as best we can, to retain these sensations” (9). This notion of language as a fixative for the evanescent stuff of consciousness would seem to be supported by the fact that a very large number of the tropisms recalled are themselves concerned with Sarraute’s extraordinarily sensitive response to the qualities of words and phrases. In this sense the language of autobiography would be a conscious doubling of the largely unconscious agency of language in the constitution of memory.⁷

Seeking the immediacy of the remembered, Sarraute never fails to give us at least the immediacy of remembering, an ongoing drama unfolding in the interior dialogue: one voice is seduced by the siren spell of tropisms recollected from the past, while the other, like an older, wiser, and warier sister, counsels against surrender, for it is not merely the tropisms themselves that possess the power to attract but even more the meretricious charms of conventional language:

— [. . .] don’t you think that there, with that cooing, that chirruping, you haven’t been able to resist introducing something a little bit prefabricated . . . it’s so tempting, you’ve inserted a pretty little piece . . .

—Yes, I may perhaps have let myself go a little . . . (12)

Sarraute’s *Childhood*, dedicated to a truthful representation of the past, offers a relentless exposé of the whole repertoire of linguistic deceptions—the shameless faking, the indulgence in the facile and the banal, the plastering over of gaps—that often make a mockery of an autobiography’s claims to referential truth. And autobiography as a genre works against

⁷ Augustine’s observation is apt in this connection: “Memory brings forth not reality itself, which is gone forever, but the words elicited by the representation of reality, which as it disappeared impressed traces upon the mind via the agency of the senses” (quoted in DUBY 542). Sarraute would contest the “gone forever.”

itself, constantly sliding toward the death of the ready-made. No wonder Sarraute confesses herself to be “a little hesitant” when confronted with the fact that her own recollections seem uncannily to resemble the deadly stereotype of “happy childhood memories”: “And how could one not feel proud of having had parents who took the trouble to prepare the ground for you to have memories which conform in every detail to the most valued, the most highly thought-of models?” (23).

Sarraute’s account of the writing of *Childhood* certainly does not support the unexamined view of the genre’s referential program projected in the how-to manuals, which propose an easy and artless parceling-out of remembered fact into a sequence of received categories arranged along a chronological spectrum.⁸ Still less does it resemble the most ingenious of theory’s alternative constructions. Louis Renza, for example, offers an astute and searching account of the autobiographical act “from the imagined perspective of the writer immediately situated in the act of writing” (“Veto” 19), and he sums up the dilemma of the autobiographer’s quest for self-presence in this succinct formulation:

Ever since Augustine’s *Confessions*, the manifest paradox confronting the autobiographer within his act of textual composition has been his experiencing his signified past self as at once the same as his present self, continuous with it, and yet strangely, uniquely, as *other* to it. How does the autobiographer mediate this self-fissure peripherally or centrally aroused by his act of writing? (Review 317)

The logic of Renza’s reasoning leads him into a dark discourse in which *fissure*, *split*, and *suicide* surface as the characteristic terms. We have seen their counterpart in the meditative fragments of *Roland Barthes*, and the dialogic structure of Sarraute’s *Childhood* would seem to confirm this view.

Reading Sarraute, however, makes me wonder whether Renza’s phenomenological fiction (his “imagined” version of the writing of an autobiography) is not excessively tortured and anxious. Sarraute, equally drawn to giving a closely detailed experiential account of her subjectivity, debates the possibility of accurately recapturing her past states of mind in language, yet she does perform the work of autobiographical retrospect without the existential malaise predicated by Renza’s account—at least insofar as we can make out from the text. Her memories, as is typically the case in autobiography, present an amalgam of selves early and late.

⁸ For an analysis of the phenomenon of how-to manuals, see Lejeune, “Teaching People to Write Their Life Story.”

Following Renza, we might ask whether, in the evocation of childhood memories, the presence of the present autobiographical self (or selves)—manifested textually in analysis of perception, in sophisticated evaluation, in richness of vocabulary—is to be apprehended as a contamination compromising the purity or integrity of the representation of the earlier self and moment of experience. Or is its unmistakable presence the fulfillment of a wish to be present once more to one's past, such that the telltale marks of temporal, psychological, and linguistic discontinuity paradoxically facilitate belief in continuity of identity, belief in the notion that the present self can establish direct contact with the childhood self from the past?

The point, however, is not to choose between Renza's account of the autobiographical act and Sarraute's—theirs are only two, after all, of the many that could be adduced—nor even necessarily to set experience against theory, but rather to suggest the variety of these accounts of autobiographical creativity. Over time they tend to take on the qualities of stories, microfictions that may momentarily gain a currency or following.⁹ I recognize, moreover, that in giving an account of Sarraute's intentions for her autobiography I am enacting the pattern of response that Jonathan Loesberg diagnoses as the characteristic failing of all reading of autobiography: in my concern with authorial intention I run afoul of referentiality, attributing to the author what can only be problems of the reader.

In a trenchant review of James Olney's pioneering 1980 collection of autobiography criticism Loesberg demonstrates the circularity and indeterminacy that result from the troublesome implication of autobiographical texts in an elusive, finally unknowable, extratextual reality: text creates self, self understood as author of text. However, although Loesberg deconstructs the critic's preoccupation with the relation to the text, with intention, with sincerity, this deconstruction in no way prevents such readings from being enacted. Instead, this recurring pattern he detects in the criticism testifies to the fact that the critic's concern with reference, with the author's intention, is built into the very structure of autobiography that we experience as we read such texts. The conceptual impasse is inescapable: in doubling the autobiographer's quest for origins, the reader begins to look like a dog chasing its tail.

The principal limitation of Loesberg's otherwise illuminating analysis, however, stems from his heuristic insistence on distinguishing author and

⁹ For a presentation of two of the most characteristic versions of the autobiographical act in the 1970s, see my commentary on James Olney and Paul de Man in *Fictions* 184–91.

reader as discrete entities, whereas it is, I suspect, precisely an author's instinctive knowledge of how autobiographical narrative affects the reader that would lead him to exploit its potential for reference to endow that principal referent, the self, with a reality it might not otherwise enjoy. Moreover, in the specular reciprocity of the world of autobiography the author as reader is matched by the reader as author, for the reader's involvement in authorial consciousness, which seems to be intrinsic to the functioning of the autobiographical text, is ultimately self-referential; readers, perhaps especially critics, are potentially autobiographers themselves.

To summarize, then, Loesberg's purpose in describing the reader's tendency to project into an extratextual realm of authorial intention is to warn against it. To the contrary, I am arguing that this proto-autobiographical tendency—this identification of reader with autobiographer—constitutes the fundamental motive for the reader's interest in autobiography in the first place. This proto-autobiographical mode of reading autobiography is also, often, crypto-autobiographical as well: we may be drawn to another's exploration of self and life history precisely because it offers provisional answers to the existential questions that would be posed in the autobiographies we are not—and may never be—prepared to write. My decision to use a passage from Sarraute in the following discussion to illustrate this crypto-autobiographical dimension of reading autobiography is, of course, by definition idiosyncratic. Should they seek to display an affinity of this kind, other readers would necessarily gravitate toward other illustrative texts.

The enabling premise of Sarraute's autobiographical practice is that some of the tropisms of her childhood experience—"a few moments, a few movements"—"are still intact, still strong enough to emerge from the protective cover they are preserved under, from those soft, whitish, cloudy layers" (246). It is because these facts of experience, these buried fragments of consciousness, survive that the referential project of the autobiography is possible at all. The referents—the tropisms—exist and are available for inspection. At the same time, however, such inspection might destroy the very referents it would preserve. Sarraute's image for the autobiographical process, her concern that the tropisms be "strong enough" to "emerge" from their "protective cover," betrays her misgiving that language might prove to be a hostile medium, not merely inaccurately representing but actually fatally altering the referents themselves. In this view the relation between the language of autobiography and its referents is precarious at best, and it is small wonder that Sarraute should

speak of the work of retrospect as a conjuring trick. What good does it do for autobiography to be possible in principle if in practice it proves to be its own undoing?

Here is Sarraute at her work, in this case conjuring up a childhood memory of extraordinary happiness experienced as she sat on a bench in the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris. She opens the passage, characteristically, with an expression of her frustration at the inadequacy of language to accomplish her autobiographical intention: “Why try to bring this back to life, without the words that might manage to capture, to retain, if only for a few more instants, what happened to me . . .” The ensuing drama of retrospect moving toward resurrection unfolds in three distinct phases, each marked by an evocation of setting. The first of these, in the past tense, presents the setting as the context in which a remarkable experience occurs:

I was looking at the blossom on the espaliers along the little pink brick wall, the trees in bloom, the sparkling green lawn strewn with pink and white petaled daisies, the sky, of course, was blue, and the air seemed to be gently vibrating . . . (56)

Sarraute proceeds to specify the nature of the experience, defining it gradually:

And at that moment, it happened . . . something unique . . . something that will never again happen in that way, a sensation of such violence that, even now, after so much time has elapsed, when it comes back to me, faded and partially obliterated, I feel . . . (56)

Connected with this first version of the experience and its setting is a sense of separation between past and present consciousnesses (“never again”), and Sarraute’s attempt to deny separation, to affirm continuity (“even now”) leads to a sudden break in the reminiscence, a rupture that occupies the extensive middle section of the passage:

Even now, after so much time has elapsed, when it comes back to me, faded and partially obliterated, I feel . . . but what? what word can pin it down? not the all-encompassing word: “happiness,” which is the first that comes to mind, no, not that . . . “felicity,” “exaltation,” are too ugly, they mustn’t touch it . . . and “ecstasy” . . . at this word, everything in it recoils . . . “Joy,” yes, perhaps . . . this modest, very simple little word may alight on it with no great danger . . . but it cannot gather up what fills me. (56–57)

In this sequence, as Sarraute dramatizes her performance of the act of recovery, we observe her attempt to live up to the constraints imposed by the referential pact that governs the text. In the careful measuring of word against experience, language shows as the adversary of its referents, and the autobiographer finds herself in the curious position of protecting her experience (“everything in it recoils”) from the damage that autobiographical representation might inflict (“alight on it with no great danger”).

Paradoxically, there is something almost triumphant about her sense of the incapacity of language to represent, a failure she presently transforms into an affirmation of the ineffable reality to be recovered as she moves into a second evocation of the garden setting:

But it cannot gather up what fills me, brims over in me, disperses, dissolves, melts into the pink bricks, the blossom-covered espaliers, the lawn, the pink and white petals, the air vibrating with barely perceptible tremors, with waves . . . waves of life, quite simply of life, what other word? . . . of life in its pure state, no lurking menace, no mixture, it suddenly attains the greatest intensity it can ever attain . . . (57)

Experience and setting become increasingly indistinguishable from each other, and consciousnesses past and present similarly interpenetrate. Consciousness—past or present, remembered or reenacted—becomes a receptacle for feeling that suffuses setting as the verbs pour out in a rush (“brims,” “disperses,” “dissolves,” “melts”). This passage builds toward a climactic iteration of the word *life*, darkened only slightly by an echo of the linguistic trouble (“what other word?”) that stalled the earlier development of this memory. In this second version, the nature of the “sensation” experienced in the garden is explicitly interpreted as an experience of “life” itself, of being, and Sarraute emphasizes its purity (free from the “lurking menace” of language) and its irreversibility (again, “never again”).

In the conclusion of the passage this denial is denied, the work of definition proves not to be enough, and Sarraute moves swiftly into a third and final evocation of this garden paradise of being, again in the present tense, signifying the union of present and past consciousnesses and both with setting. The action of entering (“brims,” “disperses,” “dissolves,” “melts into”) is now complete (“I am inside it,” “I am inside them”):

Never again that kind of intensity, for no reason, just because it is there, because I am inside it, inside the little pink wall, the flowers on the espaliers, on the trees, the lawn, the vibrating air . . . I am inside them with

nothing else, nothing that does not belong to them, nothing that belongs to me. (57)

Setting is transformed into sentience in this moment of heightened consciousness, and the self-transcendence recorded in the final lines, the participation in being, raises many an echo of the romantic construction of experience—I think immediately of Wordsworth, Emerson, and Whitman. The progressive animation of the setting that structures the entire passage is not only the central constituent of the tropism itself but a metaphor as well for the inert past to be resurrected in the text. This is to say that the passage records two dramas at once, that of the past itself and that of its recreation. When the passage has done its work, we find ourselves located impossibly (“never again” and “even now”) in a place beyond language and its potential to harm, yet we have arrived there somehow through the agency of language. We move from the “lurking menace” of words to an affirmation of the word as creative principle (“waves of life [. . .] life [. . .] life”).

If I have chosen to explicate this passage in considerable detail, it is not merely because it illustrates the nature of Sarraute’s struggle with her referential aesthetic but also because I happen to share her conception of the referents of consciousness itself, the nature and qualities of the past that an autobiography could propose to recover. As I read *Childhood*, I was deeply impressed by what I take to be the psychological verisimilitude of Sarraute’s account of her past and of her relation to it. Her focus on tropisms, on sensations beneath and beyond language though often intimately linked to it, seemed to me absolutely right. My sense of my past, by which I mean the record of my own subjectivity, is that mostly it does not survive as is except—possibly—in flashes. “Flash” seems the right term for my own experience, for it suggests the intensity, the brevity, and the illumination of the sensation recalled. As to the last quality, though, the flash—for me usually an odor, sometimes an image—is too often a light that blinds; I always wish in vain to repeat it, haunted by a sense that momentary participation in being has eclipsed my self-reflexive capacity for knowing. As T. S. Eliot writes, “We had the experience but missed the meaning.” For me, all the rest of the material for any autobiography I might ever write—that is, everything I might say of the past besides the flashes, all the “I” statements—would only be a kind of correlative or substitute for the vanished reality of past experience, a kind of matrix in which the moments of truth (for me the sensations or tropisms) could be embedded.

II. WILLIAM MAXWELL AND THE “PALACE AT 4 A.M.”

Norman Holland identifies “reality-testing” as the most distinctive feature of the act of reading nonfiction. I would suggest that the proto-autobiographical dimension I have been describing is a version of this phenomenon. Through our involvement in this referential art, we are seeking not merely models that seem to represent the particular reality of our own experience (this is one kind of testing going on) but also answers to more general questions about the reality of subjective experience and whether it possesses any intrinsic, immanent properties of form and design.¹⁰

Like their readers, autobiographers are also engaged in reality-testing, but this testing takes so many different forms that it is hardly adequate in itself to serve as a defining criterion of generic performance. In Sarraute’s case, for example, the facts of her experience—the remembered tropisms—are given, and the challenge imposed by the referential pact that governs the art of *Childhood* resides in the invention of a language sufficiently precise to represent them with fidelity. In the case of William Maxwell, on the other hand, the givens of experience are both incomplete and unacceptable, and Maxwell turns to fiction to redeem them. As *So Long, See You Tomorrow* (1980) makes clear, fiction can—even must—play a decisive role in the implementation of a referential aesthetic.

So Long will doubtless seem to be an odd choice to illustrate such a proposition, for the narrator goes out of his way to disconfirm any pretense on his part of fidelity to biographical fact:

What we, or at any rate what I, refer to confidently as memory—meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subjected to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion—is really a form of storytelling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling. Too many conflicting emotional interests are involved for life ever to be wholly acceptable, and possibly it is the work of the storyteller to rearrange things so that they conform to this end. In any case, in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw. (28–29)

¹⁰ Seeking to establish the distinction readers make between novels and autobiographies, Barrett J. Mandel, like Holland, posits a kind of reality-testing as the central criterion: “The autobiography (as a genre) embodies truth when the reader seeks confirmation of his or her own perceptions of reality in terms of those experienced by another mortal” (“Full” 55).

Instead, what *So Long* seems to do is to define the role of reference in the creation of fiction; it seems to be a novel that displays its autobiographical sources.

The first chapter, “A Pistol Shot,” presents the narrator’s memory of an incident that took place more than fifty years before in the small town of Lincoln, Illinois, where he grew up: the mutilation and murder of a tenant farmer named Lloyd Wilson by a man named Clarence Smith. Recognizing the extent to which this memory has altered with the passing of time—“what I thought happened was so different from what actually did happen that it might almost have been something I made up out of whole cloth” (35)—the narrator turns (in chapters 1 and 3) to old issues of the *Lincoln Courier-Herald* of 1922 to supply documentary evidence about Lloyd Wilson’s murder. Finally, in an effort to remedy the deficiencies of the sketchy newspaper account (“I would be content to stick to the facts if there were any” [61]), the narrator proceeds in chapters 5 to 8 to invent a fiction in which he reconstructs the sequence of events that led to the murder, creating the missing referents of an incident that haunted his memory for most of a lifetime: the close friendship between Lloyd Wilson and his neighbor, Clarence Smith; Wilson’s estrangement from his wife, Marie, and his affair with Fern Smith; the disintegration of the Wilson and Smith families; and the murder of Wilson by Smith, followed by Smith’s suicide.

So Long, however, is not a novel but a “memoir” (5)—at least that is what the narrator calls it—and the Lloyd Wilson–Clarence Smith story is subordinate to a second story associated with it, the story of the narrator’s relation to a childhood friend. The narrator states at the outset that his preoccupation with his memory of the murder stems from the fact that the murderer was “the father of somebody I knew” to whom, “later on,” he had “done something I was ashamed of afterward” (5). For a brief time the narrator and Cletus Smith had become friends, playing together day after day in a new house the narrator’s father was building, but their relation had ended suddenly with the murder (“It was as if his father had shot and killed him too” [47]). As it happens, the two boys both move away from Lincoln, only to meet by chance in the corridor of a high school in Chicago a year and a half later. In this climactic encounter the narrator makes no sign of recognition: “He didn’t speak. I didn’t speak. We just kept on walking until we had passed each other. And after that, there was no way that I could not have done it” (55). The narrator never sees Cletus again, for it is almost as though in his not speaking, in his Peter-like denial of the other boy’s existence, he has somehow murdered the murderer’s son. His

sense of complicity in Cletus's disappearance, at any rate, is the ostensible motive for his imaginative reconstruction of the Smith and Wilson story, an attempt to exorcise through belated speech the criminal silence of his adolescent self. The title of the narrative, *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, with its homely promise of renewal and return, expresses this motive of expiation, echoing the mutual salutation of the boys in the time of their brief friendship in Lincoln.

Underlying what I have termed the second story, that of the narrator's relation to Cletus Smith, is a third, the story of the narrator's lonely childhood and the central place in it of his mother, whose early death in the flu epidemic of 1918, when he was ten, marked him for good. The narrator's bereavement is the deep and lasting motive for his reenacting his friendship and betrayal of Cletus Smith and his retelling the Smith and Wilson story. As he puts it, "Before I can go into all that, I have to take up another subject" (5), "The Period of Mourning" (chapter 2) following his mother's death. The narrator recalls accompanying his grief-stricken father as he paced the floor of the house on Ninth Street night after night, tormented by his unreasoning belief "that he was responsible for what had happened" (7). Like the encounter in the school corridor, later on, the death of the mother seems to the grieving and guilt-stricken boy like "a mistake" that "ought to be rectified, only this one couldn't be":

Between the way things used to be and the way they were now was a void that couldn't be crossed. I had to find an explanation other than the real one, which was that we were no more immune to misfortune than anybody else, and the idea that kept recurring to me, perhaps because of that pacing the floor with my father, was that I had inadvertently walked through a door that I shouldn't have gone through and couldn't get back to the place I hadn't meant to leave. Actually, it was the other way round: I hadn't gone anywhere and nothing was changed, so far as the roof over our heads was concerned, it was just that she was in the cemetery. (8-9)

The motif of the door structures the narrator's recollection in these pages, and he dreams constantly of finding a way "from the place where we were now" "back to the way it was before she died" (11).

From the perspective of "The Period of Mourning," the relation to Cletus Smith seems to have opened up for the narrator a psychological space in which his relation to his mother might be repeated. Both relations are bonds that are ruptured by death—ruptured beyond repair, moreover, if the Dantesque encounter of the other "risen from the dead" (55) in the

school corridor is any indication. The two relations come together in the symbolic structure of “The New House” (chapter 3), which becomes for a time a space for the fulfillment of the narrator’s deepest wishes. Three years after the mother’s death, the father remarries and builds a new house to shelter his new life. For the son, still grieving, play in the unfinished house provides the opening into the past for which he longs: “I had the agreeable feeling, as I went from one room to the next by walking through the wall instead of a doorway, or looked up and saw blue sky through the rafters, that I had found a way to get around the way things were” (26). It is here in this house of wish that the narrator meets Cletus Smith. The two boys seem to have been drawn together by the “shipwreck” (33) that had overtaken their thirteen-year-old lives, the family sorrows of which they never speak. Day after day, as they walk “along horizontal two-by-sixes with [their] arms outstretched, teetering like circus acrobats on the high wire” (29), the narrator and his friend find in the charmed precinct of the new house the freedom to shape their lives, defying the gravity of experience.

The narrator reports that the *Palace at 4 A.M.*, a sculpture by Alberto Giacometti in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, always reminds him of his father’s new house, and his account of this sculpture develops his sense of the house as a structure of wish. “There are no solid walls” in Giacometti’s sculpture, and its network of supports is inhabited by a series of bone-like, vaguely prehistoric creatures (“a cross between a male ballet dancer and a pterodactyl”), including “what could be an imposing female figure.” “It is all terribly spare and strange,” the narrator observes, but “no stranger” than Giacometti’s autobiographical account of the origin of this house of origins. The sculpture commemorates a period in the sculptor’s life in which the creativity of the artist’s living and making seemed to be united in a single act of expression. Joined by “a woman who, concentrating all life in herself, magically transformed my every moment,” Giacometti constructed “a very fragile palace of matchsticks” night after night. The palace of matchsticks, endlessly subject to collapse, required constant renewal, and Giacometti read in the “unfinished,” “broken” structure and skeletal inhabitants of the *Palace at 4 A.M.* signs both of “cries of joy at four o’clock in the morning” and of “the morning in which our life together collapsed.” The presence of this woman—lover and collaborator—is doubled in the sculpture by a figure in whom Giacometti recognizes “my mother just as she appears in my earliest memories,” a figure associated by the sculptor with feelings of “mystery,” “fear,” and “confusion” (27–28).

The parallels between Giacometti's *Palace at 4 A.M.* and Maxwell's "new house" are clear enough, so much so that the sculpture and its genesis might seem to provide a symbolic analogue for the creation of *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. Is *So Long* itself, we might ask, merely an exercise in consolation and evasion, the construction—always at night and endlessly repeated—of an alternative matchstick reality? Is the motive force of this ceaseless making the hope that through repetition the narrator could make things right, creating a world in which the mother never dies and the friend is never betrayed?

The fundamental resemblance between Maxwell's structure and Giacometti's resides rather in the yoking of elements of creativity and collapse, in the haunting evocation of doomed bones in flight, precariously suspended in a space both open and enclosed. What gives *So Long* its uncanny tension is that the austere determinism of the Lloyd Wilson–Clarence Smith story is perfectly balanced against the imaginative freedom to manipulate experience dramatized by the therapeutic play of the boys in the new house. In a curious inversion the upshot of the self-proclaimed "fiction" of *So Long* is a stern facing up to the irrevocable nature of the facts of experience ("some things, once they are done, can't be undone" [130]), whereas the focal theme of the presumably factual "memoir" of the narrator's life that frames the Smith and Wilson story is the redemptive exercise of fiction, the rebuilding of the affective structure of the old house on Ninth Street within the confines of the new house of the father's second marriage ("In the Palace at 4 A.M. . . . what is done can be undone" [146]).

In the final chapter, "The Graduating Class," the narrator contemplates, passing from one to the next, various modes of repeating the past, in memory and dreams, in art and psychoanalysis. Whenever he revisits the Lincoln of his childhood, he confesses that he is always irresistibly drawn to his old house on Ninth Street, only to find it sadly altered. In the Lincoln of his dreams, however, there is a house on Eighth Street in which his mother waits for him ("If I ring the doorbell, she will come and let me in" [144]), but as the dreamer searches his memory of Eighth Street he realizes that "there is no such house"—*in Lincoln, Illinois, that is*—"and I am, abruptly, awake" (145). The heart of his psychoanalysis, he reports, turned precisely on the motive for this pull back into the past, his inability to accept his mother's death ("other children could have borne it, have borne it . . . I couldn't" [145]). Hence the attraction of the *Palace at 4 A.M.*, for art, doubling analysis, permits return to the place of

origin: “You could turn and come back to the place you started from” (146).

Returning once more to Cletus, the narrator pictures him lying in bed, “in the fetal position, as if he is trying to get out of this world by the way he came into it” (146), but presently this regressive image of the boy’s passive resistance to his circumstances is exchanged for another of a more heroic cast, for although it, too, is equally stamped by the same precarious mix of volition and vulnerability, the narrator affirms that Cletus “walks in the Palace at 4 A.M.”: “In that strange blue light. With his arms outstretched, like an acrobat on the high wire. And with no net to catch him if he falls” (147). This is Maxwell’s figure for the autobiographical act, a solitary quest for origins, and the making of this book about making, he seems to say, is the only net we have.¹¹

The chapter concludes with yet one more repetition of the encounter in the school corridor, this time culminating in the narrator’s effort to determine the truth of the past and its lifelong legacy of guilt once and for all. Hunting up his old high school yearbook, he looks in vain for some corroboration of Cletus Smith’s existence, but he finds no trace in it of his childhood friend. At this point, however, the factual basis for the existence of Cletus Smith is moot, for the truth of the other boy resides in his role as the narrator’s alter ego, an alternative self who could accept change and loss and move forward into maturity. The narrator makes this connection plain when he wonders in the final line whether Cletus was able to relinquish the burden of the past “so that instead of being stuck there he could go on and by the grace of God lead his own life, undestroyed by what was not his doing” (149).

If I have reviewed in some detail the narrator’s shifting posture toward his practice of retrospect in the final chapter—the juxtaposition of fact and wish, and the radical disconfirmation of both (no such house on Eighth Street, no such boy in the yearbook)—it is because I see in his troubled attitude toward repetition of the past a clue to the motive for all autobiographical making, a tension between acceptance of the constraints of contingency and surrender to the irrepressible claims of desire. Every autobiography is, of course, a repetition of the past, but a repetition *with a difference*. The “of course” here, the appearance of the obvious, requires some explanation, for the difference at issue involves something more

¹¹ For discussion of the regressive impulse that seems frequently to lurk at the heart of the autobiographical act, see the conclusion to chapter 3.

than merely the gap between the experience of subjectivity and an account of it in words. The boy's refusal to accept the truth of his mother's death strikes me as an appropriate figure for the truth I want to get at, the element of resistance to the past that lurks in any desire to repeat it.

Repetition of the past is necessarily a supplement to it and never merely a mirror of it. Whenever it is performed, the act of repetition tacitly confirms that reality not yet made into the referential fiction of autobiography—life as it is or was—is never entirely acceptable to the autobiographer. It is the made form of a life that brings acceptance, or at least understanding. *Of course* the repetition adds something; otherwise why write, why bother with reenactment of the past at all? The fundamental paradox of a referential aesthetic resides precisely in this simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the constraints of the real: the house on Ninth Street is also and always a "Palace at 4 A.M."

I have been arguing that *So Long* is a kind of autobiography, and although I have been referring to the "I" figure in the book as "the narrator," as far as I am concerned he is to be identified with William Maxwell himself. What made me think that the book was not just a novel—a novel, to be sure, in the form of a fictive autobiography but a novel just the same? After all, the dust jacket for the hardcover edition stamps the generic label—"A Novel"—beneath the title, and the paperback edition boldly announces the book on both the front cover and the back as "The Most Magnificently Praised Novel of the Decade." And most of the blurbs follow suit.¹² Was it some quality of the first-person voice that led me to think otherwise? (I think so.) At some point (when?) I did read the brief "Note about the Author," and the first two sentences must have seemed to me at the time sufficient confirmation of my intuitive sense of the book's deeply autobiographical posture: "William Maxwell was born in 1908, in Lincoln, Illinois. When he was fifteen his family moved to Chicago . . ." (151). Later on I read Maxwell's *Ancestors* (1971) in which he charts the history of his family, and I was not surprised to find the essential facts of the narrator's life in *So Long* repeated here: the beloved house on Ninth Street, the death of his mother in the flu epidemic of 1918, and so forth.

But so what? What if *Ancestors* did not exist? What then? Aping the

¹² The reader's reception of a text is inevitably shaped by its packaging, the mix in various combinations of prefatory material, generic labels, blurbs, cover design, and so forth—what Gérard Genette terms the *paratexte*. For an investigation of these factors in the case of autobiography, see Lejeune, "Autobiographie, roman et nom propre."

narrator of *So Long*, I could have searched the files of the Lincoln *Courier-Herald* for details of Clarence Smith's murder of Lloyd Wilson; I could have looked for Maxwell's own picture in the yearbook of a certain high school in Chicago; but I did not, unwilling, perhaps, to have my belief in *So Long* as an autobiography disconfirmed. Moreover, and more to the point, the referents that matter (the grief for the mother, the betrayal of the friend) are typically facts of subjectivity, of interiority, that leave no verifiable trace.¹³ What it comes to, finally—and this will be my position in chapter 2 about the value of autobiography for the biographer—is an instinct to trust. When the narrator speaks of *So Long* as “this memoir—if that's the right name for it” (5), I take him at his word.

In a recent essay on the reading of autobiography, H. Porter Abbott proposes to resolve the thorny issue of the relation between fact and fiction in such texts. His point of departure is empirical, based on his students' response to the reading of autobiographies. The students, he reports, characteristically fall into two groups: the naive and trusting, who believe in a correspondence theory of autobiographical truth, and who read the text accordingly as a transparent, unmediated account of biographical fact; and the suspicious, who are acutely conscious of autobiography as performance, and who approach the text with “demystified, analytic awareness” (“Autobiography” 601), seeking evidence of the author's manipulation of fact to suit various forms of self-interest. According to Abbott, the naive are reading “factually,” as though the text were the biography of the author, whereas the suspicious are reading “autographically,” Abbott's term for “the broad category of self-writing” of which autobiography would be a “narrative subset.” To make matters still more complicated, Abbott adds to these two modes of reading a third or “fictive” posture, in which the reader abandons any notion that the text is implicated in a world of reference. No longer concerned with biographical fact or authorial performance, such a reader approaches the text as an autonomous and “artful whole” (613).

If I apply Abbott's distinctions to my reading of *So Long*, my reluctance to disconfirm the factual basis of the text would class me with his naive and trusting readers. This group surrenders to the Coleridgean willing suspension of disbelief that Abbott cites as characteristic of the reading of fiction. Yet central to my interest in this text is its concern with making,

¹³ For additional discussion of the nature of autobiographical truth—of the referents that matter—see my commentary on Henry James in chapter 2 and my discussion of Lillian Hellman in chapter 5.

with the autobiographical act, with the boy teetering in the rafters of the new house that is simultaneously the old house on Ninth Street and the retrospective autobiographer's "Palace at 4 A.M." So in Abbott's terms I would be reading *So Long* both "fictively" and "autographically"—and doubtless "factually" as well, for I was hardly indifferent to the brief "Note about the Author," which seemed to support my belief in the factual basis for the narrator's "memoir." But could we not object that *So Long* is a peculiar and unrepresentative example, given its problematic status as both "memoir" and novel?

To this I would reply that *So Long* is merely an extreme—and hence instructive—instance of the characteristically double nature of autobiography as a creature of both fact and fiction. This double and apparently contradictory posture of autobiographers and their readers toward experience is precisely the point of my portraits of Roland Barthes and Philippe Lejeune in the Introduction. Of Barthes we could ask, following the logic of Abbott's categories, how can the theorist who asserts that "*in the field of the subject, there is no referent*" be the same individual as the helpless child "*alone in the hole*," the same individual as the loving son who needs to believe that the beloved essence of his dead mother could yet survive (and hence be available for recovery) in a faded photograph? Belief in a referential aesthetic would appear to be an experiential necessity that is relatively impervious to the conceptual difficulties posed by theory. The problem with Abbott's generic categories is that both the "naive" and the "suspicious" tendencies inhabit the same readers. As Lejeune puts it, "We *indeed know* all this; we are not so dumb, but, once this precaution has been taken, we go on as if we did not know it" ("Autobiographical Pact [bis]" 131).

Abbott's conception of a poetics of autobiography focuses on the reader, and the work of Elizabeth Bruss, Lejeune, and Loesberg confirms the promise of this approach. Even allowing for the simplification necessary to any heuristic endeavor, however, Abbott loses the yoking of fact and fiction in his well-intentioned effort to discriminate a threefold typology of "textual attitudes" ("fictive," "autographic," and "factual" [611]). It is precisely this yoking of contraries, of fact and fiction, that constitutes the characteristic tension of autobiographical discourse. Abbott's evidence, moreover, would seem to bear me out, for his two kinds of student readers (the naive and the suspicious) highlight the part of fact and fiction in the response to autobiography. The suspicious want to be naive—that is, they want to trust the text, they want to read it referentially, but they cannot because they do not trust autobiographers to tell

the truth. If they were prepared simply to collapse autobiography into the other categories of fiction, however, why would they scold Rousseau—or Franklin—or anyone else, as Abbott says they do, for self-serving manipulations of biographical fact?

Abbott's proposal for a typology of "textual attitudes" resembles Philip Dodd's recent attempt to discriminate between what he regards as two competing models of contemporary autobiography, "autobiography-as-fiction" and "autobiography-as-history." "Autobiography-as-fiction," he contends, as illustrated by Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, becomes "the sanctuary of a self uncontaminated by history, made by ART, safe from psychic and historical determinations" ("History" 65). The capitalization here tells all, identifying "literary" autobiography as a retreat into art-for-art's-sake. By contrast, "autobiography-as-history," the responsible, politically engaged variety of self-representation championed by Dodd, conceives the life of the individual as necessarily a part of a larger, collective social experience. As with Abbott's categories, so with Dodd's: the attempt to bring autobiography to heel by dissociating fact from fiction is doomed to failure. Although it is easy enough to spot the fictions in autobiography, Dodd's emphasis, following Wellek and Warren, on the fictive as the mark of the literary overlooks the extent to which self-invention in autobiography is necessarily a decisive biographical event, as I shall argue in chapter 2. In any case, literature, fiction, and art are cultural categories embedded in history.

Similarly, although the allegiance to history writing is clear enough in such a work as Ronald Fraser's *In Search of a Past*, which Dodd celebrates as an exemplary instance of "autobiography-as-history," he ignores the decisive contribution of the literary to the other two discourses employed by Fraser in the text, one derived from oral history, the other from psychoanalysis.¹⁴ Dodd's position is frankly prescriptive: the representation of collective experience must be accompanied by self-conscious reflection on the act of representation. Quoting Richard Johnson's review of E. P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class*, he asserts that autobiography with historical ambitions "must move systematically through different levels of abstraction, describing and examining particular histories, but 'doing theory' all the time" (67).¹⁵ "Doing theory" should include, I would add, following Hayden White, a recognition of the extent to which

¹⁴ See my discussion of Fraser's autobiography in chapter 3.

¹⁵ In a more recent essay written in collaboration with Simon Dentith, "The Uses of Autobiography," Dodd gives a more nuanced definition of "autobiography-as-history."

history writing is inevitably a literary practice and history itself a cultural fiction. “History or Fiction: Balancing Contemporary Autobiography’s Claims”—this is the title of Dodd’s essay, and the either/or construction precisely misses the necessary part of both in any autobiography, whatever its pretensions to art or historicity. Goethe struck the right balance between these terms long ago in the memorable title of his autobiography, *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*From My Life: Poetry and Truth*).¹⁶

III. “THAT-HAS-BEEN”

The object of my presentation of Sarraute and Maxwell has been to display the contradictory elements of fact and fiction at work in the operation of a referential aesthetic. Contemporary theory with all its sophistication needs to be reminded that there is nothing perfunctory about the referential claims of autobiography. Most autobiographers these days certainly know—to one degree or another—that autobiography is a kind of fiction. Why, then, do they persist in asking us to believe that autobiography is constituted by the stuff of biographical reality?

One motive behind the pursuit of a referential aesthetic could be subsumed under the word *discovery*. This involves the notion that a life already possesses latent within it and prior to any retrospective intervention a principle of design, a design that it would be the autobiographer’s object to discover. It is one thing to suggest that *human life* has a form, easy enough to achieve if we have total imaginative liberty to shape character and action to suit (the theater of the novel). It is another thing altogether to say that *my life* has a form, a form asserted in the face of all the welter

¹⁶ According to Eugene Stelzig, Goethe’s title captures his view that “the twin poles of his life are not firm opposites, but provisional oppositions involved in a dialectic interplay”: “Here we have an acceptable model of the manifold possibilities of autobiography as a literary genre, one elastic enough to allow for the artful merger of experiential fact with the devices of fiction” (8). In the later portions of his challenging discussion, Stelzig moves away from this emphasis on “dialectic interplay” and proposes a “homological” requirement for the relation between text and life (9–11), a prescription that disqualifies Rousseau’s *Confessions*, for example, as “genuine autobiography” (13). For Stelzig, the *Confessions* emerges instead as an “alterbiography” (10) because of Rousseau’s fundamental and pervasive misrepresentation of himself and his life: “Rousseau erases his true self as he writes about his life, of which his text is too revisionist a reading” (13). To the contrary, I would ask if this “true self” hypostasized by Stelzig is not itself a critical fiction. Is it not possible that the Rousseau whom Stelzig describes as the writer of the autobiography (erasing, revising, feeling guilty, etc.) is the “true” one, or at least a principal constituent of it?

of contingent reality. Where would this form come from? Is it merely an imposition on the random chaos of biographical reality of a form borrowed from imaginative literature?¹⁷ Is it a reflection of models of the person and life story fashioned by a culture to make sense of the sense-neutral reality of experience? Or are there inherent in experience itself formal properties of which narrative would be a quintessential expression?¹⁸ Freud, Jung, Erikson, and others have argued for the presence of underlying paradigms that shape the contours of human development, and Susanna Egan, for one, has pointed to the ways in which autobiography seems to repeat in its literary design certain fundamental “patterns of experience” that articulate our passage through the characteristic phases of human life from birth to death.

Another motive behind the pursuit of a referential aesthetic could be evoked by the word *invention*, the notion that repetition of the facts of a life can never merely mirror them but always transforms them. In this sense all mimesis is necessarily the work of fiction. Egan draws on E. H. Gombrich’s theories of visual perception to argue that contingent reality (a term that she and I have borrowed from Frank Kermode) “is completely unamenable to reproduction; only comparisons, analogues, or metaphors can possibly work” (16). Agreeing with Egan that from the perspective of perception itself, the presence of fiction in any human representation is inevitable, I would also point out that there are additional motives which color and complicate the idea of mimesis implicit in a referential aesthetic.

In my discussion of Maxwell I have already suggested that any repetition of the past is necessarily a repetition with a difference, not only for the reasons Egan develops but because life as it is or was (that is, life not yet made in language, in art, in autobiography) is never acceptable—at least not to autobiographers, who take the trouble to make their lives in text, and by implication not to their readers either. There is always implicit in the exercise of the autobiographical act the idea that it supplements the life that has been lived, a sense that life as it was requires the improvement of art—the closure, the coherence, the permanence conferred by the stamp of form. This tendency toward fiction is curiously antithetical to the tendency to understand autobiography as merely mirror, as a showing of what was already there. Something of this tension

¹⁷ Fleishman asks these questions in “Envoi: Life as Narrative” (471–79), and his principal answer is that these forms are preserved and transmitted in a culture through what he terms the “figures” of literature. I discuss his notion of intertextuality in chapter 3.

¹⁸ I explore each of these possibilities in chapters 3 and 5 respectively.

between (re)discovery and invention in the practice of autobiography is nicely illustrated, as I have hoped to show, by Sarraute's almost perverse determination to reproduce in language the precious tropisms of memory despite her deep-seated fear of the power of language to alter and betray.¹⁹

Deeper still than either of these motives of discovery and invention lies an existential imperative: a desire to assert the distinctiveness and the continuity of one's subjectivity (whether made or discovered). Resistance to the idea that consciousness should perish seems to be an inevitable consequence of the culture of individualism, of which modern autobiography is so intimately a part. In the last chapter of his autobiography, *Speak, Memory* (1951, 1966), Vladimir Nabokov expresses this sentiment with striking vehemence, enlisting his art to help him "fight the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence" (297). No one has celebrated the redemptive power of autobiography with greater authority than Nabokov. Contemplating his work of retrospect with triumph, he asserts that the fractures of time are "now mended by *these* rivets of bronze" (309). Barthes's concept of the photograph as "a certificate of presence" provides an analogue for this aspect of autobiography's referential aesthetic. According to Barthes, the photographic record offers incontrovertible proof that "someone has seen the referent (even if it is a matter of objects) *in flesh and blood*, or again *in person*" (*Camera* 79); it is an art that proclaims of its referents, "That-has-been" (*Camera* 77).

What difference does it make that I should continue to believe autobiography to be a profoundly referential art, especially in light of my sense of the play of fiction in its practice? This is a question I have been asking myself for a long time, and I recognize that to some it may seem to be an unaccountable surrender to some impossible Romance of the Real. Perhaps this preoccupation with reference is finally inexplicable—my own sense of it, at any rate, for I have tried to present the urgency of it for Barthes and Lejeune, for Sarraute and Maxwell. Perhaps it is of a kind

¹⁹ In studying autobiography it is hard to maintain a distinction between the material of a life (and whatever possibilities of immanent form it may contain) on the one hand and the autobiographical act (and the form it makes or invents) on the other, for the making of the shape of a life or self is an activity that belongs on both sides of the ledger. As I have suggested elsewhere, the performance of the autobiographical act can be understood as an extension of a lifelong process of identity formation, and it mirrors experiential reality in this sense as well, in performance as well as in product. In this respect the making of autobiography belongs to the world of reference that is its subject. See *Fictions* 218–19, 226–27.

with Barthes's idiosyncratic response to certain photographs, which he reports in the opening lines of *Camera Lucida*:

One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: "I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor." Sometimes I would mention this amazement, but since no one seemed to share it, nor even to understand it (life consists of these little touches of solitude), I forgot about it. (*Camera* 3)

Self and Culture in Autobiography: Models of Identity and the Limits of Language

IN PLACING so high an estimate in chapter 2 on autobiography as an indispensable, authoritative source of biographical insight, I may have seemed to subscribe to one of the sustaining myths of autobiography, belief in the possibility of self-determination. What—or how much—does an autobiographer really mean when he or she speaks of writing a life? The drive in writing lives toward an identity between story and the personal history that is its subject—“this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man”—is reflected in the ambiguous uses of the word *life*, our common term for both. At the heart of this homology between life (lived) and life (written) for someone who is writing a life is the autobiographer’s desire to stand to both in the relation of author. In this chapter I want to complicate this rather romantic view of origins by suggesting the extent to which the self and its story in the lives we live and write are deeply embedded in culture.

Fictions in Autobiography testifies to my admiration for those who write in response to an existential imperative, practicing an art of self-invention in order to create a space in which the self can live and move in response to its own volition (275–78). While my admiration remains undiminished, I feel in retrospect that I did not give adequate weight to the force of culture in the playing out of the autobiographical act, perhaps because I was drawn to the illusion of autonomy that looms so large in the genre’s history, an illusion epitomized in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “Cartesian” formula for the self as the source of its existence, “I felt—therefore I was.”¹ It is not my intention, however, to steer clear of a posture of absolutely autonomous individualism only to embrace an equally absolute version of cultural determinism. What I want to demonstrate instead, especially in my discussion of *Hunger for Memory* by Richard Rodriguez, is a sense of the autobiographical act as performed not in some wholly private, fictive realm of the isolate self but rather in strenuous engagement with the pressures that life in culture entails.

¹ For a related discussion of Fitzgerald, see Eakin, *Fictions* 207–9.

Before turning to the practice of autobiographers themselves, I shall examine how models of identity function as the principal conduit of culture's shaping influence on the construction of life history in autobiography. It is not hard to document that the issue of models is pervasive in autobiography and autobiography studies today, and recent work in cultural anthropology can deepen our understanding of the ways in which culture constructs the ideology of identity that necessarily informs any kind of involvement with autobiography. I shall be using the notion of model in the phrase *models of identity* in two ways: first, in the sense of a theoretical construct that articulates the psychological structure of the self, and second, and more important for my inquiry, in the sense of an example of selfhood or character that a given culture offers for imitation. Such culturally sanctioned models of identity may, of course, include aspects of particular theories about the design of the human personality.²

I. MODELS OF IDENTITY

In his celebrated essay "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" (1956), Georges Gusdorf announced the view that has guided all subsequent major attempts to write the history of the genre: autobiography is the product of a specific culture that assumes the "conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life" (29). To be sure, there have been dissenting voices, notably those of Paul de Man (919–20) and Avrom Fleishman (35–39), who refuse to concede the status of autobiography as a genre in the first place. Both stress the fundamental instability of the categories associated with writing about the self, although it is worth noting that each proceeds to write about an entity called "autobiography." Protests such as these seem irrelevant, however, in view of current findings about literary practice, as when Linda H. Peterson, for example, is able to demonstrate that English autobiographers from Bunyan to Gosse believed themselves to be participating in a distinct generic tradition.

In the main, and I am thinking especially of Elizabeth Bruss, Philippe Lejeune, and Karl J. Weintraub, literary historians have accepted the truth of Gusdorf's premise, and they have addressed themselves to defining the cultural circumstances that have given rise to the practice of autobiography, the conditions under which autobiography has been written

² E.g., for the impact of Freudian theory on commonsense views of personality, see M. Brewster Smith ("Metaphorical" 79) and Moscovici.

and read as a recognizable literary kind while continuing to change over time. Bruss and Lejeune have between them set forth the methodological problems involved in conceptualizing the history of autobiography as a genre. Probing the functioning of literature as a social system, Lejeune seeks to specify the shifting horizon of readers' expectations (a concept he borrows from Hans Robert Jauss), while Bruss attempts to codify the illocutionary rules (a concept she derives from J. L. Austin, Peter F. Strawson, and John Searle) that determine whether a given text will "count as" autobiography at a given moment of cultural history (Lejeune, "Autobiography and Literary History"; Bruss 1–18).

Following Gusdorf's approach to autobiography as a distinctive cultural phenomenon, William C. Spengemann and L. R. Lundquist, and Karl Weintraub have focused on the decisive role of culturally sanctioned models of identity in the genre's unfolding history. Spengemann and Lundquist stress the writing of autobiography as "a cultural act" (501). Language in autobiography operates as a kind of "focusing glass," which "brings together the personal, unassimilated experiences of the writer and the shared values of his culture" (502). To engage in autobiography is to draw on these shared values, which crystallize into a set of "culturally evaluated images of character" (504), "fairly specific roles" "that civilization prescribes . . . for its citizens to adopt when portraying themselves in writing" (516). Central to all these roles in Western culture Spengemann and Lundquist discern a core belief in "individual identity," conceived as "an integrated, continuing personality which transcends the limitations and irregularities of time and space and unites all of one's contradictory experiences into an identifiable whole" (516).³

Like Spengemann and Lundquist, Karl Weintraub argues that all cultures "compress the essential values and convictions in human models" that exercise an "intensely persuasive and attractive power" on the process of self-formation because they are "taken to be of more universal validity

³ Georges Gusdorf traced the history of the model of individual identity in the West in *La Découverte de soi* (1948), and he anticipated here the position of Spengemann and Lundquist with regard to the decisive role of language as the medium for transacting the relation between self and culture: "L'emploi nécessaire du langage apporte avec soi au coeur même de notre plus personnelle intimité la présence du domaine public et social sous sa forme la plus agissante" (100) (The use of language inevitably introduces into the heart of our most personal intimacy the presence of the public and social realm in its most determining guise). See also my discussion in *Fictions* (199–209) of the thesis that cultural models of human personality determine the history of the self as an idea and shape the history of autobiography as well.

[than any merely idiosyncratic version of the self]" ("Autobiography" 837). Convinced that "autobiography is inseparably linked to the problem of self-conception" (834), he pinpoints the end of the eighteenth century as the moment when autobiography comes into its own as a significant cultural form in the West in conjunction with the rise of individuality as the dominant ideal of personality. Since then, the notion that we all possess unique selves, continuous identities developing over the course of a lifetime, has become an established article of faith for both autobiographers and their readers. Even those doubting autobiographers and critics, such as Goronwy Rees, Roland Barthes, and Roy Pascal, who testify that their personal experience fails to confirm the possession of such a self, operate nonetheless in reaction to the reigning model of identity.

At the same time, as Weintraub reminds us, belief in individuality presents additional complications for those who act upon it, for unlike earlier ascendant models in the West, individuality is a curiously antimodel kind of model, stressing as it does the fulfillment of "one unique and unrepeatable form" (839) of selfhood. In the opening lines of his *Confessions*, Rousseau captures the paradox at the heart of the notion of embracing individuality as a model, for he claims for his identity an absolute value of singularity—"I am like no one in the whole world"—while enjoining others to confess the uniqueness of their own selfhood with an equal candor—"I have displayed myself as I was" (17); his uniqueness, in other words, is exemplary, a model for others to follow. We must recognize accordingly that the very generality of such a model engenders problems of self-definition that every autobiographer and critic must face anew: what do we think our experience is really like, and how do we conceptualize the experiencing self? Before taking up autobiography itself, I want first to examine some current theorizing about the self in a variety of disciplines and then to discuss the role of models of identity in autobiography studies today.

II. THEORIES OF THE SELF

We live in the West, and perhaps especially in the United States, in cultures that are saturated in identity issues. Peggy Rosenthal's recent study of the popular usage of such related words as *self*, *growth*, *relative*, and *relationship* suggests the extent to which our everyday speech manifests our largely unreflecting participation in what she identifies as "the dominant ideology of twentieth-century Western thought" (253), secular hu-

manism.⁴ The currency of the concept of identity is such that it also functions as a prominent commodity in advertising. The Dewar's "Profile" ads for their brand of Scotch whiskey, which feature capsule vitae of presumably real individuals, offer a familiar example, while the endless endorsements of products and services by "names," as we say revealingly, is another.

The presence of models of identity is pervasive in our lives and also confusing, for if we appeal to social commentary for conceptual clarification, we find that many of the disciplines that have concerned themselves with identity employ a theory or theories of their own.⁵ Just to name some of the relevant fields indicates the rather daunting spread of the subject: theology, philosophy (especially phenomenology), sociology, psychology (especially developmental), psychoanalysis, cultural anthropology (especially ethnopsychology or "indigenous" psychologies), social history, and, overlapping with these, semiotics and cognitive studies.⁶ When it is not borrowing heavily from models supplied by other fields, even literature is prepared to offer up a model of its own, the self as text or locus of texts.⁷

The very choice of term employed to designate the human being reflexively considered is itself momentous. Concluding her survey of the repertoire of concepts employed in philosophy, including *character*, *figure*, *person*, *soul*, *mind*, *self*, and *individual*, Amelie Oksenberg Rorty observes, "Humans are just the sorts of organisms that interpret and modify their agency through their conceptions of themselves" (323). Recent discourse in autobiography studies, in English at any rate, seems to gravitate toward

⁴ Rosenthal seeks to distance herself from the linguistic determinism that her findings seem to imply, but when she asserts that "it's also in our nature, as individual beings whose thoughts and behavior are to some extent free, to be able to resist the pull of the leading lines [of culture embodied in discourse] if we choose" (259), she seems to appeal to the tenets of the very secular humanism whose ideological hegemony she has worked to display.

⁵ In field after field books are appearing that attempt to trace the evolution of the concept of identity within a particular discipline. See, e.g., Baumeister and Meissner for two recent examples in psychology and psychoanalysis.

⁶ See, e.g., the recent collection of essays edited by Carrithers et al., *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*.

⁷ The textualization of reality promoted by deconstruction in particular and poststructuralism in general has been increasingly abandoned by critics and scholars in the United States because of its failure to attend to historical context. J. Hillis Miller's recent MLA address concedes the reality of this shift toward history and culture while asserting—in vain—the centrality of the deconstructive posture. One sign of this turn toward history is the currency of the so-called New Historicist approach to literary study; the newness in question resides less in method than in the programmatic reassertion of the importance of an informed historical understanding of text and context.

self as the term of choice, yet the psychologist Anthony J. Marsella affirms that “there is no other concept in the English language which presents so many definitional problems as ‘self’” (285). Rosenthal emphasizes that *self* is “a loaded term,” and she uses it as the paradigmatic illustration of her view of words as “receptacles into which different disciplines and ideologies and traditions of thought pour their particular meanings, their favorite value-laden concepts” (42).

Theories of the self constitute a vast and thorny field of inquiry, and autobiography studies is no exception to the ubiquitous play of ideology that Rosenthal uncovers in our speech. Once launched in pursuit of theories about the self, a reader can travel very far indeed: as model after model of identity passes in review, one discovers that some of them are radically different from the person-centered variety of Cartesian individualism that modern autobiography in the West has presupposed. The anthropologist Milton Singer, for example, advocates an anti-Cartesian semiotic concept of the self based on C. S. Peirce’s model of the person as an “outreaching identity”: in this view “the self . . . is not identical with the individual organism . . . [it] may be less or more” (495).

Despite the overwhelming evidence of disagreement where contemporary theories of the self are concerned, however, M. Brewster Smith and others, drawing on an interdisciplinary perspective, have managed to bring some order out of the very real chaos of this literature. Surveying the self in turn from evolutionary, transhistorical, cross-cultural, and ontogenetic points of view, Smith concludes that “the very nature of selfhood, not just its context, is historically and culturally conditioned, because selfhood is an historical emergent in a changing world of cultural diversity” (“Perspectives” 1057). “Conditioned,” “emergent,” “changing”—this is the language of process that characterizes so much of the current discussion, which tends to conceive of the self as a broadly derived cultural construct, subject to all the forces that shape the complex unfolding of human life in society, as opposed to more traditional views of the self as an inviolable and transcendent entity, a secularized version of the soul.⁸

Psychiatrist Frank Johnson’s survey of current theories of the self stresses a common tendency in the several disciplines he examines (theology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and psychoanalysis) to replace an earlier view of the self as “*a unitary phenomenon*, . . . an encapsulated, individual variable” with a new conception of the self as “*interpersonal*” and

⁸ Francis L. K. Hsu comments, “The main problem created by the concept of personality is that we tend to see it as a separate entity, distinct from society and culture” (25).

“intersubjective” in which “the unit of study . . . becomes *interaction* or *transaction* between and among selves” (129). If there is indeed an apparent consensus across disciplines, as Johnson makes out, “*that the self is a social construction which is symbolically and signally created* between and among social beings” (129), then autobiography in the mass continues to be a largely conservative bastion of the old-style individualism that Smith and others view as obsolescent.

If Johnson correctly characterizes contemporary theories about the self, what becomes of the autonomy and freedom traditionally assumed to be the privileges of the self in the dominant model of identity conceived as individuality? Smith’s move, like Rorty’s and Rosenthal’s, is to balance the apparent tilt toward determinism by suggesting that selfhood is also “partly self-created” (“Perspectives” 1059). Although this affirmation of the possibility of self-determination might seem to be merely a predictable defense of Western-style individualism, it in fact proceeds logically from Smith’s understanding of the nature of human reflexiveness. Citing S. Epstein and George Kelly (and paralleling the view of Rorty, whom I quoted earlier), he states, “Our perceptions, concepts, and theories . . . about ourselves as persons become at least partly constitutive of who we are as persons” (1060). Accordingly, in his peroration Smith urges theorists in his field to incorporate a broad humanistic perspective in their thinking about selfhood precisely because “the individualistic version of selfhood that has characterized our Western tradition since the Renaissance . . . seems an increasingly poor fit to our requirements for survival in unavoidable interdependency” (1062). Theorists, however, can hardly hope to stand free of the complex, dialectical interplay between self and culture, and it is fascinating to learn that Smith detects the same informing presence of “individualistic value assumptions in American personality and social psychology” (1062) that Weintraub posits at the heart of modern autobiography in the West. In this respect theorists of self are no different from their counterparts in autobiography; in both cases, as Johnson puts it, “Westerners have inevitably *enacted* self in the process of *explaining* self” (92).

III. “AUTOGYNOGRAPHY”

If models of identity occupy a prominent position in the theory of many different disciplines today, so do they in autobiography itself and in autobiography studies as well. By definition all autobiographies presuppose a model of identity, and many seek to inculcate one, notably those belong-

ing to the didactic variety of conversion narrative which, running from Saint Augustine to John Bunyan to Malcolm X, constitutes the oldest continuous tradition of autobiographical writing. Another obvious example of a strain of autobiography that centers on the explicit promotion of a model of identity is the success story—and its inversion, failure as success (as in *Walden* and *The Education of Henry Adams*)—which, more than any other pattern, has provided the plot of choice for exemplary American lives from Benjamin Franklin to Booker T. Washington to Norman Podhoretz.⁹ Criticism of autobiography compounds the preoccupation with identity that is endemic to the writing of lives, for it, too, necessarily involves a response to the reigning general model that Weintraub posits as central to the genre. When it comes to models of identity and their emplotment in a life story, autobiography studies has become a highly charged field today: some would deny the existence of the self in the first place, repudiating autobiography as a stale exercise in a discredited bourgeois mythology; others, dissatisfied with the match between the reality of subjective experience and its representation in autobiography, have proposed alternative models of the self; still others, accepting the fundamental proposition of a fully constituted self, seek to replace its familiar white male exemplars from the dominant culture with noncanonical selves drawn from the ranks of the oppressed—whether of class, gender, or racial group.

Recent sensitivity to the phenomenon of canon formation as a primary manifestation of cultural politics in teaching and writing about literature has contributed to a new awareness of the ways in which unexamined assumptions about models of identity in autobiography can result in the pernicious exclusion of nonconforming instances. Arnold Krupat, for example, argues that our predisposition to accept “*egocentric individualism, historicism, and writing*” (307) as the characteristic marks of the autobiographical project has led us to prefer an “Eastern” tradition of American autobiography, oriented toward Europe and self-consciously literary (Jonathan Edwards, Benjamin Franklin, Henry Thoreau, Henry Adams, Gertrude Stein), to a “Western” tradition, in which the orientation toward the Indian and the refusal of writing are the definitive signs (Daniel Boone, Davey Crockett, Kit Carson, Jim Beckwourth, Buffalo Bill Cody, and Mark Twain).

⁹ For a brilliant presentation of this theme, see Martha Banta’s *Failure and Success in America*. In *Making It* Norman Podhoretz offers an autobiography exclusively focused on the values of success and career in American culture.

Similarly, Regenia Gagnier's study of nineteenth-century British working-class autobiography demonstrates the influence of generic assumptions on autobiographer and critic alike. Noting that previous students of working-class autobiography, such as David Vincent and Nan Hackett, have accepted the view that autobiography is to be defined as "the revelation of a centered, unified subject or self" (140), she notes that this "Cartesian subjectivity" (148) was not assumed by most working-class writers, who saw themselves instead as "'social atoms' making up the undifferentiated 'masses'" (141). "Bourgeois subjectivity was the dominant ideology in nineteenth-century Britain" (149), Gagnier argues, and the working-class autobiographer occupied a discursive position of considerable discomfort: on the one hand, the worker is frequently apologetic about his or her lack of distinctive selfhood; on the other, he or she is equally worried about the "egotism" of writing about the self, instinctively perceived, perhaps, as a breach of solidarity with one's class. Gagnier's observations are based on her reading of several hundred working-class autobiographies, and her study of this vast popular literature usefully complements the more familiar concern with high Victorian practice of autobiography studied by Jerome Buckley, Linda H. Peterson, Avrom Fleishman, and others.

Nowhere in autobiography studies have models of identity achieved greater conceptual prominence than in writing about women's autobiography, a subject launched by Estelle C. Jelinek in the anthology of criticism she published in 1980, developed subsequently in numerous articles and special sessions at professional meetings and symposia (at Louisiana State University in 1985, at Stanford in 1986), and now receiving book-length treatment (by Jelinek in 1986, by Sidonie Smith in 1987, by Françoise Lionnet and Felicity Nussbaum in 1989). The two ambitious anthologies of criticism that appeared in 1988, *The Private Self*, edited by Shari Benstock, and *Life/Lines*, edited by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, demonstrate the rapid maturation of this area of inquiry. Germaine Brée's recent essay "Autogynography" provides a useful overview of current thinking about women's autobiography, and I will follow her lead in recognizing Domna Stanton's essay "Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?" as marking a turning point in feminist investigation of this subject. Approaching the self as a discursive entity unfolding in the text, Stanton can find no textual evidence of a distinctively female signature in autobiography, although she remains convinced of the fundamental difference of gender. How, then, to account for this surprising discrepancy between the felt reality of private experience and the testimony of the literary re-

cord? Note that Stanton is not questioning the existence of a body of autobiographical literature by women; her investigation of the relation between gender and genre is engaged at a different level altogether.

One plausible explanation for Stanton's negative finding about women's autobiography is that women have accepted patriarchal views of the experience of self and its representation in literature that are inadequate to express the distinctive reality of their own inner lives. As Annette Kolodny puts it, "Women internalized a picture of themselves that itself precluded the kind of self-attention which might generate autobiography" (241). Linda H. Peterson finds historical evidence that would support this view. In order to account for the impoverished state of women's autobiography in nineteenth-century England (she places Martineau into the balance against Carlyle, Ruskin, Newman, and Gosse), Peterson points not merely to general social prohibitions against female self-assertion, but also to the fact that Wesley and others specifically excluded women from the male hermeneutic territory of biblical typology which, she argues, shaped the dominant tradition of Victorian autobiography. Tellingly, she notes that Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, a pseudo-autobiography that permits its heroine a subversive violation of the traditional typological system, is presented under the auspices of a male editor "who, according to Victorian convention, selects and arranges what a woman has to say about her life" (135). As long as the genre continued to reflect male values and power, Carolyn Heilbrun and Patricia Spacks find a legacy of secrecy, repression, and displacement in women's autobiography.

Principal among these internalized male values governing the practice of autobiography is the notion of the autonomous self: as Brée formulates it, adapting the model of identity defined by Gusdorf and Weintraub, "The individual . . . could look within himself as an isolated self-directed unit who could assume command of his life" ("Autogynography" 173). Brée cites Susan Friedman's proposal of an alternative model of identity that would enable the emergence of a true "autogynography" in Stanton's sense, a model in which "the important unit is never . . . the isolated human being but the presence and recognition of another consciousness" (174). Friedman derives support for her emphasis on collective identity and interpersonal relations in the work of psychologists and sociologists such as Sheila Rowbotham and Nancy Chodorow, and additional evidence is provided by Mary G. Mason's review of the history of women's autobiography. Mason finds no trace in the characteristic examples she studies (by Margaret Cavendish, Dame Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, and Anne Bradstreet) of the male patterns of self-discovery established by Augustine and Rousseau. The male archetypes conceive the

drama of the inner life to unfold wholly within the confines of the self or soul, and are thus quite “inappropriate as a model for women’s life-writing,” for “the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some ‘other’” (210).¹⁰

The logic of the situation suggests that, once liberated from the tyranny of the male dispensation, the female self will find expression in literary forms of its own, and Brée, Kolodny, and Heilbrun have saluted the dawning of the new mode, variously exemplified in the autobiographical writing of Kate Millett, Adrienne Rich, Maxine Hong Kingston, Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, and Julia Kristeva. As candidates for the distinctive imprint of female identity that Stanton and others require in a genuine “autogynography,” the diary (proposed by Jelinek [“Introduction”] and Juhasz) and the confession (proposed by Heilbrun) seem not to fill the bill, for both have been practiced for centuries by men and women alike. A more promising version of the new would be works that break with the chronological teleology of traditional linear narrative, although Brée is careful to note that male autobiographers, such as Barthes and Leiris, seem to be making a similar move (“Autogynography” 174–75). Brée bravely points to “interviews, recorded, filmed, or taped,” and “photographic records of lives, from cradle to grave” as examples of new and “not necessarily literary” (178) forms of autobiography, but similar male experimentation in various media makes me wonder whether the distinctiveness of gender is going to manifest itself in terms of form.¹¹ It is difficult, in fact, to envision what “autogynography” will be like. Interestingly, all of the “autogynographers” identified by Brée and the others continue to operate in a narrative form, for all their innovations.

The boldest stroke of Brée’s inquiry into “autogynography,” however, comes in her willingness to look beyond the conceptual confines of her subject. Inspired by J. F. Lyotard, she entertains the possibility of an altogether new dispensation for autobiography:

If I may make my own leap into speculation, it might well be that at this time of spectacular change in our sense of the macrocosm we inhabit—

¹⁰ As one follows the discussion of models of identity in the case of women’s autobiography, it is interesting to note that the so-called Gusdorf model, which as originally formulated was distinctly open-ended in conception, becomes progressively reduced, closed, and masculinized until it seems to be roughly synonymous with the linear teleology of a public career, in order, presumably, to serve as a contrast with female experience, which is held to be essentially private and discontinuous in nature.

¹¹ See Lejeune, *Je est un autre*, for an account of autobiographical self-presentation in a variety of media.

women, because until now they have had little occasion, therefore little inclination, to “construct meaning” [Lyotard’s phrase] on a grand scale, are in a better position to see beyond . . . our dichotomies and abstractions (not the least of which is the male-female dichotomy) and to look to the “multiplicity of the real.” (175)

From this imaginary vantage point, modern autobiography’s preoccupation with models of identity, which served historically according to Gusdorf and Weintraub as its enabling premise, shows as its principal constraint. If one were to succeed in looking directly at the “‘multiplicity of the real,’” would this reality include the singularity that has been the hallmark of identity in autobiography since Rousseau? Will there be a place for the individualistic self in the genre once it has moved beyond gender?

Brée sets the stage for asking radical questions about the future of autobiography when she entertains the possibility that “somewhere along in our mid-century years the ‘moi-je’ inherited from the Romantics waned and moved away from the center stage carrying with it the autobiographical narrative” (178–79). It would be relatively easy to adduce parallel assertions that the integrity of the romantic self and the linear narrative structure that was its most characteristic expression have been supplanted by a view of the self as fragmented, and of the autobiographical fragment as its form.¹² If we inquire into the basis of such judgments, it is difficult to get beyond the predisposition to make such statements in the first place: critics will point to texts they deem to be peculiarly representative, and autobiographers will point to states of mind.

This is hardly a surprising state of affairs, moreover, for the reality of subjectivity is a notoriously elusive category. Denials of the self’s reality or of the continuity of its experience over time are not new—here we need think only of the skepticism of David Hume—but the frequency with which such statements are made is certainly a striking fact of contemporary literature and criticism. Even allowing for the difficulties involved in offering authoritative support for statements of this kind, they call into question the very premise of the genre as we have known it, for belief in a model of identity *of some sort* does seem to provide an outer limit beyond which it would be hard to accept the very idea of autobiography as a viable proposition. This, at any rate, is what Elizabeth Bruss is driving at

¹² For a parallel account of the decline of the self, see Sprinker and Jay (*Being*); see also my discussion of the related views of Wylie Sypher, Eugene Goodheart, and Robert Langbaum on this subject in *Fictions* 205–6.

when she speculates that “autobiography could simply become obsolete if its defining features, such as individual identity, cease to be important for a particular culture” (15). The linkage between self and culture, between models of identity and autobiography, is clear to all observers. What is less clear in the commentary to date is the way in which this linkage functions—this is my subject in these pages. The playing out of models of identity in the genre’s history suggests that the modalities of cultural change affecting autobiography are quite complex.

IV. AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND “THE PSYCHOANALYTIC SELF”

If autobiography developed in the West to express a fundamental belief in the individual’s intrinsic value, as Gusdorf and Weintraub argue, we could plausibly assume that important modifications in the model of identity would entail important shifts in the conception and practice of the genre. This is precisely the case made by Thomas Cooley, for example. He dates the rise of modern autobiography in America from the practice of Adams, Twain, Howells, and James, who abandoned the traditional, unitary model of the self as innate and changeless in favor of a situational model of identity as “the shifting deposit of a continuing process of adaptation” (19). This difference reflects the emergence of modern developmental psychology, as opposed to the traditional faculty psychology that Thoreau and the Transcendentalists shared with Franklin and the Puritans. In the case of women’s autobiography, by contrast, the relation between shifts in the model of identity and generic practice is less clear; Germaine Brée and Domna Stanton believe that it would be premature to pass judgment on the possibilities of “autogynography.” I turn instead to the relation between autobiography and psychoanalysis for a more substantial measure of the potential impact changing conceptions of the self may have on the genre’s development. Let us consider the most influential twentieth-century model of identity, which Steven Marcus has recently described as the psychoanalytic self.

In order to provide a context for sizing up the influence of psychoanalysis on autobiography, I want to take a quick look at the received history of the concept of the self in the West, which could be rendered schematically as follows: in the beginning, in antiquity, there was no sense of the self as individual. Paul Veyne, for example, in the first volume of *A History of Private Life, From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, asserts categorically that “no ancient, not even the poets, is capable of talking about himself.” “To talk

about oneself,” he continues, “to throw personal testimony into the balance, . . . is a Christian, indeed an eminently Protestant idea that the ancients never dared to profess” (231–32), and Weintraub has analyzed the cultural factors in Greek and Roman civilization that discouraged the development of a conception of personality as individuality (*Value* 1–17). Then, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, along with Protestantism come the idea of man as an individual, private rooms, autobiography, and a new sense of the word *self* as a noun referring to “that . . . in a person [which] is really and intrinsically *he* (in contradistinction to what is adventitious)” (*OED*, cited in Trilling, *Sincerity* 25). The gradual emergence of the concept of modern individuality from 1500 to 1800 has been extensively investigated by Philippe Ariès, Roy F. Baumeister, Gusdorf, Lawrence Stone, Lionel Trilling (*Sincerity*), Lancelot Law Whyte, Weintraub, and others. For heuristic purposes, we may streamline this process and credit Descartes with the discovery of the “inner” or “hidden” or “private” self, whose story came to be told in autobiography. Then we could reasonably expect Freud’s work on the unconscious (the momentous second step in this history of consciousness), which involves a radical expansion of the received model of personality and postulates a “hidden” part of the “hidden” self, to have had revolutionary implications for our understanding of the self and its story.

Surprisingly, in fact it has not. Of course one can certainly point to the influence of psychoanalysis as method or content in a number of experimental autobiographies, notably Michel Leiris’s *L’Age d’homme* (1939) and the several volumes of *La Règle du jeu* (1948–1976), Conrad Aiken’s *Ushant* (1962), and Ronald Fraser’s *In Search of a Past: The Rearing of an English Gentleman, 1933–45* (1984). Beyond a general acceptance that frankness is a desideratum, however, and that sexuality ought to be included in the story of a life, the impact of the Freudian concept of the unconscious on autobiography has not been very substantial. Several commentators in the mid-1970s, including Lejeune (“The Order of Narrative” 70–73), John Sturrock, and Christine Downing, explicitly conceded as much when they attacked the genre’s conservatism with regard to the concept of self and life story. Hoping to throw off the dead weight of convention, they called for a “new model autobiographer” who, psychoanalytically inspired, would discard the old-fashioned constraints of narrative linearity and embrace the freedom of free association proper to the psychoanalytic self.¹³ Such a reform, however, has been slow to take hold, for ten years

¹³ See also Eakin, *Fictions* 166–70, for a more detailed discussion of these issues.

later we find that Philip Dodd, praising *In Search of a Past* as “the most important contemporary English autobiography” (“Criticism” 9), is still in the position of championing Fraser’s use of psychoanalysis in autobiographical discourse as a novelty. The possibilities of psychoanalysis as method and as content for self-revelation are extensively illustrated in the case of Philippe Lejeune, who found—for a time—in the work of Leiris, the most prominent of the apparently psychoanalytic autobiographers, a model for his own practice of autobiography.

Lejeune’s earliest exposition of the relation between autobiography and psychoanalysis, the long concluding section in *L’Autobiographie en France* (1971), is also his most balanced assessment: distinguishing carefully between autobiography on the one hand and autoanalysis and psychoanalysis on the other, he concludes that psychoanalysis has not fulfilled its original promise of providing a theoretical basis for the autobiographical enterprise. Lejeune is careful in this respect to note that Leiris’s practice of a psychoanalytically inspired autobiography constitutes a literary rather than a clinical application of Freudian analysis (91–104). In support of his negative finding concerning the contribution of psychoanalysis to autobiography, he includes in an appendix extracts from an essay by Bernard Pingaud, “L’Écriture et la cure,” which argues that writing is a nontherapeutic act, and hence, I should add, unsuited to the project of confessional autobiography formulated by Lejeune: functioning as a defense mechanism, it reveals no secret but constitutes one itself (257–62).

A few years later, however, Leiris had cast his spell, prompting Lejeune in the “Epilogue” to *Lire Leiris, autobiographie et langage* (1975) to conceive of the autobiographical act as an analogue to the psychoanalytic encounter, in which the analysand “knows that the moment when he speaks is the center of his story, in the sense that everything is repeated here” (236). The example of Leiris, who placed a premium on the free play of language in the moment-by-moment unfolding of the autobiographical act, seemed to offer a viable alternative to the lockstep chronology of traditional autobiographical narrative, conceived as a transparent rendering of a recoverable past. The euphoria of the Leirisian moment, however, which Lejeune seems to have experienced as a release from literary constraint and psychological inhibition, enabling the free-associative (and imitative) style of autobiographical writing illustrated in the “Epilogue,” was relatively short-lived, as he recently revealed in the “Postscriptum à *Lire Leiris*” (1986).

The subject of the “Postscriptum,” which relates Lejeune’s face-to-face meeting with Leiris in 1976, focuses on the clinical experience of psycho-

analysis, both Leiris's and Lejeune's, which emerges as the prototype for the autobiographical act conceived as confession.¹⁴ As far as Leiris's analysis is concerned, Lejeune is frankly disappointed: Leiris is portrayed as surprisingly naive, psychoanalytically speaking, someone who never understood the Freudian conception of dream work, someone who openly repudiated free association (175). Leiris himself was also disappointed by his analysis, which seems only to have reinforced his resistance (170), for he emerged from it without having discovered anything, without having attained knowledge of an origin or a secret (173). For Leiris, and for Lejeune as well, the possibility of self-revelation through analysis is both threat and lure, and Lejeune discerns in his obsessive curiosity to get at the substance of Leiris's analysis a screen for his desire to come to terms with his own. Ironically, he reports that his own analysis, hitherto concealed as a kind of guilty secret, was just as disappointing as Leiris's; its meager discoveries really did not amount to much (166). The upshot of the "Postscriptum" is to discredit analysis as a paradigm for confessional autobiography.

For the present, at any rate, psychoanalysis has failed to usher in a new mode of autobiographical practice, although widespread discussion of clinical theory, especially Erik Erikson's conception of identity formation as a lifelong developmental process, has certainly colored the reading and writing of autobiography in our time. What are we to make of autobiographers' continued attachment to the plenary self and to the rendering of its experience in linear narrative? Why does life writing appear to be peculiarly resistant to change? Lejeune's explanation ("The Order of Narrative" 71)—and John Sturrock's as well (51–53)—reads in the genre's persistent conservatism when it comes to models of identity and life story a stubborn allegiance to an obsolescent nineteenth-century ideal of biographical form. Such an interpretation, however, mistakes symptom for cause, for we would do better to interpret the linearity of conventional biographical form as itself a response to the fundamental temporality of human experience. Such a position, of course, appeals to yet another model of identity, a concept most recently espoused by Paul Ricoeur and David Carr, who posit a phenomenological correlation between the tem-

¹⁴ The importance of this model for Lejeune is reflected in his evident disappointment at discovering that Serge Doubrovsky's account of his analysis in *Fils* is mostly a fiction ("Autobiographie, roman et nom propre" 66–68). For additional commentary on Lejeune and psychoanalysis, in particular his interest in Lacan, see Olivier 58–59. Lejeune himself is careful to disclaim any authoritative mastery of Lacanian theory ("Postscriptum" 170).

poral structure of narrative and what they take to be the essential narrativity of human experience.¹⁵

With psychoanalytic autobiography, as with “autogynography,” we observe the tendency of critics to seek to direct change in the genre in response to what they take to be the truth of a particular model of identity. But what is the status of that truth? The Freudian theory of the unconscious continues to be embroiled in controversy, and it is by no means clear, for example, that the free association in analysis to which Lejeune and Sturrock appeal precludes the existence of a prominent narrative dimension to the clinical enterprise.¹⁶ Moreover, some of the early champions of psychoanalytic literary criticism, such as Frederick Crews, have recanted their original belief. The relation between theories of personality and the fact of gender is equally controversial, and Germaine Brée (“Autogynography”), as we have seen, is prepared to interpret the preoccupation with the making of models of identity as itself an obstacle to our apprehending the reality of our experience. Howard Gardner’s recent survey of research in six primary fields of cognitive studies (philosophy, psychology, artificial intelligence, linguistics, anthropology, and neuroscience) points out how many questions remain to be answered before we can found a model of identity on a firm basis of empirical fact.

V. THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

Discussion of identity formation in terms of “models” and “concepts” can lend a misleading air of the abstract to a process of socialization that is often brutally concrete and direct, as in the case of Malcolm X. Facing the perennial question for American youth, “What are you going to be when you grow up?” Malcolm X receives a repressive answer from his junior high school teacher, who reminds him that the models of identity open to blacks are narrowly controlled by white culture: “You’ve got to be realistic about being a nigger” (36). Taking this bitter lesson to heart, Malcolm X literally enacts the logical alternative to the assumption of black inferiority when he attempts to appropriate white identity through the painful experience of getting his hair “conked.” It is only in retrospect that he can

¹⁵ For further discussion of these issues, see the section headed “Narrative, Time, and the Constitution of Identity” in chapter 5.

¹⁶ For further discussion of the narrative dimension of psychoanalysis, see Schafer, Spence, and Eakin, *Fictions* 170–71.

recognize the depth of his saturation in the values of the dominant culture: “I was trying so hard . . . to be white” (31). We could say that the experience of the conk manifests Malcolm X’s reception of a message from white America that black is not beautiful, but if we did we would attenuate the primary power of the text which dramatizes the excruciating experiential reality of cultural oppression, the lie about black identity literally searing Malcolm X’s scalp in the enslaving application of the lye.

By contrast, Malcolm X’s emphatically didactic formulation of his engagement in the autobiographical process reflects his determination to recover the initiative for the black self in its struggle with white culture, and it is surely no accident that autobiography and its sustaining myth of the autonomous self have become a preferred mode of expression for the oppressed in our time—for women, for blacks, for convicts, for gays. Autobiography, however, is by its very nature a distinctly ambiguous mode of self-assertion, for the self is shaped by culture every bit as much in its writing as in its living. I would argue that the tension between the experiential reality of subjectivity on the one hand and the available, cultural forms for its expression on the other always structures any engagement in autobiography, and the most striking tangible evidence to support this view is presented in collaborative or “as told to” autobiography.

In his study of the composition and publication of slave narratives under the aegis of Northern white abolitionists, William L. Andrews documents the overt, programmatic coercion of cultural institutions that can inform an autobiographer’s apparently free choice of models of identity and shapes for life story. As long as the ex-slave continued to dictate his story to a white amanuensis, the narratives were predictably targeted to reassure the middle-class sensibilities of the white reader, especially with regard to the fugitives’ demonstrated potential to rebel against the authority of Southern white masters. White control of the instruments of public expression could effect a systematic repression of the violent anger and bitterness at the core of the black self, and Andrews gives a fascinating account of the curiously antiautobiographical drift of this literature of appeasement, of the fictionalizing that went forward in the service of “fact.”

Studying the current vogue for the lives of common people collected by journalists and oral historians, Philippe Lejeune makes a parallel case about the politics that inevitably governs a collaboration of this kind: such lives can gain access to the printed word only through an intermediary belonging to the dominant class that controls the production and consumption of such texts (“The Autobiography of Those” 209). Lejeune has

a lively sense of the ambiguities and ironies involved in such transactions, for to the extent that the system of communication in question serves to promote the values and ideology of the dominant (literate) class (198), even the most apparently disinterested ethnographic project may manifest the taint of exploitation. A collaboration ostensibly devoted to the preservation of autobiographical data that might otherwise perish may nonetheless involve a fundamental condescension that possesses the potential for voyeurism and violation (210). Thus it is by no means clear that the illiterate individual (peasant, artisan, worker) has in fact been enfranchised through such ethnographic intervention, achieving “authority” over his or her own life in spirit if not in the letter of the author’s signature. As Andrews and Lejeune demonstrate, collaborative autobiography offers a rich opportunity to explore the play of power and politics beneath the deceptive surface of first-person discourse with its rhetorical structure of self-authorization.¹⁷

VI. THE RELATION BETWEEN SELF AND CULTURE: INTERTEXTUAL AND SEMIOLOGICAL APPROACHES

I want to return now to the problems involved in conceptualizing the relation between self and culture in the writing of autobiography. If it is true that models of identity are ubiquitous and inescapable in autobiography and autobiography studies, what posture should we adopt toward them in developing our thinking about autobiography? Given our present tentative knowledge of the structures of subjectivity, as illustrated by the findings of Gardner and others, we would do well to shift our attention from passing judgment on the adequacy of particular models to studying instead the dynamics of the relation between models of identity and the practice of autobiography through insights provided by cultural anthropologists and by autobiographers themselves. Seeking to avoid vague, zeitgeist-type notions when it comes to understanding how a model of identity works in a culture, we need to ask: where do models come from, and what is the manner of their dissemination? how do models achieve authority and what are the cultural institutions involved? what factors ac-

¹⁷ For further discussion of collaborative autobiography, see also Albert E. Stone’s “Two Recreate One: The Act of Collaboration in Recent Black Autobiography—Ossie Guffy, Nate Shaw, Malcolm X” in *Autobiographical Occasions* (231–64) and Eakin, “Malcolm X.”

count for the change of a model over time? In asking questions such as these, I follow Janet V. Gunn (10) in calling for a broadly cultural, indeed anthropological, approach to the study of self in autobiography.¹⁸

As I suggested earlier, Weintraub, Gusdorf, and Spengemann and Lundquist point to models of identity as the conduit of cultural influence upon an individual's formation of his or her operative sense of self. How does this process work in the case of autobiography? The most familiar approach to the cultural sources of the language of autobiography, illustrated in two recent books by Avrom Fleishman and Linda H. Peterson on the history of British autobiography, derives from a theory of intertextuality: language comes from language, books from books. In Peterson's view, an autobiographer "does not . . . begin with the raw facts of his experience and then create or discover an order from within; instead, he constructs a life from the models of prior autobiographical texts" (57–58). Fleishman agrees, arguing that the language of autobiography is always mediated, a reworking of stories told by others, and it is his project to trace the history of what he calls the "figures" of autobiography, the "verbal formulas, iconographic images, and intellectual commonplaces" that cumulatively, over the centuries, constitute "the lingua franca of literary discourse" (49). Fleishman and Peterson trace the language of British autobiography back to the biblical typology employed by Augustine (Fleishman) or, alternatively, by John Bunyan (Peterson).

Most autobiographies supply useful illustrations of the agency of culture and its institutions when it comes to the individual's encounter with models of identity, and a good many of them seem specifically to confirm the book-centered conception of the problem of origins that the intertextuality of Fleishman and Peterson entails. Augustine's "*tolle, lege*" would be the paradigmatic instance, and J. S. Mill's reading of Wordsworth would be another. Models of identity permeate the discourse and imagery of a culture, and they frequently do crystallize in stories that offer to the nascent self a pattern for identity and a shape for a life story. I think of young Alfred Kazin dreaming in the ghetto over *The American Boys' Life of*

¹⁸ Recognizing concepts of self as the focal structure of autobiography studies and eschewing the models of essentialists, who view the self as "absolute, ineffable, and timeless," and of structuralists and their followers, who reduce self to "a reified textual system" (8), Gunn urges that our self-knowledge "is always grounded in the signs of one's existence that are received from others, as well as from the works of culture by which one is interpreted" (31). More recently, Philip Dodd has made a parallel case against the limitations of formalist and poststructuralist readings of autobiography, calling instead for critics to recognize "the nature of autobiography's entry into history" ("Criticism" 11).

Theodore Roosevelt, or again, of Sartre, boy wonder, cribbing the plot for his own career as a literary genius from a piece of didactic trash entitled *The Childhood of Famous Men*. It seems quite likely, however, that for many autobiographers such texts are made to stand for a more complex, less literally legible, process of cultural instruction that leaves no textual trace beyond the autobiography itself.

Intertextuality—at least as it is practiced by Fleishman and Peterson—does not seem to lend itself easily to a rendering of the experience of culture as process. Despite his assertion that autobiography is best understood not as a product but rather as an activity or process, signaled by his preference for the term “self-writing,” Fleishman settles in fact for a taxonomy of figures whose mutations it is his business to follow from text to text in diachronic sequence. Confessed at the margin of this otherwise traditional literary historical project is a sense of nagging discomfort that the intertextual procedure seems to generate. Acknowledging his failure “to specify a concrete relation between the mythos of metaphors constructed in the text and the personal myth constituted as a self,” Fleishman recoils nevertheless from the idea of “collapsing [the self] into the linguistic vortex of the text” (35).

Accordingly, in an “Envoi” annexed to the body of the book, inspired by Paul Ricoeur, Fleishman gives a distinctly experiential, phenomenological answer to the elusive problem of origins, namely, that the forms or figures of autobiography are ultimately derived from the rhythms of our living, such that we could say that “life . . . is already structured as a narrative” (478). In his summation, however, Fleishman reverts to his intertextual posture: “Where does the language of self-writing come from? From the community’s narrative discourse, to be sure, especially from those authoritative texts which embody the prevailing schemas of a life” (479). The dynamics of the encounter between self and culture asserted here remain problematic, built into the circularity of his very formulation as he moves from “language” to “life”: the texts are recognized as “authoritative” because they “embody prevailing schemas,” and the “schemas” are recognized as “prevailing” because of their prominent display in “authoritative texts.”

It is easy enough to say that what is missing here is precisely a sense of process. Yes, as Fleishman massively demonstrates, the figures of autobiography have an extensive history that can be traced from text to text, but how have they existed? How have readers and writers engaged with them? But then again, how are we going to find answers for such questions, if indeed they are answerable, for, as Elizabeth Bruss put it, “Given

only a text or even a contrasting set of texts, how can one hope to seize its dimensions as an action?" (19). It may well be that the circularity in Fleishman's thinking—the "language" derived from "discourse" expressed in "texts" which "embody" "schemas"—testifies to the fundamental interdependency and reciprocity of the discursive situation of autobiography considered in its cultural context. Pondering the relation between models of identity and autobiography, Michel Beaujour points to a conclusion of this kind when he queries: "How do we prove the emergence of individualism [in the West]? By pointing to the existence of autobiographies? Or do we attribute the existence of autobiographies to the fact that there is already individualism?" ("La Question" 49). Is it possible to extricate oneself from the apparently circular reasoning in which autobiography is understood to be a response to a model of identity the existence of which, in its turn, is manifested in autobiographies?

One solution, and currently a prominent one in the thinking of post-structuralists and semioticians, would be to abandon any attempt to adjudicate such questions of causation as hopeless by definition. Thus Roland Barthes, for example, asserts that our cultural experience is textual in nature in the first place. From this perspective, the question of origins pursued by Fleishman, Peterson, and Beaujour is disallowed by infinite regress, for both self and culture are constituted by a network of codes "whose origin is 'lost' in the vast perspective of the *already-written*" (*S/Z* 21). If intertextuality seems to omit any account of the transmission of texts as a primary cultural process, Barthes supplies this lack with a vengeance in *S/Z*, attempting to specify the moment-by-moment play of cultural codes that informs the reader's apprehension of meaning as he parses each unit of the text. Fleishman may resist collapsing the self into "the linguistic vortex of the text," but Barthes knows no such hesitation: the "I" who reads is "a plurality of other texts," for "subjectivity" is only "a plenary image, with which I may be thought to encumber the text, but whose deceptive plenitude is merely the wake of all the codes which constitute me, so that my subjectivity has ultimately the generality of stereotypes" (10). Everything is language, text, code, and by extension the privacy of selfhood celebrated by individualistic autobiography shows as derivative, conventional, and public.

Maybe what it comes to is a chastened acceptance of the fact that the knowledge we might like to have about the individual's lived engagement in cultural experience can only come to us in the form of some text, that otherwise it leaves no trace. I have already alluded to Hayden White's firm reminder on this point in chapter 2, that "the historically real . . . is

that to which I can be referred only by way of an artifact that is textual in nature" ("Context" 209), and I want to return to his views once more, for he is, I believe, the only critic to date to have attempted a sustained application of a semiological approach to the reading of autobiography, in this case *The Education of Henry Adams*.

As with Barthes, White's emphasis is on process and code: language is not a "reflection, however refracted, of a structure more fundamental," but rather "a complex mediation between various codes by which reality is to be assigned possible meanings" (202). A text like *The Education of Henry Adams* represents what White terms the resources for "meaning production available in the culture of Adams's time and place" (213). A certain circularity seems to remain, however: White alleges that "when we inquire into the context of a work such as the *Education*, we are interested above all in the extent to which that context provided resources for the production of the kinds of meanings that this text displays to us" (212), but he also affirms that our knowledge of that context and its resources for meaning production is to be derived from the text. In any case, the semiotic approach promotes discourse itself, its forms, its codes, its figures (to place Fleishman's project in this context), as the primary subject of reference in autobiography.

It would be hard to say that White's semiological approach breaks new ground in interpreting *The Education of Henry Adams*, but I do think that his emphasis on the resources for meaning production offers an extremely suggestive way of conceptualizing the cultural situation of any autobiographer. Fleishman, Peterson, White, and others are right to stress the extent to which the ostensibly autonomous practice of autobiography is necessarily embedded in a preexisting context of discursive practice, and the historian of discourse can hope to reconstruct a great deal of this context if he is prepared to do the work. Setting aside the preconceptions about the history of autobiography that we derive from highly selective consideration of a limited canon of literary masterworks, Philippe Lejeune has undertaken to compile a comprehensive inventory of autobiographies written in France in the nineteenth century. Like Barthes and White, Lejeune emphasizes that he regards the texts in his corpus not as ancillary sources of historical information but rather as primary social facts in their own right ("La Cote Ln 27" 258). What emerges from such a programmatically unselective study of texts is a sense of the "micro-forms" of autobiographical discourse that can be said to have achieved popular currency at a given moment in the history of a culture, a grammar of the building blocks of personal narrative. For the historian of discourse, autobiography must be

conceptualized not as some absolute literary essence but instead as historically variable, belonging to constantly changing networks of social practice in which the life of the individual receives articulation.

Lejeune's investigation of the genesis of his great-grandfather's autobiography, which he recently edited and published for the first time, gives a rare and fascinating glimpse of the agency of culture in the enactment of autobiographical discourse. Here we have an example of the autobiographer drawing on his culture's resources for meaning production, as White would have it. Lejeune identifies three cultural sources for the style of self-presentation in this homely work: the art of composition that Xavier-Edouard Lejeune learned in a Montmartre grammar school from 1856 to 1858, the romantic novels of Victor Hugo, Eugène Sue, Alexandre Dumas, and others that he devoured in his adolescence, and especially the newspapers of the period that he read assiduously, clipped extensively, and occasionally even recopied ("En famille" 199–200). The private speech of the individual engaged in the autobiographical act is derived, Lejeune argues, from public discourse structured by class, code, and convention. From the perspective of the historian of discourse, it makes sense to say that the self who writes is written.

VII. INDIGENOUS PSYCHOLOGIES

If historians of discourse like Lejeune and White stress that the textual self created in the autobiographical act is quarried from the resources of the "*already-written*" texts of the surrounding culture, cultural anthropologists suggest the extent to which the makers of such selves, autobiographers—and the rest of us—are similarly produced. In speaking of culture, self, and models as I have, I have run the risk of implying that these terms signify wholly discrete categories, that culture, for example, is something outside or beyond the individual, something we live in like a state or place. The truth of the matter, however, is a good deal more complicated, for culture infiltrates the boundaries of the apparently autonomous self: it inhabits our minds, it structures our thought.

The work of the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz offers a salutary corrective to those of us who have become steeped in the myth of the autonomous self, for in his view not only is a model of self a cultural construct but the person entertaining such a model is culturally constructed as well: not only thought but emotions, he states, are "cultural artifacts in man" (*Interpretation* 81). This view of emotion as "cultural artifact" is ar-

resting and may seem to do violence to that sense of the quality of feeling cherished in Western autobiography since Rousseau as the individual's most distinctive claim to a unique personality. Recent research on the history of the emotions by social historians, however, has begun to justify this notion of feeling as "cultural artifact," demonstrating that cultures do possess a specifiably distinct emotional style. Peter N. Stearns reminds us, though, that while it may be possible to trace the history of an emotion as an idea or value in the surviving literature, supporting evidence, "the real social history, the actual incidence, of the emotion itself" (338) is certainly extremely difficult, if not impossible, to document.

How do we know what other people, in other cultures or in other periods, are or were really feeling? Geertz, for one, sensibly concedes that such a question is unanswerable, and he directs attention instead to another that does admit of an answer: "The ethnographer does not, and, in my opinion, largely cannot, perceive what his informants perceive. What he perceives, and that uncertainly enough, is what they perceive 'with'—or 'by means of,' or 'through' . . . or whatever the word should be" ("Point of View" 224). What he proposes, in fact, is a semiotic understanding of culture as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (*Interpretation* 89). Central among these fundamental structures that organize our experience is the concept of the person, the individual human being, and it becomes the anthropologist's task to search out and analyze "the symbolic forms—words, images, institutions, behaviors—in terms of which, in each place, people actually represented themselves to themselves and to one another" ("Point of View" 225).

If all cultures apparently require a concept of the person in order to function, cross-cultural study reveals that the content of the concept is radically culture specific, as Geertz himself demonstrates in his commentary on Balinese society and the paradoxically depersonalized concept of the person that obtains in it. Investigations by other anthropologists confirm Geertz's findings, and there can be no doubt that the Cartesian assumptions about the self reflected in so much modern Western autobiography are neither "natural" nor normative. For the Melanesian, according to Maurice Leenhardt, "there is no experience of a defining 'body,' . . . no physical envelope that separates a personal 'inside' from an 'objective' outside" (Clifford 185), while according to Godfrey Lienhardt, the Dinka of the southern Sudan, who do not possess "our notion of 'mind,'" have "no firm basis for thinking of themselves as selves" (Heelas 10).

Geertz's semiotic approach to culture emphasizes the interrelatedness, the interdependency, of its structures of meaning, and he argues, for example, that "there is an unbreakable internal link" "between a people's conception of what it is to be a person and their conception of the structure of history" (*Interpretation* 389). Thus, in the case of the Balinese, he asserts, "linked to their depersonalizing conception of personhood is a de-temporalizing (again from our point of view) conception of time" (*Interpretation* 391). Geertz's observation suggests that the role of the concept of person—or any comparable concept—in people's construction of their experience must not be considered as operating in isolation, but rather as a member of a complex configuration or cluster of symbolic forms, and it confirms in particular the assertion made by a number of literary historians that the rise of autobiography reflects the conjunction of a model of identity as individuality and a concept of history as an irreversible, never-to-be-repeated sequence of actions. Gusdorf ("Conditions" 30–31) and Weintraub ("Autobiography" 843–48) posit these as the twin enabling conditions for the possibility of modern autobiography in the West,¹⁹ while James Olney has shown that it is precisely with reference to concepts of time and of person that African autobiography differs from its Western counterpart (*Tell Me Africa* 56–59).²⁰

Applying his semiotic approach to a widely differing set of societies—in Bali, in Java, in Morocco—Geertz persuasively demonstrates the crucial role that sense-making structures play in enabling people to process the multifarious reality of human social experience. To the extent that one grants fundamental importance to this study of the symbolic forms that people "perceive 'with'—or 'by means of,' or 'through,'" it may seem all the more surprising to learn that such inquiry has acquired intellectual respectability only recently, at least in disciplines such as anthropology and psychology where one might most readily expect to find it. If there is now substantial interest in "ethnopsychology" (M. Brewster Smith, "Metaphorical" 62) or "indigenous psychology" (Heelas 3), if researchers from a number of adjacent fields—philosophy, psychology, anthropology, religious studies (to name those assembled in Heelas and Lock's *Indigenous Psychologies*)—now find it appropriate to ask, "How do culturally

¹⁹ This linkage between concepts of person and time is central to Lejeune's view of Sartre's innovation as an autobiographer ("The Order of Narrative").

²⁰ This point is admirably expressed in the following comment by Peter Abrahams, the South African novelist: "Tribal man is not an individual in the western sense. Psychologically and emotionally he is the present living personification of a number of forces, among the most important of which are the ancestral dead" (quoted in Olney, *Tell Me Africa* 177).

contrasting peoples conceptualize their human nature and their personal-social processes?" (M. Brewster Smith, "Metaphorical" 62), Rodney Needham attributes the previous neglect of such inquiry to the unexamined assumption "that human nature is essentially the same everywhere, and that inner states, dispositions and capacities have already been adequately discriminated by the psychological vocabularies of Western languages" (67).²¹

Needham is right in pointing to attitudes toward language as deeply implicated in any thinking about inner states and about the self or person who experiences them, although his reading of the neglect of indigenous psychologies does not acknowledge the tendency toward cultural relativism earlier in the century inspired by the views of Edward Sapir, who, as Howard Gardner paraphrases, "put forth the provocative hypothesis that a person's very processes of thinking are structured, if not controlled, by the particular properties of the language one speaks" (204). "No two languages," Sapir asserts, "are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality" (quoted in Gardner 235). Although Gardner reports that recent work by Eleanor Rosch and others has undermined the kind of extreme linguistic determinism espoused by Sapir's student Benjamin Lee Whorf in favor of the existence of certain experiential universals (for example, the perception of colors), he notes that "as one moves toward complex, abstract, and less immediately perceptible realms, the role of one's symbolic systems [including "the language one uses"] may become predominant" (358).

Current research by ethnopsychologists and cultural anthropologists concerning an extremely diverse array of societies supports Gardner's assessment.²² Rom Harré's findings, for example, drawing on cross-cultural, transhistorical, and ontogenetic instances, offer a characteristic and compelling demonstration of the view "that indigenous psychologies are indeed both adequate and distinct, and that therefore social forms and individual personalities must be culture-specific" (79). It is the relation between social forms and individual personalities that remains to be determined. As Needham points out, our knowledge of inner states is always mediated, for "no inner state can be expressed socially in a purely natural way" (76), and the mediation of language is the decisive factor to be inves-

²¹ For a brief history of views of human nature, especially as reflected in the practice of anthropology, see Leach 55–85.

²² I am thinking here of the essays gathered in the collections edited, respectively, by Heelas and Lock and by Marsella, DeVos, and Hsu.

tigated. Although research into indigenous psychologies is tempered by the recognition that linguistic evidence must be supplemented by evidence of characteristic social patterns of behavior (Harré 84), by the recognition that some aspects of selfhood do not depend on the possession of language,²³ language remains inescapably central as the medium in which inner states are culturally negotiated and expressed. What, precisely, are we entitled to infer from the presence (or absence) of particular terms in a given language that refer to inner states or to the person? What is the relation between a subjectivity experientially considered and its articulation, especially in language, in acts of social expression?

VIII. A METAPHOR OF A METAPHOR

As far as autobiography is concerned, nowhere is the case more boldly made for drawing inferences about the nature of subjectivity from the surviving testimony of literary expression than in Lionel Trilling's lectures given at Harvard in 1969–1970, and subsequently published as *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Noting that “historians of European culture are in substantial agreement that, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, something like a mutation in human nature took place” (19), leading to the emergence of man perceived as an individual, Trilling argues that “the impulse to write autobiography may be taken as virtually definitive of the psychological changes to which the historians point” (24). Are changes in models of identity merely ephemeral manifestations, superficial literary fashions? Do they, alternatively, as Trilling suggests, reflect important changes in the nature of subjectivity? Or do they in fact actually work to bring about changes in the nature of subjectivity in the cultures within which they occur? The last of these possibilities is potentially the most radical in its implications. It becomes a question, as M. Brewster Smith formulates it, “as to how, and to what extent, culturally shared implicit personality theories may actually be formative of personality” (“Metaphorical” 79). Since such theory is registered linguistically, in terms such as *self*, *individual*, *unconscious*, and the like, the question becomes, as Needham asks, “whether new inner states are created, i. e. distinctively experienced, as new lexical discriminations are made” (77).

These are hard questions, and conclusions are certainly premature. As Rom Harré observes, “It is not yet clear, in a general way, to what extent

²³ M. Brewster Smith cites G. C. Gallup's study of selfhood in chimpanzees as a basis for this observation (“Metaphorical” 64).

social practices and social theories, psychological functioning and psychological theories, mutually engender each other” (101). The notion of mutuality here is especially promising, nevertheless, for discussion of these issues in the case of autobiography has tended to polarize in an unfortunately reductive fashion, dividing those who interpret the autobiographical act as the exercise of an autonomous subjectivity from those who see in it the workings of cultural (and specifically linguistic) determinism: the self who writes, or the self who is written. As field after field tackles the problem of the self in its relation to culture—active or passive, subject or object—the difficulties of the issue seem increasingly to be as much a function of the formulation as they are of the elusiveness of the evidence itself. In several versions of this relation I have commented on a circularity that seems to vitiate their value as explanation, but some observers now point to this circularity as a clue to the dynamic reciprocity that structures any exchange between self and culture.

The following statement by the psychologist Andrew Lock, which addresses precisely the vexatious circularity of the relation between self and culture, adopts the notion of feedback to model the process in which self is both subject and object, agent and acted-upon:

We thus come to a fundamental, though apparently tautologous point: that the existence of culture is predicated upon that of self-awareness, and that the existence of self-awareness is predicated upon that of culture. In the same way as in the course of evolution the structure of the brain is seen as being in a positive-feedback relationship with the nature of the individual’s environment, so it is with culture and self-awareness. (22)²⁴

Lock’s formulation supplies a sense of process largely missing in the intertextual and semiotic (at least in its structuralist guise) versions of the relation between self and culture considered earlier. The phylogenetic or evolutionary analogy is, I suspect, more than adventitious; it suggests that the process is organic, experiential, and constantly evolving, whatever the ideological overlay may be in our efforts to fix and define it in terms of models. That the self is simultaneously both subject and object in this relational model seems peculiarly relevant to autobiography, in which, as Emile Benveniste (224–26) and Philippe Lejeune (“Autobiographical

²⁴ Norman Holland emphasizes feedback as a model for the experiential perspective on the development of human identity that he proposes in *The I*, especially in chapter 5 where he summarizes the concept of feedback as it is employed in current research on perception (112–23).

Pact” 8–10) remind us, the *I* functions simultaneously as the subject uttering its discourse and as the subject of the discourse uttered.

If the concept of feedback helps to describe the relation between self and culture, then, returning to the relation between models of identity and autobiography, we must discard any attempt to align either member of this mutually constituting pair along a simple axis of cause and effect. The circularity of Beaujour’s formulation (“La Question”) seems right on the mark after all: autobiography is an expression of individualism, which it in turn promotes and defines as an ideal. In the light of the intricate mutuality and reciprocity of this view, propositions of the change-the-model-of-identity, change-autobiography variety—as advocated, for example, by proponents of a psychoanalytic or autogynographic stance—fail to convince. As we grasp how complex are the factors that govern the emergence of the concept of the person in a culture, we will be less easily persuaded that a model of identity can be theorized into—or out of—existence. Nonetheless, many scholars now speculate that theories of personality may well contribute to the formation of personality itself. Where will change in models of identity and in autobiography itself come from, then?

No one will dispute that autobiography has changed—think of the gulf that separates Bunyan, Gibbon, Franklin, and Rousseau from Beckett, Barthes, Mailer, and Kingston. But as far as the model of identity founded on individuality is concerned, autobiography has changed in a much more limited way than we might have expected. In raising the issue of change I am contemplating the possibility of a cultural shift on the scale of that which ushered in modern autobiography in the first place, and the circumstances that attended that earlier shift point to the kinds of factors that would be required to work a change of this magnitude. If change comes for autobiography, or if autobiography should disappear altogether, it will more likely come from some profound alteration in the conditions of our living than from the acceptance of propositions in a manifesto.²⁵

Modern autobiography seems to have emerged concurrently with—and is perhaps a symbolic manifestation of—people’s acquisition of a distinctly personal space in which to live, rooms of their own, in which, ac-

²⁵ Something of the comprehensive view of social conditions bearing on this question of change is illustrated by Baumeister, who discusses the rise of the Western concept of identity in the medieval and early modern periods under the following rubrics: “the hidden self,” “individuality,” “privacy,” “death,” “choice of mate,” and “childhood and growth” (35–46).

According to Witold Rybczynski, the bourgeois values of privacy, intimacy, and “home” could flower. As Roy F. Baumeister puts it, drawing on Trilling’s search for the origins of sincerity as a prominent cultural value in the West, “In the sixteenth century the concept of the person came to include having a kind of internal space and self not directly visible in social actions and roles” (36). “The new model autobiographer,” the new model of person, is likely to inhabit a new model of personal space, and the circumstances of personal space have changed irrevocably in the postindustrial age. As Tony Hiss has observed in his recent study of our relation to the space in which we live and move, “It has been during the past forty years or so that almost everyone in the Western world has for the first time moved indoors” (47). “In America today,” he continues, “almost all of us spend almost all of our time inside, breathing recycled air and absorbing artificial light” (48). Hiss makes me wonder what the consequences will be for the literature of the first person. The demographic pressure of the population explosion, the world political struggle founded on conflicting concepts of the person, the accelerating technological progress of the silicone age—these and other forces will determine the construction, or even the existence, of personal space.²⁶

I find this connection between personal space and concept of self enormously suggestive, especially since, as M. Brewster Smith points out, “spatialization metaphors are central” (“Metaphorical” 75) to our operative sense of our self-consciousness. If James Olney has approached autobiography as a metaphor of self, Smith holds that the self is itself a metaphor, that “metaphorical thinking is constitutive of our selfhood” (74). In this sense, the notion of a “model of identity” or a “concept of self” is potentially misleading in that self—whether in life or in autobiography—already *is* a concept, identity already *is* a model; both are metaphoric constructs dwelling in that “mind-space of our experience” which “has no literal location in geography” (75).²⁷

I hasten to add, however, that even if we accept with Smith and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson the view that “the language of subjectivity *is* inherently metaphoric” (Smith, “Metaphorical” 68), and its corollary, that

²⁶ Daphne Patai’s account of her fieldwork gathering the life stories of women in Brazil offers compelling evidence of the link between personal space and autobiographical narrative. Of her contacts with working-class women she writes, “It was more difficult . . . to find a place where we could speak in private and undisturbed. The situation of telling their own stories became another luxury to which poor women had limited access” (5).

²⁷ The heart, the brain, the liver, the pineal gland—these are some of the parts of the body proposed as the location of inner states in various cultures and periods of human history.

our communicable knowledge of subjectivity is necessarily linguistic, I do not find that the idea of the self in autobiography as a metaphor of a metaphor attenuates in the least degree the psychological reality of the experience of selfhood, or perhaps more circumspectly, the experience to which concepts of self or identity refer. To the contrary, I take the linguistic elaboration of a vocabulary of inner states as evidence of the collectively felt need to articulate the affective life of reflexive consciousness. The content of that vocabulary, the nature of the concepts and models, the repertoire of metaphors and figures, will be culture specific. The research of developmental psychologists into identity formation in the West suggests that children are coached by their parents to understand their behavior as derived from inner states and to understand those states as organized or centered by an intending self (Baumeister 183–85).

At this point it is fair to ask whether we really need theory to tell us what we probably think we already know about the self and its representation in autobiography. That the self is constructed in life as well as in literature is surely a commonplace, for a working assumption of identity formation underlies the practice of most thoughtful autobiographers today. What this belief comes to in the case of autobiography is the creation of a narrative that will explain “how I came to be the ‘I’ I am.” Even prior to its expression in any text, the experience of selfhood is itself paradoxically both mediated and direct, for, as Norman Holland observes of the “I,” “It cannot be sensed itself, yet I experience my I directly and immediately” (*The I* 325). What is new is the current emphasis on textual construction, a livelier sense of how experience is mediated through language such that what is most obviously represented in autobiography is not experience itself but the codes for its representation, what White has termed “the resources for meaning production.”

When it comes to self, then, autobiography is doubly structured, doubly mediated, a textual metaphor for what is already a metaphor for the subjective reality of consciousness. The peculiar complexity of autobiography as a record of the role of models of identity in the relation between self and culture resides in this fact: ontogenetically considered, the self is already constructed in interaction with the others of its culture before it begins self-consciously in maturity (and specifically in autobiography—where it exists) to think in terms of models of identity. This is what I mean when I say that the self of an autobiographical text is a construct of a construct, and that culture has exerted a decisive part, through the instrumentality of models of identity, in the process of identity formation, whether literary or psychological.

All this talk of structure and code, metaphor and model, obscures the experiential reality of the ongoing transaction between the individual and culture to create a form in life or art in which to know and express the nature of subjectivity. Autobiographies themselves provide a precious record of this process. Of course, any autobiography offers such testimony, but some do so explicitly and self-consciously. Two recent autobiographies, by Ronald Fraser and Richard Rodriguez, feature the individual's quest to structure experience in terms of culturally sanctioned models of identity. If we are ever to realize Geertz's ambition to found "a scientific phenomenology of culture," it will be achieved in part through the study of records like these. "What we want and do not yet have," he writes, "is a developed method of describing and analyzing the meaningful structure of experience (here, the experience of persons) as it is apprehended by representative members of a particular society at a particular point in time" (*Interpretation* 364).

IX. RONALD FRASER'S *IN SEARCH OF A PAST*

At the beginning of this chapter I stated that I would be using the phrase *model of identity* in two ways, in the sense of a theory of personality and in the sense of an example of selfhood or character that a given culture offers for imitation. Ronald Fraser's autobiography, *In Search of a Past* (1984), illustrates both of these uses in a quite deliberate and self-conscious fashion. As the subtitle to the American edition, *The Rearing of an English Gentleman, 1933–45*, suggests, one model is social, and Fraser employs the methods of the oral historian to reconstruct the conventions of the English system that defined the upper-class identity to which he was destined by birth and family training. The second model is psychoanalytic, and Fraser reports the free association of the sessions with his analyst, to whom he turned for help in his stalled quest to come to terms with himself by recapturing his troubled past. To these two models of identity and their attendant methodologies must be added a third, most important of the three, associated with writing. Fraser's autobiography reveals that the act of self-expression is subject to the same forces as the material about selfhood that it would express, for language, in Fraser's experience, is deeply implicated in the social and psychological realities to which it refers. All three modes of inquiry—historical, psychoanalytic, autobiographical—while functioning synchronically in the narrative we read, function in it

diachronically as well, unfolding as a discrete series of attempts to locate a past and a self.

The brief opening part, “We,” establishes the chronology of Fraser’s engagement with his past: an early, perhaps novelistic, phase, abandoned because he could not “find the myth or lie that brings the past into focus” (6); a subsequent foray into the oral history of his childhood world, initiated in 1967 and shelved later on “because I couldn’t understand my part in it” (6);²⁸ and finally, starting anew in 1979 at the beginning of the present book, an appeal to psychoanalysis to supply the missing answers (the “We” in the title of this initial section refers to Fraser and his analyst “P”). Fraser’s account of his analysis breaks off three and a half years later in May 1983, and the autobiography, the final product of his pursuit of past and self, appeared in the following year.

Convinced that “the past is a collective experience” (6), Fraser applies the techniques of oral history to the reconstruction of daily life at the Manor House at Amnersfield, his childhood home. The long second part of the autobiography takes the form, accordingly, of a series of interviews with former servants—Ilse the German nanny, Bert the gardener, Carvell the groom, and various maids—who describe in detail their work, and, somewhat more reluctantly, their attitudes toward it.²⁹ “Their memories,” Fraser writes in the prefatory acknowledgments, “allowed me my first access to the past.” Class is the baseline of their perspective on experience then and now, governing their relations to Fraser and his parents in the years leading up to the Second World War and their relations to “the little master” turned oral historian some forty years later. What we get from Fraser’s artful winnowings of his voluminous material (he notes that his conversations with Bert, for example, run to some two-hundred-odd “dusty” [27] pages in transcript) are sharply etched views of life downstairs and of downstairs’ view of upstairs. The novelty here resides not in the information itself, a predictably bleak picture of long hours, low pay, and next to nothing in gratitude, but in its inclusion as a content—and a major one at that, occupying easily half the narrative space of Fraser’s life story—in an upper-class autobiography. Self is a social reality, constituted in no small part by the others who surround it.

Fraser presents the interviews with the servants in three sections: “They,” devoted to their lives and duties at the Manor House; “She/He/

²⁸ According to Fraser, “The interviews were mainly done in 1967–68” (“Review Discussion” 185).

²⁹ For insight into Fraser’s views about work and its place in capitalist society, see his introductory remarks to a volume he edited on this subject, *Work: Twenty Personal Accounts* 7–10.

She,” concerning their impressions of Fraser’s governess (Ilse), his father (Captain Alexander Fraser), and his mother (Janey); and “You,” their memories of Fraser himself as a child. What this progressive movement from servants to masters to self suggests is that Fraser’s identity is circumscribed and defined by a carefully structured network of social relations, and it is Fraser’s father, in particular, who embodies for the child the upper-class identity to which he must conform. So completely in fact is Captain Fraser associated with the role of the master—cool and peremptory in his dealings with the servants, passionate only in his daily riding to the hounds, otherwise bored and buried behind his newspaper—that he hardly exists as a person. In a later section of the narrative, Fraser’s analyst comments on the father’s absence from his recollections of the past, and Fraser replies, decisively, “There was no possibility of a human relationship there . . . I knew then that I couldn’t fill the role, could never be a man like him” (104).

This sense of “role,” of what it takes to be a gentleman, and of the necessary steps in the child’s training (learning to ride, going away to public school at an early age, and so forth), is accepted by servants and master alike—but not, notably, by Fraser’s mother—as the model for young Fraser’s identity. As Doris, one of the maids, puts it, “You were being groomed to be a gentleman when you grew up. . . . Everything seemed concentrated round that” (75), and it is precisely the child’s failure to conform to the model prescribed by class that offers the first tangible evidence of the disjunction between private feeling and social form that shapes Fraser’s inveterate sense of being a divided self. Fraser links this “split” in himself to a parallel “split” between his parents, for his mother, a product of mixed American-German background, is presented as an outsider, a stranger who did not herself fit into the closed, provincial circle of Amnersfield and its “gentlemanly rituals” (66), who did not share her husband’s conventional views on the upbringing of their son. It is she who rescues him from his miserable existence at public school later on, and Fraser’s portrait of his mother as a “nebulous” (63) figure, a slowly developing personality who eventually defined herself in opposition to his father, suggests that she functioned for him then—and now, in retrospect—almost as a kind of alter ego. This identification between mother and son crystallizes for Fraser in an image of their skiing together abroad in the Alps, free for once in this brief moment of happiness from the class constraints of English society.

And what of “the little master” (“It’s *master* Ronnie to you” [75], as Fraser’s mother corrects an overly familiar maid): what is his posture toward his indoctrination in his social role? The servants recall him as a

passive, docile, even frightened little boy, and Fraser captures his own sense of this early self, whom he consistently distances as “you” in these pages, in a recurring image of a small boy standing alone in the garden, watching Bert the gardener working in the earth or village children roaming the Manor grounds during an annual treat (111). The child wishes for the freedom of dirt, the uninhibited play and camaraderie, that seem to be the privilege of the working class, yet he does not dare to get dirty for fear of Ilse, the “all-seeing” (33) nanny who observes him secretly from an upper window. Almost as if to compensate for Ronnie’s pathetic passivity, the oral historian conducts the interviews with considerable aggression, constantly trying to draw his informants out of their deeply conditioned class reserve to articulate a well-deserved indictment of the master class for its complacent oppression.

What remains unspoken in the interviews, with their concern for the outward forms of social existence, is Fraser’s self within a self, his “profound sense of nullity” (79) that lies behind the nominal superiority of “the little master.” In order to address this inward, psychological dimension of his conflicted sense of identity, which manifests itself in the second section in repeated memories of confinement and repression, Fraser turned—and turns in the third part of the text—to psychoanalysis. The therapeutic aim of the analysis, as articulated at the outset by analyst and analysand, is for Fraser to achieve a fully integrated personality by working through and accepting the history of his “split vision” (4) of the past. Fraser rehearses this psychoanalytic phase of his inquiry in a three-part sequence, “We,” “Us,” and “I,” which parallels the three-part sequence of the interviews, “They,” “She/He/She,” and “You,” replacing, as the titles suggest, the alienations and oppositions of class with a new sense of unity and solidarity. In “We,” Fraser reviews the first three and a half years of his analysis, from September 1979 to April 1983, and the turning point in the clinical process, the move that enables his subsequent exploration of self, occurs early on at the end of the first “two barren weeks” (93), when he shifts to the couch and begins to free-associate. The initial image that surfaces, which Fraser interprets as a symbol of the dualistic structure of his personality, is hermetic: “a heavy paving stone, warm brown in colour, well-worked and smooth on top, unhewn beneath. A foundation stone, I thought, the conscious bottom of myself” (94).

If the father is the presiding figure in the social model of identity featured in the interviews, in the free association of the psychoanalytic sessions it is the mother who plays the decisive part for Fraser, and in his case the imbalance in parental roles, the “split” in their views of his up-

bringing, is exacerbated by his having in Ilse and Janey two mothers to deal with, yet another “split.” Ilse, in her “fanatical” (56) preoccupation with cleanliness and her authoritarian treatment of the child’s toilet training (she would tie him to the pot until he performed), emerges as a disturbingly repressive presence in these pages, especially as she figures invasively in Fraser’s central image of himself as the “good little boy” dressed in white and longing to get dirty in the garden: “Deep inside myself I see a black hole and I know I have to protect it from Ilse’s cleansing hands. She can reach right down in me. But she mustn’t find this real me, it’s all I have left—and yet I don’t want it, it’s inadmissible, black, guilty” (95). “Yes,” “P” comments, “And it’s to recognize this side of yourself that’s the aim of analysis” (95).

If Ilse is the more formidable, more overtly emasculating, of the two mothers, Janey proves to be the ultimate—and unattainable—object of Fraser’s psychoanalytic exploration of his personality’s “black” underside, and she is the central figure in the last two sections of Fraser’s narrative, “Us,” and “I.” The psychic link between the two mothers is displayed in what is surely the most disturbing image generated by Fraser’s free association, an image of himself as a bundle bound with cords (strapped to the pot once more?) and wrapped in a blanket, with Ilse watching (as always). In this highly charged session Fraser relives the regressive conflict of his double repression, his hatred of being denied his freedom and his willing acceptance of his bondage, understood as a perverse strategy to gain his ends through a willed passivity: “If I retreat into myself, lie absolutely still, she will go away. . . . And when she goes I can move . . . to my mother” (96).

It is this movement toward the mother that is reenacted in the conversations between Fraser and his younger brother Colin recorded in “Us.” Fraser tells his analyst that his motive for visiting Colin in Italy in April 1983 is to find out “about the war, when everything changed” (89), for with the advent of the war comes the departure of father and governess, leaving the young brothers alone with their mother. There is a moving irony in the apparent freedom of this new proximity of mother and sons, for Janey remains as remote and unattainable as ever, and Colin recalls his brother as moody, withdrawn, and depressed—bundle-like, we might say, or, as Fraser observes to Colin, “I lived with the shutters down on you and Janey” (171). The deepest revelation of the brothers’ reunion, which seals the bond between them (this is the “us” of “Us”), comes in their mutual confession of the sense of liberation they felt at her death.

The final section, “I,” which relates three more sessions with “P” im-

mediately following his return from Italy, gives the key to Fraser's blocked relation to the mother during the war: Janey's affair with—and eventual marriage to—Wing Commander Leroy. When Ronnie leaves the public school and returns home, he becomes “the little master” of Amnersfield in name only, for the absent father's place has been filled by a dashing young pilot. Fraser touches the bottom of the dark hole of his libidinal self in a memory of creeping down the hall at night on his way to the bathroom, hearing and not wanting to hear his mother in her lover's room. Later, during a game of chess, when Janey tells Ronnie of her intention to marry Leroy, Fraser's sense of being defeated by his rival is definitive and desolate: “I had lost” (182). With the death of his father, reported in the last recorded session with “P,” Fraser's story comes to an end, and “P” provides this narrative of loss with an epigraph paraphrased from Freud to the effect that “the ego is a graveyard scattered with the headstones of lost objects” (185).

What the autobiography gives us, then, is a story of class conflict and, superimposed upon it, a second story of Oedipal family drama, “the hidden script beneath the story of one's life” (171). Both of these stories and the models of identity that they feature are familiar, even conventional; what makes them fresh is the reworking of the materials of oral history and psychoanalysis in the third, narrative mode of the autobiographical act itself. This autobiography is not merely about the process of identity formation, social and psychological, but an integral part of the process itself,³⁰ and Fraser's desire to write about his past, we are told, predates his bout with oral history launched in 1967 and his decision to undergo an analysis ten years later. Fraser's work on his autobiographical project extends to more than fifteen years, and he joins Rousseau, Whitman, Thoreau, Claude Mauriac, and others in the extent to which the writing of his life looms large as a—sometimes *the*—focal activity in the living out of the life itself.

This sense of writing as psychological process, as part and parcel of “the hidden script” he seeks to work through with “P,” is confirmed by the fact that Fraser's difficulties in writing his life are constantly thematized as a content in the therapy. “How can one write about one's past without an ‘I’ as the focus?” (90), he complains to “P” in an early session, tacitly acknowledging the failure to suppress self, distanced as “you,” in the transcripts of the interviews with the servants. This is to say that the

³⁰ I have discussed the connection between the writing of autobiography and the process of identity formation in *Fictions* 226.

vicissitudes of the autobiographical project do not merely reflect but actually manifest the conflicted route of his years of self-discovery: the story of the one is the story of the other; life and text coincide. The psychological teleology of his narrative pursuit, namely, that to be able to complete the book is to have achieved an integrity or wholeness of identity,³¹ is registered in the progression of the personal pronouns that serve as titles to each of the parts, moving from the person as object to the person as subject, from the difference of the other, finally, to the self as “I.”³²

In a memorable exchange with “P” in which Fraser notes that “*you* is the pronoun I most often use about myself,” “P” draws an analogy between Fraser’s literary difficulties with the first person and the psychological perplexity of the child “before it has an ‘I,’” and Fraser confirms that writing functioned as an integral part of the process of identity formation for the child he was long ago just as it does now for the midlife autobiographer. Fraser traces his desire to write, in fact, to an early memory of self-assertion when as a boy of five he wandered alone into a wood and discovered in a clearing “a tree stump on which, glistening in the sun, an amber pendant of resin hung over a round, shiny stone. Looking at the pendant, rolling the stone between my fingers, I was suddenly happy. In some way they became a part of me and I of them” (110). As remembered by Fraser, the child experiences this achievement of autonomous identity as a distinctly physical, intensely pleasurable form of gratification, an acquisition of masculine power. Yet, characteristically, his attempt to communicate this experience of the plenitude of self (the “round, shiny stone” recalls the “foundation stone, . . . the conscious bottom of myself”) to his parents fails completely. The pleasure of wholeness yields to fragmentation and dispersal (“my words fell outside myself like stones and were stuffed into

³¹ For another illustration of an autobiography’s completion conceived as a metaphor for an achieved wholeness of identity, see my discussion of Saul Friedländer’s *When Memory Comes* (1980) in *Fictions* 235–55.

³² Fraser claims the reading of André Gorz’s autobiography, *The Traitor* (1959), as the point of departure for his own inquiry into the past, and Laura Marcus has identified the principal points of correspondence between the two autobiographical projects. Like Fraser, Gorz makes a highly self-conscious use of theoretical models (Marxism and psychoanalysis in both cases), and, still more to the point, Gorz structures his narrative as a movement through pronominal references such that when he writes of himself as “I” in the last section, he is “by implication, ontologically closing the gap between the ‘I’ that writes and the ‘I’ that is written” (79). Marcus notes, however, that whereas “Gorz’s narrative strategy is to present the writing of *The Traitor* as the necessary condition for the construction of an ‘I,’ . . . Fraser depicts the construction of the ‘I’ as the authentic self as the condition for the writing of the autobiography” (80).

other people's pockets and forgotten"), and so the child attempts, as it were, to put his stones into his own pocket, "to write down the adventure" in order "to make real what they failed to understand" (110).

In this memory of origins, then, although the act of writing is intended to celebrate the acquisition of autonomous identity as a pleasurable experience of power, it reflects as well some fundamental lack: "Did I fear that when I tried to express myself it didn't work?" (109). The play of free association develops the tension between strength and weakness in this assertion of identity, of the "I" who writes, for Fraser explicitly interprets his work with words as competing for mastery with "the destiny" his parents, and especially his father, "had in store for me." When he speaks of writing about the "I" of the clearing in the wood as the creation of "a world that my parents would have to recognize as being more valid than theirs," he points to the motive that determines the design of this autobiography, for the success of Fraser's quest for autonomy is paradoxically determined by his quest for the equivalent of parental approval. Hence the dialogic structure of the autobiographical project in all its phases, which Fraser is careful to reproduce in his presentation of the exchanges between the oral historian and his informant, the analysand and his analyst, the author and his readers, in which the verdict of the other is essential to secure the integrity of the self.

His parents' refusal to value his activity as a writer triggers a painful memory of his father's hostile response to his earliest recorded display of creativity, a re-creation of "the Aldershot tattoo with my lead soldiers." When he plays "God Save the King" on the gramophone, his father commands him to stand erect; the child, deeply frightened, is convinced that he will "never be a man."³³ The sexual content of this struggle between competing models of identity becomes increasingly clear as image leads to image, memory to memory, in this session of the analysis on June 11, 1981. Fraser associates the "blackness" of his fears in these memories of his own early creativity with the procreative force of his father's sexuality and the threatening underside of his own personality, the "black hole" of selfhood that he sought to protect "from Ilse's cleansing hands": "It's like that cesspit at the Manor which Bert had to pump out, where my father's condoms used to block the pump. I feared falling into that stinking blackness." The image of the cesspit in its turn calls up yet another "black force," an image of the village children invading the garden during their annual treat at the Manor, "some of them twice my size": "They were stronger than me, doing things I couldn't do" (111). The nominal superi-

³³ See 73 for an earlier recollection of this episode.

ority of the child's upper-class identity yields to his overwhelming sense of sexual inadequacy, and Fraser on the couch appeals to his analyst for a structure "to make sense of the disparate things thrown up here," an appeal that "P" translates as a desire "to control black forces which you fear uncovering."

Fraser's difficult search for self—as child, as analysand, as autobiographer—is played out in this tension between structure and image, holding on and letting go, an intrapsychic warfare between conscious and unconscious motives, and Fraser is sufficiently savvy to suspect that his attraction to structure as a form of explanation (in history, in psychoanalysis, in autobiography) may be a defensive strategy serving to maintain repression and so defeat the very aim it is embraced to realize, reconstruction of the truth about himself and his past. In this sense, the "I" who writes might seem to be a kind of antiself blocking the path to integrity of the personality. If we consider the play of structure and image in Fraser's narrative, however, it is difficult not to conclude that writing autobiography serves him as an extension, a revision, and perhaps even a resolution of the modes of self-knowledge afforded by the practice of oral history and psychoanalysis.

Although Fraser's arrangement of his materials does reflect the chronology of his various attempts to deal with his past, the interviews followed by the analytic sessions, this sense of a sequence of discrete phases is constantly blurred by the incorporation of these pasts into the present, a present that is, finally, textual in nature. Thus, Fraser's selective recapitulation of his interviews with the servants in part 2 stands, we are told, for his review of the transcripts of these conversations in late summer 1979 in preparation for the beginning of his analysis in September of that year (recounted in part 3). Again, the first three and a half years of the analysis with "P" from 1979 to 1983, recorded in a series of notebook journals, are reviewed by Fraser on the plane in preparation for his meeting with Colin in Italy in April 1983. This is to say that the content of his experience recorded in the oral history and psychoanalysis is constantly mediated as text, and the reading of these texts in turn shapes his experience.

The operative assumption of this reflexive activity is that to read about the past is to understand the self, a process most strikingly dramatized in Fraser's visit to his brother in Italy. Fraser and Colin, for example, discuss transcripts of key sessions between Fraser and his analyst, transcripts included for the reader to peruse. In the periods in between his conversations with his brother, Fraser rereads transcripts of his interviews with the servants that deal with persons and events which the brothers have just discussed, and he transcribes the conversations he has just had with

his brother. What we read, then, is a transcript of a transcript, which, in turn, contains comments on and pieces of still earlier transcripts. Fraser's present is completely taken up with his autobiographical project, his living given over to an endless replay of the past in an infinite regression.

The apparent determinism of this obsessive retrospect, however, of a present wholly constituted by the past, is offset by Fraser's conviction that the self-expression of this making of texts will eventually express an autonomous self.³⁴ Fraser shows himself always engaged in the process of transforming his experience into some kind of text, and, in a kind of ceaseless feedback relation, the autobiographer suggests that subsequent re-readings of the texts engender new, liberating insights into the experiences they record. To read this narrative is to participate in a continuum of experience in which the distinctions between past and present, text and experience, dissolve: the cumulative upshot of this autobiographical practice is to persuade us that the "I" who writes functions for Fraser not merely as a literary but as an experiential model of identity, for he makes us see that he not only writes his life as an autobiographer, he lives it as an autobiographer as well.

To read Fraser's text with its intricate layerings of past and present is to experience a symbolic analogue of the progressive enlightenment of autobiographical retrospect. It might be useful, then, for me to conclude my discussion of *In Search of a Past* by considering the network of images and metaphors that structures his narrative quest for self. These images operate simultaneously in literary and psychological contexts; they link the texture of the text to the texture of consciousness that is its subject. Their play in the text is complex and not easily—or even properly—disentangled, for the tangle is intrinsic to the biographical truth of Fraser's confused sense of self. My identification of certain key clusters of images is, accordingly, provisional and heuristic.

In the chronology of his reconstruction of the past, the first of these clusters is associated with the Manor House itself; an image of the house is the first memory reported in his initial session with "P," and it is an image of the house that inaugurates his gathering of the interviews with the servants.³⁵ Revisiting Amnersfield after a lapse of twenty-five years, Fraser approaches the house unseen to spy on it much as he remembers

³⁴ Fraser has commented, "The book's search is for an 'I,' a subject who would be capable of writing it" ("Review Discussion" 185).

³⁵ The house, moreover, is featured in the subtitle to the original British edition of the autobiography, *The Manor House, Amnersfield, 1933-45*, and in a photograph on the dust jacket of the American edition.

being spied on from it as a child, but he finds it impenetrable, resisting his efforts at analysis. This hermetic, opaque quality of the elusive image (“the closer I got the further the house receded behind walls” [3]) parallels his own repressive image of himself as a house with “the shutters down” on his turbulent sexuality and his desire for his mother, and Fraser associates the house and its walls consistently with confinement and division. The most recent visit to Amnersfield recorded in the narrative, however, on Good Friday, April 1983, on the occasion of a demonstration for peace and nuclear disarmament, strikes an altogether different note. This final evocation of the house of memory and personality emphasizes his pleasure in its lightness and space under the hands of the new owner, a redemptive image of the healing wrought by his pursuit of the past.

The narrative space between these framing images of the house of repression and the house of reconciliation is filled with related strings of imagery that reflect the unresolved conflicts of Fraser’s inner life. I have already discussed the most important of these, the child in the garden longing and fearing to get dirty, the child as bundle longing and fearing to move, his personality itself as similarly “split,” “well-worked and smooth on top, unhewn beneath.” In all of this imagery associated with selfhood, symbols of plenitude (such as the “amber pendant of resin hung over a round, shiny stone”) are the exception, while absence, blankness, emptiness, and division are the rule. In Fraser’s text, much as in the free association of his analysis, these various strains of imagery intersect and coalesce, giving us glimpses of the intricate circuitry of desire in his divided personality.

The transcript of the session with “P” on June 11, 1981, offers a good illustration of this mimesis of psychic process in the text, presenting the childhood memory of his earliest sense of identity as a writer, which connects with his memories of his other identities of class and sexuality. Part of the fascination worked by the apparent randomness and fragmentation of Fraser’s free association is that the bits and pieces of consciousness are repeated in configurations which become increasingly predictable; imagery signifying his failure to understand himself comes to signify the very structure of the self to be understood. As if to point up the patterning in this discourse of images, the autobiographer juxtaposes the transcript of the session of June 11, 1981, with that of March 30, 1983, in which we recognize the by-now-familiar associative chain of childhood fear and desire: the memory of his last visit to the house and his wanting and not wanting to see it, and related to it, his desire to complete his autobiography and his sense that “P” prevents him from doing so by obliging him to

return to the infantile aspects of his personality; the empty silence within him, unbroken by the voices of the two mothers, voices he wants and does not want to hear, “telling me I must go”; his feeling of wounded dispossession, of being “eviscerated,” “looking down into a gaping hollow that, like the inside of a carcass, has opened up in me”; and, concluding the sequence and the session, the “shadowy child dressed in white standing in the garden alone, watching” who is also “the dirty little boy they don’t want to know about” (117). To see or not, to write or not, to hear or not, to do or not—this is Fraser’s discourse of repression and desire, and it is fitting that the autobiographer should seek a structure for the self in images, for the primary metaphor for his fissured identity is that of a “split vision,” the operative mode of his displaced and voyeuristic sexuality.

Enclosing the images of Fraser’s text is the master image of the house itself (where Fraser is never the master), and only at the end does Fraser recognize that the Manor House at Amnersfield, the point of departure for his inquiry into the past, is also his destination. Midway on in his analysis, midway on in the text as well, in the plane flying to Rome, to brother Colin, and to memories of his mother, Fraser recalls his flight to Paris after the war with Colin, his mother, and her airman lover; he identifies this flight from Amnersfield once and for all as the point “where the book would have to end” (96). The lesson of his analysis, however, is that he could only leave the past behind him forever by returning to the house itself to face the truth about his love for his mother.

Opening the final sessions of analysis that conclude the book, and displacing the fantasy of a flight to freedom with Janey, is a dream of hearing a plane crash in the night and confronting an injured pilot while a woman waits, looking on. Toward the end of his visit with Colin, Fraser had shared with his brother a transcript of a session with “P” in which he recalls that Janey “gave me an ‘I’—an e-y-e—once” (167), a telescope (“a telescope-penis,” “P” of course suggests), which he used at school instead of glasses to compensate for his nearsightedness, for his mother “considered glasses a weakness” (168). If the mother could give him an “I,” could let him see, could make him strong, she shows now in the nightmare as an ambiguous figure who could take his identity from him, strip him of his power: the wish to fly with Janey is accompanied by a fear that to do so is to be wounded. The dream of the plane crash, which takes place *within the house*, and Fraser’s identification with the injured pilot prompt his deepest penetration into the sexual darkness of the Manor House, releasing memories of his adolescent sexual encounters with a working-class youth (with whom he built model planes, who “freed me to become myself” [153]) and with a serving girl, and most of all, the memory of his

reluctant nocturnal discovery of his mother in her lover's room. Shut out by his mother, he shut her out of his life, and, in the final pages of the narrative, when the "foundation stone," "the conscious bottom of myself," is lifted to reveal its "unhewn" underside, Fraser beholds the "graveyard" of the ego and comes to see the autobiography as the culmination of his lifelong search for his mother.

As Fraser contemplates his dead at the last, and his idea that his narrative is intended as a kind of "monument" or "memorial" to them, the autobiography shows as an ambiguous symbol of the process of identity formation it both records and enacts: if the quarry of his personality preserves among the various stones of selfhood the plenary image of the "I" who writes as "an amber pendant of resin hung over a round, shiny stone," it is also littered with fragments, "broken and scattered tombstones." "How can one recreate the past if one is constantly destroying it?" he asks, baffled, recognizing that he must come to terms with the casualties of the Oedipal warfare of his youth if he is to heal the "split" in his vision and so achieve the integrity and autonomy of selfhood that completion of the autobiographical narrative would signify. Does Fraser's narrative flight, we wonder, deliver him home free and intact, or does it end in the crash he dreams and fears?

Fraser makes the link between closure and cure in yet one more moment of vision, a transcendent moment in which vision itself is transfigured, transforming at least in wish the deprivation of the child watching in the garden, the bondage of the bundle doubly bound in blanket and cord. To look back at the past psychoanalytically or autobiographically is, this once, to see it whole, to resurrect the dead. As he looks at his looking back, Fraser seems to attribute to the process of retrospect itself a redemptive agency:

In the inner darkness where I'm confined, where nothing now moves, I see myself looking back down at my childhood, as though through a glass funnel that narrows at the far end, and silently I feel them gathering, coming together, until they fill the emptiness around me, and in their eyes, unimaginably, I see an indestructible love, in their bodies touching each other, an unsurpassable assurance, and I stand there, my hands by my side, like a child overwhelmed with wonder . . .

"It was the unity of love you yearned for," "P" says. (186)

The perfection of this moment of wish, however, the "indestructible," "unsurpassable" "unity of love" that the autobiographer-child envisions, is also "unimaginable," and, after uttering the wish to "P," Fraser goes on to express in this last recorded session of his analysis the limitations of

history and psychoanalysis as approaches to his past and self. If psychoanalysis seems to yield only “bits” and “fragments,” never the “totality” of vision that would reveal “the causal relationships between them” (186), the same could be said of history, and “P” recognizes that it is precisely to make good these deficiencies of psychoanalysis and history that Fraser turns to autobiography in order to become “the author of your own childhood then. The historian of your past.” Exploiting to good effect the sense of an ending that any narrative structure must afford, Fraser edits and arranges the transcripts of his analysis so as to display it as a drama with a climax and resolution. Even the closure of autobiography, however, is sharply qualified by the provisional, inconclusive posture of analyst and analysand in the final lines: “He pauses. ‘Well, we’ll have to leave it there for today.’ I find my glasses and swing my legs off the couch. ‘I’ll see you next Monday.’ I turn to look at him for a moment, and his face is impassive” (187).

In fact, the structure of the autobiography replicates the dialogic structure of the individual parts, an ongoing debate that seems to refuse definitive settlement by historical, psychoanalytic, or narrative procedures. Although Fraser’s story ends with a pause, this final posture of inconclusion is contained within a sequence of sections whose pronominal titles, as I have already mentioned, suggest a progressive movement toward the “I,” the final member of the series. Providing an ironic counterpoint to this notion of a journey home through memory to the self, however, is Fraser’s evocation of his father’s end as a pathetic, senile old man, whose loss of memory is virtually total (“Who was your mother?” [30] he asks); there is to be no going home to Amnersfield for him, only the indignity of the nursing home, loss of identity, and sinking into death. Yet there is the fact of the published book itself, which testifies to completion of some kind, although the title, *In Search of a Past*, suggests that at least in Fraser’s case, the quest for self is best understood as a lifelong process which only death can end.³⁶ Clearly Fraser is not prepared to say that he has arrived definitively at a sense of self, and it may well be that one of the satisfactions of autobiography in this case is that it permits the articulation of wishes even as it requires recognition that they cannot be fulfilled. Narrative satisfaction, the sense of arrival at a destination, may be the only possible substitute for the real destination that seems forever to elude him.

³⁶ It should be clear from the drift of my analysis that I disagree with Laura Marcus when she observes of Fraser’s “version of ‘the divided self’” that “it reproduces the dualism between individual and society” but “does not account for the formation of subjectivity by and within the social and the symbolic” (83).

X. RICHARD RODRIGUEZ'S
HUNGER OF MEMORY

Recalling the cross-cultural perplexities of her Chinese-American childhood, Maxine Hong Kingston writes of her early experience in elementary school:

Reading out loud was easier than speaking because we did not have to make up what to say, but I stopped often, and the teacher would think I'd gone quiet again. I could not understand "I." The Chinese "I" has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American "I," assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? Was it out of politeness that this writer left off strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked? No, it was not politeness; "I" is a capital and "you" is lower-case. I stared at that middle line and waited so long for its black center to resolve into tight strokes and dots that I forgot to pronounce it. (193)

The child grasps intuitively that language is linked to the structure of identity, that the letter of the first person is governed by cultural conventions ("politeness") which determine received models of selfhood. Indeed the child's very failure to understand "I" betrays an understanding of the relations among self, language, and culture that is radical in its simplicity: the letter *is* a person ("assuredly wearing a hat") and, reciprocally, being a person is contingent upon the modalities of discourse, on reading, writing, and speaking. Language constitutes identity, or gives it, at least, a form in which it may be known, for it is only when the "black center" of the self "resolves" into the "tight strokes and dots" of discourse that it can be recognized and read. Although the teacher "had already told [Maxine] every day how to read 'I,'" the lessons of acculturation come hard, and the child is punished for her instinctive trust in a straightforward correspondence between language and reality in which identity—anyone's and her own—would be equivalent to an identity between form and subjectivity: the little girl stalls, waiting in vain for "I" to "resolve" into "I." If she could not understand "I," how could she possibly be it? As Maxine puts it a bit later on, "If you don't talk, you can't have a personality" (210).

Speech and silence are often the terms in which the process of identity formation unfolds in cross-cultural lives. While any autobiography, of course, is necessarily based on tacit assumptions about the relation between language and identity, the special circumstances of ethnic autobiog-

raphy tend to make these assumptions explicit as felt experience. Recognitions like Kingston's seem to dawn predictably in case after case in these narratives as soon as the child of immigrant parents is made to learn the language of the dominant culture. *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1981) is especially instructive in this regard, for I can think of no other autobiographer who matches Rodriguez in his single-minded preoccupation with this subject.

If Kingston's childhood self assumes an invariant relation between the form of the letter and the reality of identity—an identity of identity, so to speak, in any language—the assumption of Rodriguez's childhood self is equally natural and logical: movement from one language into another is experienced as a shift in identity as well. Ricardo Rodriguez leaves the intimacy of his Spanish-speaking home to become, in the cool impersonality of the American classroom, Richard Rodriguez (“*Rich-beard Road-ree-guess*” [11], as the schoolroom nun instructs in her introduction of the dark-skinned boy to his classmates, all of whom are white). The child believes, moreover, that his progress in English and his concomitant growth into a new identity necessarily entail the progressive loss of his old identity as he gradually abandons his Spanish: “*Rich-beard*—their English voices slowly prying loose my ties to my other name, its three notes, *Ri-car-do*” (21).

Like the child, the adult sees language as inevitably implicated in his identity, as in this introductory meditation in which Rodriguez, teacher now himself, instructs the reader how to read him correctly, acknowledging the power of English to reshape not only his Spanish name but the structure of family relations that it signifies: “Rodriguez. The name on the door. The name on my passport. The name I carry from my parents—who are no longer my parents, in a cultural sense. This is how I pronounce it: *Rich-beard Road-ree-guess*. This is how I hear it most often” (4). For the adult, however, it is a question not of a shift from a Spanish-language to an English-language identity, as the child naively assumes at first, but rather of a shift from a private to a public mode of identity. Whatever the language may happen to be, one may have an identity in one's writing in public that is different from the identity one articulates in private speech. Thus, through language, Ricardo Rodriguez is empowered to become the Richard Rodriguez of his autobiography, as the title of the book boldly asserts, for the author's name does not figure independently of the title but is instead included in it as if to give this self-created identity a kind of freestanding objective existence: *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*.

Culturally speaking, Rodriguez traces his public identity—for him, the only possible identity in autobiography—not to his parents but to language itself, such that he can speak of his autobiography as “a book about language, . . . the great subject of my life” (7). He rightly characterizes his portrait of himself as that of a man “obsessed by the way [language] determined my public identity,” “[by] the way it permits me here to describe myself, writing” (7). “Permits”? Or “determines”? How are we to understand the impact of language on the development of Richard Rodriguez? As far as I can make out, Rodriguez himself—or perhaps it would be safer to say “*Road-ree-guess*’ himself,” although the “himself” remains equally problematic—is as divided in his public, autobiographical posture on this issue (and hence in his public identity) as he is in the splits he describes between public and private selves.

More than most stories of education, *Hunger of Memory* is the story of a life spent in school, and the basic plot of the life of Richard Rodriguez is soon told, as the autobiographer himself is the first to point out: “The boy who first entered a classroom barely able to speak English, twenty years later concluded his studies in the stately quiet of the reading room in the British Museum. Thus with one sentence I can summarize my academic career” (43). This capsule version of Rodriguez’s rise spells success, the staple of immigrant autobiography, as readers of Alfred Kazin’s *A Walker in the City* (1951) and Norman Podhoretz’s *Making It* (1967) will be quick to recognize. Interestingly, however, in making clear how the formation of his identity conforms to a familiar cultural paradigm, Rodriguez differentiates his troubled story from these earlier celebrations of the pattern. As he goes on to say in the same passage, “It will be harder to summarize what sort of life connects the boy to the man” (43). In Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), the autobiographer discovers the representative value of his story, identifying himself as Hoggart’s “scholarship boy.” Rodriguez is the counterpart of the working-class youth who “gets on” in school by a dogged conformity to the speech and values of academe, painfully paying for his choice with solitude and alienation as he gradually separates himself from the warmth and support of his family circle.

This sense of the costs of acculturation distinguishes Rodriguez from the expansive, upbeat hymns to the process of Americanization that we find in Jacob Riis, Mary Antin, and many another ethnic autobiographer. According to Rodriguez’s paraphrase, the development of Hoggart’s “scholarship boy” is based on a shift from the “spontaneity and nonrational ways of knowing” of his parents at home to the deliberation and “reflectiveness” (46) of his teachers at school. This shift is registered for

Rodriguez on the level of language, and so his story becomes progressively a study of the qualities of speech and silence as the autobiographer ceaselessly assays his growth as a growth in discourse. As I listen to Rodriguez telling his story of the split between “*Ri-car-do*” and “*Rich-beard*,” I hear two distinct and opposed voices, one expository and one narrative in mode, and I shall argue that the interplay between them—which we might call the story of the story, the drama of the autobiographical act—reenacts the split that is their common theme. Identity for Rodriguez is inextricably bound up first and last with language.

The first of the voices, the expository, is—structurally at any rate—the dominant mode of *Hunger of Memory*, making this autobiography something of a rarity in a genre in which narrative customarily rules. In all six chapters Rodriguez lives up to his reputation as a “provocative” public speaker and writer about “contemporary education” (4); much of the material is actually drawn from essays previously published in such national magazines as *The American Scholar*, *Change*, *Saturday Review*, and *College English*. In the three chapters that specifically address his schooling (1, 2, and 5), Rodriguez presents himself as a tough-minded realist, arguing that bilingualism and affirmative action are misguided programs which fail to recognize the importance of acculturation, the linguistic and social fusion that inevitably occurs in the melting pot of the American school. Rodriguez’s target is the unexamined equation between language and cultural identity, a simplistic but powerful concept entertained at once by first-generation immigrants and by second—or later—generation activists in education who associate the speaking of the native language with the possession of a set of cultural values. Thus the Mexican schoolboy in the all-white parochial school in Sacramento, who begins to forget—and wants to forget—his Spanish, is scorned by his Spanish-speaking relatives as a *pochó*, someone who has sold out home and family to *gringo* values. Similarly, as a graduate student in English at Berkeley, Rodriguez is derided by self-proclaimed “Chicanos” in his seminar as a “‘coconut,’ someone brown on the outside, white on the inside”—“*Miss-ter Road-ree-gas*” (162), faithless to the culture of the *barrio*.

To his critics Rodriguez replies that the change brought about by his American education is both necessary and irreversible. Even as a child Richard soon realizes that the intimacy and love he initially associates with the Spanish of his Spanish-speaking home are distinct from the language in which they are expressed. What bilingualism delays or ignores is that learning the public language of the dominant culture brings with it the acquisition of a new mode of identity, and through it, power. As a boy

Rodriguez is pained by the weakness, the vulnerability, that he hears in the infrequent, halting English of his parents (as opposed to the “confidence” and “authority” [25] of his father in Spanish). As an adult he contrasts again and again the articulate strength of the English-speaking *gringos* with the downtrodden condition of *los pobres*, poor, migrant Mexican laborers imprisoned in their silence. What Rodriguez would teach the bilingualists is that “while one suffers a diminished sense of *private* individuality by becoming assimilated into public society, such assimilation makes possible the achievement of *public* individuality” (26)—as, for example, in the writing of his essays and his autobiography. He concedes that the child experiences a loss of self even as he gains a new one, but it is a loss that is intrinsic to maturation itself and as such transcends any narrowly linguistic or cultural categories of identity: “Once I learned public language, it would never again be easy for me to hear intimate family voices. More and more of my day was spent hearing words. But that may only be a way of saying that the day I raised my hand in class and spoke loudly to an entire roomful of faces, my childhood started to end” (28).

The flawed premise of the “Chicano” activists, says Rodriguez, who demand the institution of programs in ethnic studies and other marks of their distinctive separation from mainstream culture, is that they can simply bracket the process of change that transformed Ricardo into the “scholarship boy,” believing instead that they can belong “at once to academia and to the society of the disadvantaged” (157). Rodriguez knows that neither he nor they can “‘go home again’” in the sense of retaining at the end of one’s education the identity one possesses at the beginning. To the contrary, he argues, it is the very separation from one’s language and culture of origin that enables one to achieve an understanding of its distinctiveness. For Rodriguez, at any rate, to refuse change is to refuse education itself; for him, culturally speaking, there can be no going home. He really has become a “coconut” after all; his skin is not what or who he is, and to the extent he has become Americanized, he *is* white.

In the autobiography’s climax, at the end of the fifth chapter, “Profession,” we witness Rodriguez’s unflinching acceptance of the logic of these convictions, which forces his refusal of the very success that the “scholarship boy”’s long years of dedicated study have achieved. He becomes convinced that his impending triumph in the academic job market is due to a misperception of his true identity. The so-called minority student was hardly a victim, “an alien from public life” (147) like *los pobres*, for he had the “confidence of a public identity” (164). Affirmative action worked to privilege the already privileged, rather than to benefit the “genuinely

socially disadvantaged” (167). And so, to the dismay of his uncomprehending Anglo professors at Berkeley, Rodriguez turns down all of the coveted job offers, exchanging the silence of academe (the quiet of the reading room at the British Museum) for a new silence, that of the freelance writer who becomes the author of *Hunger of Memory* a few years later on. The politics of identity has run its course: Rodriguez is caught between two competing cultural models of identity, “scholarship boy” and minority student, one affirming assimilation, the other refusing it; he cannot serve both and retain his integrity.

Rodriguez’s progress from the lonely scholar in London writing a dissertation on English Renaissance literature to the isolated autobiographer in San Francisco constitutes a second major phase of his development. It leads to the discovery of what Rodriguez terms “middle-class pastoral,” a second mode in *Hunger of Memory*, a narrative voice with distinctly lyric overtones. The unfolding of this second phase, except when he recounts his departure from academe in 1975, is harder to trace than the first, however, for he rarely addresses it directly. Instead, we must infer the content of this period (it runs from his Fulbright fellowship in London in 1972–1973 to the publication of his autobiography in 1981) from his shifting versions of the first phase, the one that had taken him from his childhood home in Sacramento up the ladder of success to the British Museum. From the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, in essay after essay, home and reading room constitute the poles that structure his ongoing meditation on his relation to the past, and even in *Hunger of Memory* itself, the fruit of nearly ten years’ reflection, Rodriguez continues to oscillate between them. As we have seen, the hardheaded advocate of acculturation in contemporary American education chastises misguided ethnic militants for failing to recognize the necessity and irreversibility of change, of separation from the past. However, the romantic in Rodriguez argues, as I want now to show, that change is not irreversible, that the past may be recaptured, at least in memory and the language devoted to it, in the difficult practice of autobiography as middle-class pastoral.

In 1973, in his earliest published essay, Rodriguez reviews his eight years of experience in American higher education—at Stanford, at Columbia, at Berkeley—and concludes that the institution teaches the minority student that separation from the past is necessary because that past is useless. Even at this early point, when the application of his insight to himself still eludes him, Rodriguez identifies the value of this ethnic experience as an intuitive knowledge about words, and he dreams of a possible union between the spontaneous, nonrational understanding that it could

provide and the solitary abstract rationality of the academy, a union that could reverse the “terrifying movement” of minority students “away from their histories” while rescuing the academic from “a self-absorption that limits the usefulness of his insights in actual experience” (“Leo” 38).

Rodriguez’s model of education is symbiotic in conception: the dominant culture would become acculturated by the minority even as it acculturates it. The “personal note” on which the essay concludes, however, suggests that the realization of this ideal awaits a future generation of students “who, unschooled, will be taught that they can already teach, even as they learn.” Rodriguez draws a more sober moral for himself: “I have learned too well the lesson that my past is unusable for my life as a scholar—although, as a scholar, I have learned how to know and speak about that fact.” His childhood “in a non-Castilian, Spanish-speaking home” was “at best, a curiosity.” “Eight years later, I sit now, almost patient, in a noiseless library in London reading 17th-century intellectual history, and only occasionally do I wonder what it would have meant to me to have used my past” (40). Paradoxically, if the academy encourages the development of “self-awareness” (38), its systematic and unreflecting dismissal of minority experience is distinctly antiautobiographical in tendency. For all his telling indictment of the institution’s failings, Rodriguez remains at the last still very much the aspiring scholar, imagining that the immediacy of felt experience which is central to his conception of minority background might one day enrich a reading of Milton, Descartes, or Homer.

In his second published essay, “Going Home Again: The New American Scholarship Boy” (1974), which deals again with the problems of acculturation faced by the minority student in American education, the reading room of the British Museum becomes the theater of memory. Its silence prompts Rodriguez’s recollection of “the remarkable noises of life in my family home” (23), obliging him to recognize with a new sense of urgency, “I did need to figure out where I had lost touch with my past.” Accompanying this autobiographical motive, however, is his conviction that he has himself lost the skill necessary to its realization, a skill, moreover, that constitutes the value of the past to be recovered in the first place: “The genius and value of those Chicanos who do not read seem to me to be largely that their reliance on voice, the spoken word, has given them the capacity for intimate conversation that I, as someone who now relies heavily on the written word, can only envy” (24). How to read and write the unreadable? This is the problem for the autobiographer Rodriguez would become.

In the third of his published essays, “On Becoming a Chicano” (1975), Rodriguez goes over the ground once more, measuring the distance between home and reading room; with each successive pass at his past it becomes increasingly clear that if language is the term in which the riddle of identity is initially posed, it is also to language that he turns to provide the means by which it will be solved. “‘Remade’” by his education, Rodriguez opens by presenting the rupture between his present and his past as a split between cultural and racial forms of identity: “Today I am only technically the person I once felt myself to be—a Mexican-American, a Chicano” (46). He responds to the experience of assimilation as a source not of the self-esteem and belonging that typically characterize its treatment in traditional immigrant autobiography, but rather of nagging discomfort requiring endless explanation and apology.

This malaise clouding his sense of himself is intensified by his conviction of the deeply communal basis of identity in the Mexican-American culture of his childhood. Although his academic conditioning promotes a highly individualistic mode of self-awareness, his autobiographical retrospect is distinguished by his heightened sense of what his transcultural journey entails for others. The gravity of his situation, his fear that his acceptance of a new model of identity sanctioned by the dominant culture might require the destruction of his culture of origin, is reflected in his portrait of his grandmother, “the least assimilated” of his relatives: “She remains today a dark and silently critical figure in my memory, a reminder of the Mexican-American ancestry that somehow my educational success has violated” (47). Because of his last name and the color of his skin, Rodriguez might be recognized by others as a “*Chicano intellectual*” (46), but he saw himself fast becoming as much of a dry-as-dust scholar as any of his Anglo professors. So the reading room of the British Museum becomes for him not the serene temple of academic discourse but a place of disquiet in which he contrasts the futility of his dissertation, which “said very little” (47), with the capacity of his parents, still rooted in his culture of origin, “to make passionate statements”: “I needed to learn how to trust the use of ‘I’ in my writing the way they trusted its use in their speech” (47–48).

Given his conviction that “there was no possibility of going back,” Rodriguez rejects nostalgia as a facile and unproductive posture toward the past. Instead he poses two other ways in which he might reconcile his past and present: to leave academe altogether, or, alternatively, to bring to his understanding of Renaissance pastoral or Puritan autobiography a “creative use of my sense of loss,” which he specifies as a knowledge of

“the ways in which language has meaning simply as sound and what the printed word can and cannot give us.” What this essay leaves in doubt, however, is what relation, if any, Rodriguez could establish with the language of his childhood culture. One morning in the British Museum he overhears the sound of Spanish voices and feels “embraced” by “swirling images of a past long abandoned”; a year later, however, during a job interview, as he states his misgivings about his identity as a “Chicano” professor, he imagines his grandmother once more, a forbidding, tutelary presence guarding the entrance to the past: “my grandmother, her face solemn and still” (48). These are the final words of the essay.

“In my end is my beginning.” In the second chapter of *Hunger of Memory*, “The Achievement of Desire,” Rodriguez interprets the price of his academic success as the systematic repression of his knowledge “*that schooling was changing me and separating me from the life I enjoyed before becoming a student*” (45). If his education supplied him with the plot of his autobiography, as we have seen, it also exacted a curiously antiautobiographical allegiance from the “scholarship boy” who embraced it: “Here is a child who cannot forget that his academic success distances him from a life he loved, even from his own memory of himself” (48). Arriving at the pinnacle of success, Rodriguez discovers to his dismay as he joins the “community of scholars” in the British Museum (once more!) that the world of academe is a sterile and lonely society little better than a morgue (“the pages I turned were stiff like layers of dead skin” [70]).

Here, in this dead end, imprisoned in silence every bit as much as *los pobres* working in the field, Rodriguez turns “unafraid to desire the past, and thereby achieved what had eluded me for so long—the end of education” (73). The end of one education had been achieved by a kind of repression, which seems to lift even as he recognizes its dominion over him for more than twenty years; when he eventually chooses to end his academic career, leaving the university some two years later on, he begins another education that will be fulfilled in the writing of his autobiography. In *Hunger of Memory*, however, the terms of the relation between past and present have become reversed from what they were in the early essays: “If, because of my schooling, I had grown culturally separated from my parents, my education finally had given me ways of speaking and caring about that fact” (72). Language, it would appear, was no longer the enemy of desire.

The relation between language and desire—between the present and the past, between the models of identity associated respectively with the public world of maturity and the private world of childhood—is consider-

ably more complex than this statement, taken in isolation, can possibly suggest. Rodriguez may well attribute to language here the power to work the achievement of desire, but this assertion is framed by other chapters (“Aria” and “Mr. Secrets”) that suggest an alternative view which limits the capacity of language to assuage the hunger of memory. It is the tension between these two views of language that I want now to explore, a tension which makes the reading of this autobiography so compelling.

In the first chapter, “Aria,” Rodriguez distinguishes between public utterance, in which one is conditioned to pass over the sounds of the voice to attend only to the words, and private utterance, in which meaning resides not in the words but in the voice itself. Unlike the bilingualists, Rodriguez recognizes even as a child that the “message of intimacy could never be translated because it was not *in* the words . . . but passed *through* them” (31). Intimacy resides not in words but in persons, he insists, adducing a pair of memories that suggest the filial relation underlying his experience (as a child) and his practice (as an autobiographer) of language.

In the first of these, in which his grandmother (“her face was stern with suspicion when she saw the boy [a *gringo*] I was with”) speaks to him in Spanish from the house, Richard is brought to the insight that “the deepest meaning of her message” (“directed only to me”) is something other than “exactly *what* she had told me” (31) and so defies the possibility of any translation. Yet in the opening chapter, in scene after scene, the autobiographer does in fact translate the message of intimacy in the family voices that fill his childhood world, anchoring the plenitude of his early sense of identity, as in this memory of doing his homework with his mother nearby: “And she looked over at me. Smiled. Said something—her words said nothing very important. But her voice sounded to tell me (*We are together*) I was her son. (*Richard!*)” (32). Whether words themselves, however, are conduit or barrier in the enactment of intimacy is more difficult to determine, as when Rodriguez suggests that they are an impediment to the kind of inspired hearing in which identities are enabled to connect, to recognize, and so to define each other in the medium of the human voice: “It was a stunning event: to be able to break through his words, to be able to hear this voice of the other, to realize that it was directed only to me” (31).

In the final section of “Aria,” Rodriguez develops his thinking about the “mystery” of “intimate utterance” (36) in terms of his relationship with his grandmother. He recalls a series of charmed moments in which each was intensely present to the other, both united in a communion deeper than

language but invariably associated with it, for it is the sound of the human voice as it speaks that is the medium of their exchange of love: “It was enough I was there. The words she spoke were almost irrelevant to that fact—the sounds she made” (37). Rodriguez identifies song, especially lyric poetry, as the model for the experience of intimacy; “most songs,” he notes, “are about love.” The human voice in the act of lyric expression promises the possibility of “escape” from public words to an intimate private world in which sound and feeling are one. When Rodriguez links lyric to memory (“songs put me in mind of the most intimate moments of my life”), the sounding of the voice emerges as the prototype and rationale for the autobiographical act: “I read in my room—alone—and grow conscious of being alone, sounding my voice, in search of another. The poem . . . forces remembrance. . . . It reminds me of the possibility . . . that awaits me in meeting the intimate” (38).

There is a distinctly romantic cast to this quest for presence through and ultimately beyond language, and I am reminded of Walt Whitman’s fascination with operatic song, with voice as the medium of the experience of selfhood: “Not words, not music or rhyme I want, . . . / Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.”³⁷ Rodriguez associates the language of presence with the “nonsense poems” and “meaningless rhymes” that make up the “private language” (38) of childhood, and, like the Wordsworth of the “Intimations” ode, he locates the experience of intimacy on the far side of the time line that separates the child he was from the adult he has become:

Until I was six years old, I remained in a magical realm of sound. I didn’t need to remember that realm because it was present to me. But then the screen door shut behind me as I left home for school. At last I began my movement toward words. On the other side of initial sadness would come the realization that intimacy cannot be held. With time would come the knowledge that intimacy must finally pass.

I would dishonor those I have loved and those I love now to claim anything else. I would dishonor our closeness by holding on to a particular language and calling it my family language. Intimacy is not trapped within words. It passes through words. It passes. The truth is that intimates leave the room. Doors close. Faces move away from the window.

³⁷ These lines come from “Song of Myself,” section 5. For discussion of Whitman’s desire for presence, for an experience of the plenitude of self in the act of speech, see Eakin, *Fictions* 220–25.

Time passes. Voices recede into the dark. Death finally quiets the voice. And there is no way to deny it. No way to stand in the crowd, uttering one's family language. (38–39)

The Rodriguez who celebrates here the magical, nonrational discourse of sound offers a striking contrast to the Rodriguez of the expository mode who champions the empowerment of the socially disadvantaged through the learning of public language. Here the acquisition of language, the “movement toward words,” initiates paradoxically the death of intimate utterance. If I quote this passage at some length here, it is because it presents the two languages, expository and narrative-lyric, in a distinctly temporal relation that structures the unfolding of Rodriguez's biography. Rodriguez's life, emplotted in linguistic terms, shows as a movement from a preverbal paradise of sound “toward words”; the plot of the autobiographical act—in wish, at any rate—would be to move from the fallen world of words “back to some kingdom of sound” (38). The thesis of the rationalist is clearly that the public language of the adult may be achieved only if the private language of childhood intimacy is displaced; the romantic, however, remains unreconciled. Hence the contradictory double meaning of the *passing* of intimacy inflected repeatedly in the passage: intimacy is transcendent, passing through and beyond words into a pure realm of sound, a kingdom of presence above time and memory, signifying union between the loving and the loved, requiring no art of autobiography; intimacy is transient and mortal, passing into solitude, silence, and death.

“In my beginning is my end.” Rodriguez concludes the chapter with an aria of extraordinary clarity and beauty, tensed by his contradictory feelings about the inexorable laws of language, love, and loss. As he listens to his grandmother's final memories of her early life, moreover, the autobiographer celebrates an art of memory with the power to redeem, to restore him to himself, for with the closing of the door of his childhood home he had become “a child who cannot forget that his academic success distances him from a life he loved, even from his own memory of himself” (48). Rodriguez begins with a familiar concession of the inadequacy of language to perform the work of retrospect: “I can tell you some of the things she said to me as I stood by her bed. I cannot, however, quote the message of intimacy she conveyed with her voice.” In defiance of this premise, however, this intensely focused passage moves slowly toward speech, adopting a language of utmost, almost Adamic simplicity that lists the names of things remembered, in an attempt to find a notation that

could close the gap between retrospective consciousness and the unmediated reality of childhood experience embodied in the human voice:

She laughed, holding my hand. Her voice illumined disjointed memories as it passed them again. She remembered her husband, his green eyes, the magic name of Narciso. His early death. She remembered the farm in Mexico. The eucalyptus nearby. (Its scent, she remembered, like incense.) She remembered the family cow, the bell round its neck heard miles away. A dog. She remembered working as a seamstress. How she'd leave her daughters and son for long hours to go into Guadalajara to work. And how my mother would come running toward her in the sun—her bright yellow dress—to see her return. “*Mmmaaammmmáááá*,” the old lady mimicked her daughter (my mother) to her son. She laughed. (39)

The only action reported here beyond the primary bound pair of speaking and remembering (and the laughter signifying the joy of both) is that of the necessary separation of mother from child, and when the moment of utterance comes to pass, the name of the mother spoken by the child proves to be the sign for return. The old woman's reenactment, doubly remembered by herself and by her grandson, has the power to annul the separation of generations: the child's remembered voice is spoken by the mother remembering. As Rodriguez is careful to specify, his own mother functions symbolically here in this doubling of mothers and children as the enabling middle term, “her daughter (my mother),” a stand-in for Rodriguez himself who takes her place in this moment of incarnation as the “son” restored to his mother. At the same time, in the magic substitutions of this algebra of identity, the self is reunited to itself. The image of the child running toward the mother “to see her return” encapsulates the autobiography's counterplot; in its succinctness it parallels Rodriguez's one-sentence statement of the progress of his education as a movement outward from home (and mother) toward the British Museum. Moreover, the telos of this counterplot is, if anything, the more powerful pole of attraction in Rodriguez's story, as suggested by its final title, *Hunger of Memory*, which supplants an earlier working title, “Toward Words.”

“Intimate utterance” truly is a “mystery,” as Rodriguez suggests when he concludes this scene by pointing (again) to its power to reverse the work of time and change, transfiguring the mortal body of the dying woman, restoring her to herself: “An aunt came into the room and told me it was time I should leave. ‘You can see her tomorrow,’ she promised.

And so I kissed my grandmother's cracked face. And the last thing I saw was her thin, oddly youthful thigh, as my aunt rearranged the sheet on the bed" (40). The passage dramatizes in ideal form the fulfillment of the wishes motivating Rodriguez's engagement in autobiography. The affirmation of the "mystery" of "intimate utterance" recorded here is the principal aim of Rodriguez's notion of "middle-class pastoral," which he defines in the "Prologue" as a celebration of "the intimate speech my family once freely exchanged." He goes on to concede, though, the defeat of his autobiographical project when he observes, "In singing the praise of my lower-class past, I remind myself of my separation from that past, bring memory to silence" (6). "Bring memory to silence"—this is the end of his song: "silence" displaces "speech" as the object of memory, and, remembered, "silence" silences both memory and "speech."³⁸

"Eccentric woman. Soft. Hard" (36). Rodriguez's pithy characterization of his grandmother applies equally to himself (as portrayed in these pages) and to his views of language. Immediately following and displacing his lyric evocation of the private world of intimate utterance, associated with the memory of childhood, homecoming, and the mother, is this final, austere image of the grandmother in death that brings Rodriguez's "Aria" to an end:

I saw her through the haze of a veil draped over the open lid of the casket. Her face appeared calm—but distant and unyielding to love. It was not the face I remembered seeing most often. It was the face she made in public when the clerk at Safeway asked her some question and I would have to respond. It was her public face the mortician had designed with his dubious art. (40)

Public identity, which Rodriguez argues for repeatedly elsewhere as an empowerment afforded by entry into the language of the dominant culture, is revealed here as an impenetrable, alienating mask, its language of silence likened to the "dubious art" of the mortician.

This darker view of public language and identity is adumbrated on the very first page of "Aria" in Rodriguez's inaugural memory ("I remember to start with that day in Sacramento") of the beginning of his education: "The nun said, in a friendly but oddly impersonal voice, 'Boys and girls, this is Richard Rodriguez.' (I heard her sound out: *Rich-beard Road-ree-guess.*) It was the first time I had heard anyone name me in English. . . .

³⁸ For a more detailed presentation of Rodriguez's conception of "middle-class pastoral," see his essay "Beyond the Minority Myth" 33–34.

Quickly I turned to see my mother's face dissolve in a watery blur behind the pebbled glass door" (11). Rodriguez reveals here an instinctive dissent to the proposition he affirms so often elsewhere, that acculturation is a beneficent process ("I celebrate the day I acquired my new name" [27]). If special private speech as song unites, ordinary public speech separates: it is almost as if the uttering of his name in English and the new public identity that it establishes have the power to eclipse and destroy his mother; the death of the mother tongue spells the death of the mother.

The reality of this intuition is substantiated when Rodriguez recalls that in the deepening silence of his childhood home an immediate consequence of his acquisition of English is a disturbing inability to name his parents. He could no longer use *mama* and *papa*, and "*Mother and Father; Ma, Papa, Pa, Dad, Pop*" (24) are equally unsatisfactory. The surfacing of this linguistic puzzle is the first sign of the impact that acculturation will have upon the private world of his family life, a process which will lead inevitably to his recognition that his parents "are no longer my parents, in a cultural sense" (4). Moreover, the child himself assumes responsibility for the bitter fruits of his mastery of the new language: "Once I spoke English with ease . . . I felt that I had shattered the intimate bond that had once held the family close" (30).

Paralleling these misgivings about public language and identity are Rodriguez's reservations about the lyric mode as the privileged means of access to the private realm of intimacy. Juxtaposed against his affirmation of the possibilities of "intimate utterance" in "Aria" is the revealing scene that opens the next chapter, undercutting any basis for such a belief. He recalls his attempt as an adult "to lecture on the mystery of the sounds of our words" in a ghetto classroom. As if to mock his failed speech, "the girls in the back row" attend instead to the "silent words" of a boy outside the window, his "lips straining to shape each voiceless syllable: '*Meet meee late errr.*'" In contrast to this parody of lyric expression, with its message of union deferred, is the excited listening of a single student, whose eyes "shine with ambition" (43). Rodriguez ruefully identifies her as a surrogate for himself as a boy, and so the autobiographer he is and the self he was face each other across the schoolroom desks and the intervening years, separated by the adult's knowledge that the price of ambition is separation, that the acquisition of language leads to the articulation of silence.

"'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you'" (3). These are the first words of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), and Rodriguez opens "Mr. Secrets," the final

chapter of *Hunger of Memory*, with a similar evocation of autobiography as an act of transgression: “I am writing about those very things my mother has asked me not to reveal” (175). At the same time, as if to atone for the gesture of defiance, both authors dedicate their books to their parents. Paradoxically, although Kingston and Rodriguez experience language as separation, both nevertheless look to language to restore the perfect filiality of the relation between mother and child that its exercise seems to abrogate. Like Kingston in “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” Rodriguez presents in “Mr. Secrets” a meditation on the meaning of his performance of autobiography.

When his mother reads his first published autobiographical essay some seven years before the writing of “Mr. Secrets,” she opens with her son an embarrassed exchange that illuminates their opposing views of intimacy.³⁹ As far as she is concerned, for him to speak in public of the privacy of their family life and his sense of being “‘divided’” (175) from it is to betray it, whereas for Rodriguez, “there is a place for the deeply personal in public life” (185), and he claims to honor his experience of intimacy in childhood and not to hurt his family. His mother’s pained response, however, reveals that his writing works to intensify and not to mitigate the separation between them. Significantly, Rodriguez reports, “she *wrote* to me” (189) in a letter written in English and addressed in Spanish, and, the avenue of intimate speech foreclosed by the trespass of his public writing, he writes back in reply. When he quotes from her letter, it becomes clear that his mother’s reaction to his story of himself is every bit as conflicted as his own: she admires his public voice (“the brilliant manner you have to express yourself”) yet not his use of it (“You say too much about the family”); she praises his assimilation and success (“all the wonderful achievements you have obtained”) yet she urges him to “learn Spanish better” (178)—translate “learn how to talk to me and not to talk to the *gringos*.”

The subtext of the mother’s plea is in effect a call for his return home to be the boy he had been who would never have dreamed of writing about the family, as the son makes clear in his reconstruction of his development as a writer. As a child he instinctively observed the convention of his parents’ culture that family life was not a possible subject in public discourse (was this the burden of his grandmother’s warning from the

³⁹ Rodriguez’s first published autobiographical essay is certainly one of the three early essays I have already discussed, probably “Going Home Again,” since it most directly features the separation and division in the family to which his mother refers.

window as he played with the *gringo* boy?), and he systematically responded to autobiographical exercises at school with fiction. He kept his own secret as well—that “I was growing away from my parents” (180), and only in high school does he begin to imagine the possibility of “a vast public identity writing made possible” (181).

Through his grandmother and her aria of intimacy that recognizes and embraces the listening child (“*Mmmmaammmmmmáááá*”), his culture of origin endows him with a primary model for the autobiographical act. The alternative model supplied by the dominant culture is radically different. In the specular discourse of autobiography the implied reader in the text is necessarily a function of the writing self: mirroring the “vast public identity” assumed by the writer is this characterization of Rodriguez’s faceless reader as *gringo*, “Someone with a face erased. . . . A gray presence. Unknown, unfamiliar” (182), the absolute other to the grandmother. As with the dissolution of the mother’s face behind the glass as the child enters the world of public language, so, again, there is the disturbing implication that the adult’s public practice of language yields an erasure of identity.

No small part of the power and complexity of *Hunger of Memory* resides in its simultaneously recording and expressing the struggle between languages public and private, between the models of identity symbolized respectively by grandmother and *gringo*. Thus, although Rodriguez’s capsule history of his identity as a writer features a shift from the keeping to the telling of secrets, the mother’s name for the son who now talks too much is “Mr. Secrets,” for he also talks too little: “‘What is new with you?’” she asks. “Nothing much, I respond” (186). Indeed, for all his characterization of his autobiography as an act of self-revelation, he is very much his grandmother’s son in his proud, guarded reserve in public. The identity he proposes to display is public (“I do not reveal the person I am among intimates” [190]); yet, conversely, the transactions of intimacy are equally limiting to the expression of identity, and Rodriguez notes that one of his intimates dismisses his autobiographical writing as not truly autobiographical (“‘All that Spanish angst,’ she laughs, ‘It’s not really you’” [190]). Paradoxically, Rodriguez argues that one must escape through writing “to the company of strangers . . . in order to form new versions of oneself” (190). What the autobiographer is always confessing is his keeping of secrets, however, and the only significant exception to this rule of silence comes midway on in the book in “Complexion.” This chapter is devoted to his lifelong preoccupation with the color of his skin and its consequences for his sense of his sexual identity, developed here as

a complex cluster of economic, racial, cultural, and linguistic factors, all associated with the dark, silent figure of the *macho* male.⁴⁰

Curiously, sadly, invincibly, silence masters all of the places of language in *Hunger of Memory*: Rodriguez's childhood home, the reading room of the British Museum, his apartment in San Francisco, the text of the autobiography itself. The reasoned argument of the book presents two contrasting languages, affording the definition and articulation of identity, the "intimate utterance" of his Mexican-American childhood and the public words of his American maturity, and it proposes that both equally promote the definition and articulation of identity through the power of naming. The consoling truth of Rodriguez's story would reside in their equivalence, for if he can no longer say "*Mama*," he can say "*Rich-beard Road-ree-guess*." "By finding public words to describe one's feelings," he observes, ". . . one names what was previously only darkly felt" (187), compensating for his loss of his parents' capacity for "passionate utterance."

The testimony of experience, however, reveals the silence of identity that lies beyond the reach of any language to penetrate. Thus the "deeply personal" dimension of Rodriguez's public identity as the writer can be named only as the unnameable ("Mr. Secrets"), just as in the private lives of his parents "those matters too jaggedly personal to reveal to intimates" can be voiced only in a sigh: "She remains quiet. My father in his chair remains quiet" (185). The autobiographer posits the foundation of identity in the union between mother and child (the listening child embraced by the warm sound of the mother's voice), and in the deepening silence between them he sees the linguistic marker of their estrangement, a symbol of his sense of fissured self. Eventually each turns to the language of the other in order to close the distance between them, she by writing what she could never say (and never speaking of the letter she has written), he by conceiving of his writing as a kind of speech, for "at noisy family gatherings . . . there is no place . . . to essay this, my voice" (190).

Rodriguez's position on the unspoken and its implications for identity remains unclear: sometimes the unarticulated is made to stand for the unformed and hence undefined, while at others it is interpreted as the mark

⁴⁰ Here he relates his mother's linking of dark skin to the plight of *los pobres*, *los braceros* (those who labor with the strength of their arms), and he stresses the urgency of her desire accordingly for her children to be white, betraying her wish for their assimilation into the dominant culture in order to participate in its economic advantages. The identity she wants for her son is, in effect, that of a reverse "coconut," white outside, brown inside.

of an admirable reserve that protects the core of selfhood from compromising intercourse with the world. The unspoken looms large for Rodriguez at the family Christmas that concludes the autobiography, surfacing in his father's question to him at the moment of farewell: "He asks if I am going home now too" (195). As he takes leave of his parents, who are diminished by age and engulfed in silence, he takes with him the knowledge that home is indeed somewhere else. But where? We may well ask, for his story takes him at the last to a point of separation from his family, from the white establishment institutions of higher education, and from non-white militants who seek to change them.

The contradictory voices and self-characterizations of the "Prologue: Middle-class Pastoral" suggest that Richard Rodriguez is as divided within his autobiography as he is from his family. In the self-conscious posturing of this brief introduction to his story he is at times the ethnic militant, a "'provocative speaker'" showering the "lady-fingered pieties" of "White America" (4-5) with scorn, at other times the learned product of graduate study in English instructing the reader in the conventions of pastoral as a literary genre. He will play "Caliban," appropriating the language of the dominant culture as he struts, "exotic in a tuxedo" (3), the dark-skinned arriviste at a cocktail party in Bel Air. Or he will play "Ariel," celebrating "the intimate speech my family once freely exchanged" (6). This edgy, highly volatile parade of models of identity and the various modes of discourse associated with them—pastoral, autobiography, "essays impersonating an autobiography" (7)—display the unsettled view of self and its relation to language that is rehearsed in the rest of the book. Moreover, when an uneasy editor in New York, worried by the abstract quality of Rodriguez's expository mode, urges him to do more with narrative ("Let's have more Grandma" [7]), Rodriguez is adamant in his refusal to paper over in language the evidence of his divided personality.

It is precisely this mix of styles and selves that attracts me to this autobiography; given the complexity of the relations that obtain among self, models of identity, and culture, the contradictions and confusions of its views about language strike me as honest rather than evasive. In particular I am drawn to Rodriguez because he recognizes the power of culture and its models of identity, operating here through the institutions of education, to shape the individual and yet to endow him with a mode of self-creation that seeks to transcend cultural and linguistic determination. A romantic at heart, Rodriguez is nevertheless too much of a realist, too

rooted in contingent existence, to regard the possibility of (re)entry through language into a wholly autonomous realm of identity and feeling as anything other than a necessary illusion, an insatiable desire, the hunger of memory that turns the wheel of narrative in autobiography.

There is inevitably a certain abstractness to discussions of models of identity by such historians of autobiography as Georges Gusdorf and Karl J. Weintraub. By contrast, what autobiographies like those of Ronald Fraser and Richard Rodriguez bring home is the experiential reality of models of identity in individual lives. The gentleman, the good little boy, the scholarship boy, the *pocho*, the minority student, and so forth—these are not creatures of theory but possibilities of daily encounter. Fraser and Rodriguez demonstrate that cultural constructs of race, class, and gender and the various discourses associated with them structure the process of identity formation that is central to maturation. The place of autobiography in all this, and particularly its language, is complicated by its partaking of the very history of the process that is its subject. On the one hand, early and late, language seems to promise an entry into some plenitude of selfhood, confirmed in the exchange of naming between mother (“*Ri-car-do*”) and child (“*Mmmaaammmmáááá*”), or in Fraser’s progressive movement toward the naming of himself as “I.” On the other hand, again early and late, language forecloses the possibility of the self as plenitude that its acquisition promotes in the first place.

In the ontogenetic development of the human personality, self-reflexive awareness, the sense of the self as a self, seems to be closely bound up with the acquisition of language, both engendered by intersubjective experience. Here the relation between self and other (usually the mother) is decisive, and it is surely no accident that, whenever autobiography grapples with the mystery of origins, this is the relation that typically rises to the surface—in Kingston, in Rodriguez, in Fraser, in Barthes. The logic of individuation, presumably a gain in the ethos of individualism, is predicated on loss: language and the other, language taught by the (m)other, enable the articulation of self that, conceptually, is by definition founded on the recognition of its separation from the other, its division from plenitude. The language of autobiography is a further naming of the self, a further reenactment of this primal partition.⁴¹

⁴¹ For a more extended discussion of the relation between the formation of identity and the acquisition of language, see Eakin, *Fictions*, “Self-Invention in Autobiography: The Moment of Language,” especially 209–35.

Motivating the autobiographical act, however, in case after case, seems to be an antiautobiographical, antilinguistic, antiself wish for restoration to a preverbal unity with the other. Contrary to the unexamined view that writing autobiography is merely a form of pleasurable vanity or *self-indulgence*, the naming of the self in these instances reveals not a plenitude but an inconsolable emptiness, a solitude, a lack. Fraser's vision of the lost unity of an "indestructible" love is precisely "unimaginable" just as Rodriguez's recollection is devoted to "a magical realm of sound . . . I didn't need to remember." As for Barthes, he opens his self-portrait by stating his instinctive resistance to any naming or imagining of himself, positing "the perfection of a human relationship" in the abolition—"in oneself, between oneself and others"—of "*adjectives*" (43). It is altogether appropriate, moreover, that Barthes's dedication of his autobiography to his mother, represented in the haunting photograph of the frontispiece, should be unspoken.⁴²

There is, then, in the autobiographical practice of Kingston, Fraser, Rodriguez, and Barthes, a strangely antagonistic relation between affect and expression.⁴³ All of these texts celebrate the practice of language, yet whether language can be said, finally, to be the servant or the enemy of desire is not possible to determine. What I find curious in all this is the presence of a regressive vision at what seems to be the affective center of these autobiographies, an impulse to undo the work of individuation altogether. What is desired is not to imagine, not to remember, not to name—but rather to return to an earlier mode of being released from the burden of self-reflexive autonomy. That models of identity are the *sine qua non* of interpersonal relations in any human culture is one thing; that we should willingly acquiesce in the developmental cost is quite another. It is by no means clear that autobiography—at least in the hands of these introspective practitioners—should be construed as an affirmation of the culture of individualism, even if it is necessarily recognized as one of its most characteristic manifestations.

⁴² See Kennedy for an account of the implications of Barthes's relationship with his mother for his views about "the nature of the self and the purpose of writing" (387).

⁴³ For an important recent treatment of this relation in the work of Roland Barthes, see Gratton.

Henry James's "Obscure Hurt": Can Autobiography Serve Biography?

THE SYSTEM of classification long in place in our libraries and bibliographies posits the kinship of autobiography and biography, ranging them both under the aegis of history as categories of the literature of reference, kinds of writing determined by their presumed basis in verifiable fact. Yet it is precisely with regard to this central identifying feature of reference to a world beyond the text that theory of autobiography today differs from the practice of biography. Thus it has become commonplace for students of autobiography to assert that the past, the ostensible primary reference of such texts, is a fiction. As Burton Pike puts it, bluntly, "The past does not exist" (337). The world of biography, on the other hand, shunning life in the fast lane, seems to have largely maintained the traditional purity of its positivistic allegiance to fact, to the past as recoverable reality. The lesson of the fictive biographer in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (1938) is all too clear: once admit a doubt about the reality of the past and the entire project of biography begins to disintegrate. Abandoning his study of the marquis de Rollebon, Antoine Roquentin is reduced at the last in Sartre's deterministic vision to an existence without memory, almost without identity, in which consciousness bubbles up discontinuously, from moment to moment, like gas.

This split between autobiography and biography on the issue of reference is unfortunate, for work in each domain has much to offer the other when it comes to defining an appropriate model for life history. For biographers who tend to take reference too much for granted, the theory and practice of autobiography are instructive, for they demonstrate that simplistic notions of biographical fact need to be enlarged in order to include modes of fiction that often constitute the experiential reality of life history. At the same time, the example of biography can help to remind us that autobiography, for all the manifold fictions in which it is implicated, is nothing if not a referential art. Despite these differences with regard to reference, autobiography and biography share a common goal that can be defined as the attempt to reconstruct what it felt like to be this particular person. My concern is with the uses of autobiography for building life

history in biography. Specifically, I would ask whether and in what ways autobiography in itself or in its contents can serve as referential fact for biography.

Traditionally, biographers use autobiography as a source of information about the life of the biographical subject, especially about the early years, when documentation is apt to be scarce because the historical significance of the subject *as a subject for biography* has yet to emerge. This is the case, for example, with the two biographers who have given us the only large-scale renderings of the young Henry James, Robert LeClair and Leon Edel. Curiously, though, the writing of an autobiography is usually not itself presented as a major event in the life of the biographical subject. In order to pose the relation of autobiography to biography, I want to examine the instance of Henry James's "obscure hurt," considering both what has been, and what might be, the approach to this episode of James's story. "James's story" is, I think, an appropriately evasive phrase, and "this episode" is necessarily an ambiguous one, for it is crucial to discriminate between two episodes, two pasts, two orders of biographical event in autobiography: the earlier time that is ostensibly the subject of autobiographical discourse, and the time during which the autobiography is written.

Of these two constructions of reference in autobiography, current theory is heavily invested in the latter, in what has come to be known, following Elizabeth Bruss, as "the autobiographical act." I associate the thinking of James Olney (*Metaphors*), Barrett J. Mandel ("Full"), and others with this view, and its implications for biography have been clearly suggested by Jean Starobinski, who observes, "No matter how doubtful the facts related, the text will at least present an 'authentic' image of the man who 'held the pen'" (75). Such thinking has worked to discredit as an impossible naïveté the traditional view that an autobiographical text can offer a transparent, unmediated access into an extratextual world of past events. From this perspective, Robert LeClair's defense of his "extensive use" of James's autobiography "because of the amazing accuracy of his recollections" (8) would be merely wishful thinking. The price of autobiography's contribution to biography, however, as conceived by current theory—namely, the new light shed on the autobiographical act as a primary biographical event—seems to require the sacrifice of its traditional contribution to the recovery of the distant past. Do we have to pay this price? Where would LeClair, where would Edel, where would anyone be with regard to the matter of James's early years without the testimony of the autobiography?

I. "A SHABBY CONFLAGRATION"

By way of introduction to what I shall refer to as the first biographical event, the "obscure hurt" that James says he suffered at the beginning of the Civil War, it is suggestive to note its evolving importance in the unfolding of Jamesian biography. In Rebecca West's slim volume of 1916, which devotes a few sentences to the wound and its aftermath, the hurt is accepted at face value as a physical injury that prevented James from participating in the Civil War. In the biographies of the 1920s, by Van Wyck Brooks and Pelham Edgar, the injury is, if anything, even less important than in West's account, but by the 1930s it acquires a new and more comprehensive significance in Glenway Wescott's notorious speculation (echoed by Stephen Spender and others) that the hurt might have involved some kind of castration. The turning point in what we might call the biography of the hurt came in 1943, in an essay by Saul Rosenzweig, "The Ghost of Henry James." While retaining the fashionable view that young Henry James suffered some kind of "passional death" (88), Rosenzweig proposed that "the physical aspect" of the injury was "of purely secondary importance": "paramount is the subjective depth of the injury as James experienced it" (84). From Rosenzweig to the present, notably in the interpretations of Leon Edel and Richard Hall, the hurt has been treated as a major biographical event, both determining and determined by the larger context of James's life history—his unconscious psychic identification with his injured father (Rosenzweig, Edel), his repressed incestuous love for his brother William (Hall), and so forth. The history of the hurt in the lives of James from West's to Edel's should teach us that truth in biography, like truth in autobiography, is not a fixed but an evolving content.¹

Let us begin with the facts of this episode as recorded by James in *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914), the second volume of his autobiography. According to James's account, he sustained the injury while fighting a fire in Newport, apparently in the spring of 1861, shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War, with "the smoke of Charleston Bay still so acrid in the air." The language James employs on this occasion is strikingly circumstantial: "Jammed into the acute angle between two high fences, where the rhythmic play of my arms, in tune with that of several other pairs, but at a dire

¹ See West 20; Van Wyck Brooks 32; Edgar 13; Wescott 523–24; Spender 36–37; Rosenzweig 79–100; Edel, *Untried Years* 167–83; and Hall.

disadvantage of position, induced a rural, a rusty, a quasi-extemporised old engine to work and a saving stream to flow, I had done myself, in face of a shabby conflagration, a horrid even if an obscure hurt" (415). The language here certainly suggests a physical injury (James was "jammed"), yet when Henry, initially secretive, confides his trouble to his father and they seek the advice of a surgeon in Boston, the upshot of the doctor's diagnosis, "a comparative pooh-pooh" (416), is to leave the bewildered youth "to reckon with the strange fact of there being nothing to speak of the matter with me" (417). James concludes his narrative of the hurt with his visit to the wounded at Portsmouth Grove, where, in a remarkable passage of one-upsmanship with Walt Whitman, James presents himself as the *wounded* wound dresser. Measuring wound for wound, civilian Henry was persuaded that in his own "impaired state" (426) he was the equal of any veteran of the war; it is the felt connection between this private area of personal history and the public history of the nation at war that supports James's identification of his noncombatant earlier self as suitably heroic.²

When Edel tested James's account of the hurt and its aftermath against the facts of biographical and historical record, the results were disquieting, to say the least. The chronology James reconstructed in 1913 simply does not square with the chronology established by Edel for these events of 1861 and 1862. For one thing, the stable fire in Newport ("the shabby conflagration") took place *not* in the spring of 1861 but in the fall, on October 28. There is no surviving testimony in Edel's biography to corroborate either the fact of James's injury in the fire or the visit to the doctor in Boston.³ Nor is there anything in the contemporaneous descriptions of Henry in the weeks after the fire by William James and Thomas Sergeant

² In his provocative study of the autobiography, "The Memoirs of Henry James," James M. Cox takes James to task for his condescension to Whitman and to Andrew Johnson, concluding that James's vision of the Civil War in particular and of American history and culture in general was "impoverished" (189). Cox's essay is a major treatment of James's late style, uncovering as its central dynamic "the aestheticizing of capitalism," which Cox reads as directed "toward acquisition not of money or things but of consciousness" (173).

³ Howard M. Feinstein identifies the surgeon Henry consulted in Boston as Dr. Henry J. Bigelow (1818–1890), a professor at the Harvard Medical School (*Becoming* 198n). When I contacted Dr. Feinstein to learn the source of this information, he told me that James himself makes this identification in his autobiography, and further, that this is the same surgeon whom his father had consulted for treatment of a boil on his hand. There is, however, no mention of Dr. Bigelow in the autobiography. For the reference to Dr. Bigelow's treatment of Henry's father, see the letter of Henry James, Sr., to Mrs. Francis G. Shaw, July 22, 1859, in Perry 2: 185–86.

Perry to suggest impaired health, low spirits, or restricted activity. Still more perplexing, the visit to Portsmouth Grove, according to Perry's diary, occurred not *after* the fire, as James would have it, but several months *before* the fire, in the summer of 1861, and hence *before* the wound. As for the visit to the doctor and his "pooh-pooh," how could the surgeon find evidence of an injury that was not there? Are we really surprised in turn not to find evidence that such a visit was ever made? Thanks to the wonders of the biographer's art, the whole sequence—injury in the fire, visit to the doctor, vindication as one of the wounded at Portsmouth Grove—simply falls apart.⁴

What are we to make of these discrepancies between the autobiography and the historical record? When is the autobiography a reliable source of biographical fact and when not? What is a stable fire to us if Henry really was not injured in it? And what is the interest of the visit to Portsmouth Grove if Henry, as yet unhurt (if ever he was), could therefore not have measured his potential for heroism, wound for wound, against that of the injured veterans of the war? Clearly we need to address the status of these referential statements in the autobiography unless we prefer simply to abandon all hope of reconstructing that period and Henry's state of mind. The biographer of James needs to ask whether it is possible that the substantive obscurity and the temporal confusion marking the retrospective account of the hurt in 1913 are truer to the psychological heart of the episode than the comparative clarity of the surviving documents (by Perry, by William James, and so forth) that are contemporaneous with this event (or nonevent?) of 1861.

To put it this way is to suggest that there is a second event, a second order of biographical fact involved, that should be central to our consideration. In asking "What happened?" as we have been, we come much closer to the truth when we reply, "Henry James wrote something about a mysterious injury in a text he composed in 1913." In this sense the autobiography is not merely a source of biographical facts; it is such a fact itself. In defense of the need to state the obvious, let me make three points. First, in terms of the evolution of the biographical record concerning Henry James, the hurt (this "obscure" one, and not some back injury referred to in various letters over the years) figures as a decisive event in James's story for the first time in 1913; James himself made it so. Second, this kind of autobiographical making is characteristically undervalued in the practice of biography, and this undervaluation is indeed but a special instance of a more general tendency, namely, the curious reluctance of

⁴ See Edell, *Untried Years* 167–83, especially 169, 174–75, and 177–79.

literary biographers to conceptualize writing as a primary biographical event. Writing is viewed all too often as *about* something else; it becomes a secondary reflection of some other biographical event that it would be the biographer's task to recapture.

Finally, to stress, as I have, the need to accord to the autobiographical act the status of biographical event is to suggest the importance of a *contextual* understanding of autobiography's re-creation of biographical fact. In conceptualizing the referential status of historical artifacts, Hayden White repudiates the commonsense notion that "the object to which an artifact gives access is conceived to exist outside the artifact." Referentiality in history is *never* direct, he argues, for he is careful to remind us that "the historically real . . . is that to which I can be referred only by way of an artifact that is textual in nature" ("Context" 209). In this view, the text itself, not some putative reality that lies beyond it and to which it refers, becomes the primary focus of historical (and hence biographical) inquiry. When it comes to applying White's contextual understanding of historical reference to the case of autobiography, I think that Erik Erikson's psychosocial perspective on Gandhi is especially instructive. Erikson comments, somewhat apologetically: "One is almost embarrassed to point out what seems so obvious—namely, that in perusing a man's memoirs for the purpose of reconstructing past moments and reinterpreting pervasive motivational trends, one must first ask oneself at what age and under what general circumstances the memoirs were written, what their intended purpose was, and what form they assumed" ("Gandhi" 701).

There are, in fact, very few examples one can point to in the practice of biography that direct attention to the subject's writing an *autobiography* as biographically significant. It is, perhaps, indicative of this tendency that even so aggressive a spokesman for psychobiography as Bruce Mazlish, in a book of more than four hundred pages on the lives of James and John Stuart Mill, devotes only four pages to Mill's engagement in the autobiographical act (162–65). Similarly, in his massive five-volume treatment of James's life, Edel devotes only a handful of pages to his subject's performance as autobiographer. Following the view of Robert Sayre (144–45), Edel proposes that the writing of the autobiography was instrumental in James's recovery from illness and depression, but he does not demonstrate how the literary project accomplished this therapeutic task (*Master* 455–58).

In the existing literature on James there are as yet no comprehensive treatments of the biographical significance of the autobiographical act, but two biographical studies—Saul Rosenzweig's early essay and Howard M. Feinstein's recent work on William James and the James family—display

the kind of sensitivity to context advocated by White and Erikson. Whether or not we are prepared to assent to Rosenzweig's speculation (espoused later on by Edel) that James's injury in the Newport fire is to be understood as "in some sense a repetition" of the injury his father sustained "while likewise engaged in extinguishing a fire" (83), he demonstrates an extremely suggestive understanding of life history as a series of interconnected developmental stages, in which passages of biographical experience dating from widely different periods may be simultaneously active at any given moment. He argues, for example, that the "unparalleled fervor" of James's efforts in support of the Allied cause at the outbreak of World War I is to be understood as a "belated compensation" (95) for his nonparticipation in the Civil War, a subject he had so elaborately and recently presented in *Notes of a Son and Brother*. As for the "obscure hurt," drawing on his view of James's problematic identity as a small boy, Rosenzweig wisely speaks of the accident as offering Henry's "general orientation"—the small boy's fundamental feelings of inadequacy—"a specific date and place for its disclosure" (82).

Explicitly aligning himself with the Eriksonian view of life history in which "earlier crises are constantly reexperienced and earlier solutions perpetually reworked" (*Becoming* 229), Howard M. Feinstein demonstrates exemplary care and tact in laying out the psychological parallelism between William James's crisis and breakdown of 1872 and his father's crisis of 1844 at a similar age and stage in his development. Still more to the point is Feinstein's model analysis of what it meant to be sick in the James family in particular and more generally in nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture. His revealing study of the family correspondence concerning travel abroad for ostensibly health-related motives uncovers a veritable politics of illness in the James family circle ("Use"). As to Henry's "obscure hurt," in Feinstein's view, it exemplifies the extent to which a young man, deeply troubled by the problem of vocation as posed both by the culture and more peculiarly by his father, could find in illness and invalidism a "socially acceptable" definition of the idleness necessary to his artistic development (*Becoming* 198).

II. TEXT AND SELVES

Let me now consider the autobiographical account of the "obscure hurt" from two temporal perspectives, that of the period of the autobiography's composition and that of the period recalled. In a study I published in 1984, I asked why the autobiographer chose to tell this particular story of

himself during this phase of his life history, and I argued that James derived strength for the present from the insight he acquired into his ego's resources in meeting a life crisis long ago during the Civil War ("Henry James"). It is not hard to see why the autobiographer might have been drawn to the story of a young man who managed both in spite of and because of illness and disability to achieve a full realization of his creative powers. James had reasons enough to need such support and inspiration in these years: the apparent failure of the New York Edition, the death of William, his own poor health—and, perhaps most important of all, his fear that he might never realize his hope to return to the house of fiction. James himself seems to subscribe to such a reading of the biographical significance of the autobiographical act when, in a letter he wrote to his nephew Harry on January 19, 1913, he states that in pursuing the project he was "working off" "the heritage of woe of the last three years" (*Letters* 2: 289). A parallel line of thinking informs his characterization of his earlier self, for in the context of the entire narrative the episode of the "obscure hurt" emerges as the climax of an extensive series of episodes which demonstrate that illness is curiously linked to creativity. In these episodes the "taking in" of impressions gives James's younger self a sense of his imagination's possibilities and power, and it is sickness, solitude, and confinement that seem to operate as enabling conditions for this process, providing a secure environment in which the proto-artistic activity of his consciousness can proceed uninterrupted.

Whether a relation of causation obtains between illness and creativity has been endlessly debated in our time by Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, and others. James's account of the hurt falls well short of positing a causal relation between it and his art. What he does suggest is that his youthful creativity (his shy wanting to want to be "just *literary*" [413]) required the security of a secluded space in which to operate (a closet at Newport, an alcove at the Harvard Law School), and that the injury may have helped to create that space (just as, a bit later on, the "studious retirement and preparatory hours" of his life at law school supplied his "supine attitude" with "a certain fine plausibility" [417]). Although illness, of course, does not explain in an organic sense the nature of artistic creativity, this is not to say that an artist's belief in his difference, his inwardness (figured variously as physical injury or psychological illness), may not operate with an effective agency tantamount to causation in the unfolding of his imaginative life. (It is worth noting that such a theory is illustrated by the fate of James's Milly Theale, whose curious interviews with Sir Luke Strett resemble the autobiographer's puzzling encounter with the doctor in Boston.)

Setting aside the question of the objective truth embodied in the myth of the sick artist, what we need to consider here is the possibility that the link between illness and creativity may have had for James early and late the force of cultural sanction. I think here not only of the work of Jean Strouse and Howard M. Feinstein on neurasthenia as a nineteenth-century social phenomenon but also of Susan Sontag's illuminating study *Illness as Metaphor*, in which she suggests that tuberculosis, for example, was "a way of affirming the value of being more conscious, more complex psychologically" (25).⁵ Given the predisposition in the James family to accord to consciousness the highest possible moral, aesthetic, and metaphysical value, we can hardly be surprised by the "interest" Henry claims in the autobiography for his hurt—and Alice in her diary for her cancer.

These speculations about the relation of illness to creativity apply, of course, equally to the episode of the hurt and to the writing of the episode. If this issue is a major theme of the autobiography, it is also an insistent preoccupation of the many letters about the autobiography that James wrote in this period, principally to William's widow Alice and to his nephew Harry. To date, the autobiography letters remain mostly unpublished, but Carol Holly has proposed an edition of them (forty-eight in all) that will afford a fascinating record of the way in which James's performance of the autobiographical act merges in his discourse with the manifold illnesses (shingles, depression, and so forth) of these years. Holly believes that these illnesses of the present are somehow related to—reflections of, caused by—James's reimmersion in some old family issues revived in the process of his autobiographical retrospect, and I think it equally possible that James's concern with illness and disability in the autobiography may have been conditioned by his present maladies. In all probability text and context operated symbiotically, each determining and determined by the other, to create the thematization and manifestation of illness recorded simultaneously in the autobiography and in the letters. Holly also speculates that James's desire to elicit sympathy and approval for the autobiographical project from his principal family correspondents of this period may have led him to exaggerate his symptoms—one more round of the politics of illness.⁶

Roland Barthes ("Introduction" 261) and Paul Jay (*Being*) have argued

⁵ See also Strouse 104–26, and Feinstein, "Use."

⁶ These views were communicated to me by Professor Holly in personal conversation and in a recent essay, "'Absolutely Acclaimed': The Cure for Depression in James's Final Phase," concerning the role of readers' response to the autobiographies in effecting James's sense of well-being and recovery of artistic power in 1914.

that we must be careful to distinguish between the textual and the biographical self, but to read these letters of James is to become persuaded of the extent to which the making of a textual self may become the focal event in the life of the biographical self. Their scruples, however, about the biographical significance of autobiography are widely received today, and a good many theorists of autobiography, myself among them, have been willing to characterize the autobiographical act as devoted to the creation of personal myth, to the practice of an art of self-invention. Suppose we come to view the autobiographer of 1913 as engaged in mythmaking: is this then to dismiss his portrait of his earlier self as an invention of autobiographical retrospect with no basis in referential fact?

To be willing to ask such a question is to risk a “conflagration” of our own, for if we eliminate the autobiography as a source for James’s childhood, most of the recoverable substance of that childhood goes up in smoke. What can we know for certain about our own or about anyone’s early life? Peter Brooks has demonstrated that when it comes to the quest for origins, psychoanalysis has worked to undercut the authority of the historicist mode of narrative explanation that has long sustained the traditional practice of referential art in autobiography and biography. Although free association in analysis seems to promise revelation of the earliest determining events in our psychological history—the very dawn of the self’s existence, as in the “primal scene” witnessed by the infant Wolf Man—Freud reluctantly concedes, nevertheless, that this originary event upon which he so brilliantly constructs the etiology of the Wolf Man’s illness may be altogether fictive, without basis in referential fact. The upshot of Brooks’s analysis is to postulate “another kind of referentiality” altogether, one that would displace the quest for origins that has been the traditional concern of the biographer and historian: “All tales,” he observes, “may lead back not so much to events as to other tales, to man as a structure of the fictions he tells about himself” (78).

Returning once more to my question of a moment ago, if we accept the view of the autobiographer of 1913 as a mythmaker, are we then obliged to reject his portrait of his earlier self as invalid for the purpose of biography? Following the view of man as an irrepressible teller of tales, we would need to complicate our approach to the problem by considering the extent to which James’s earlier self—or anyone’s—was doubtless similarly engaged in the process of self-invention. This, at any rate, is James’s theory, for if we suspect the autobiographer of practicing fiction, the autobiographer, in turn, asserts that the small boy, son, and brother he was then was also practicing fiction. In this sense we do well to place the autobio-

graphical act in the larger context of identity formation, regarding it as a reenactment and extension of earlier patterns of behavior. What I am suggesting is that the making of fictions about the self, indeed the making of a fictive self, is a fact and likely to be a principal fact of experience not merely in the creation of an autobiography but in the making of a life. I recognize, nevertheless, that to make such speculations is certainly a risky business for the biographer: on the one hand, we would not want to succumb to a circular reasoning that would use the early life (as recalled much later on) as evidence to demonstrate the continuity of identity preoccupations between selves early and late; on the other, we would not want to discredit autobiographical retrospect altogether.

III. REFLECTIONS ON IDENTITY

Even if we were to abandon the notion that an autobiography provides in some way an access to the earlier self that biography would capture, we could still claim that it provides access to the retrospective self “who ‘held the pen.’” But before we go much further with this talk of selves early and late, I think we need to examine the assumptions about identity that such formulations presuppose. The model of identity that typically informs literary discussions of autobiography is (not surprisingly) textual in nature: there is a present, retrospective self (the man “who ‘held the pen’”; James, say, writing in 1913) whose memories reconstitute the life of an earlier self (James as small boy, son, and brother; the youth of 1861 and 1862); this pair of selves is inscribed in the narrative structure of the text as narrator and protagonist. At the heart of this narrative structure—its fulcrum as it were—is the first-person pronoun, the “I” whose simultaneous double reference as speaker and subject of its speech both makes possible and subverts (as we shall see) the ability of autobiographical discourse to posit the identity between author and subject that is the characteristic telos of such a tale.

But whether the structure of discourse is homologous to the structure of psychological identity is another matter altogether. Roland Barthes, for one (as I have mentioned), often warns against the tendency, in dealing with the concept of the person or subject, to confuse the linguistic with the psychological. Barthes was, in fact, profoundly skeptical about the reality of identity, preferring instead to invoke the “ideology of the person” (*S/Z* 191), and when he did come, perhaps paradoxically, to write his own autobiography, he chose to emphasize the textual nature of the self in

question by including his name as both author and subject in the title: *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. In Barthes's view, the proper name, on which for Philippe Lejeune the very possibility of autobiography and its concept of identity are founded, is in reality a cultural construct and convention rather than the mark of a psychological reality.⁷

Short of abandoning autobiography altogether (as Barthes, interestingly, did not), I think we are obliged to accept some notion of identity as the *sine qua non* of the genre. Sensitized, however, by Barthes's lively awareness of the ease with which we allow ourselves to speak of identity in this matter of the person, we should be wary of the reductiveness implicit in certain of the discriminations that are so widely received in autobiography studies today. For example, for heuristic purposes in my discussion of James I have employed Starobinski's formula, the man "who 'held the pen,'" but—pace Barthes—the man who held the pen clearly held a lot more besides. Certainly it was a salutary corrective for Burton Pike, James Olney, Barrett J. Mandel, and others to assert the primacy of the present in the autobiographical act, countering the unexamined notion of autobiography as offering an unmediated, transparent access to the self and world of the past. Implicit, however, in such a position—in speaking about the retrospective self writing an autobiography in the present and about the various earlier selves he or she writes about from the past—is the potential to confuse the temporal with the psychological, to drift toward a serial, discontinuous model of identity or identities, the agency of each definitively ended once the moment of its chronological ascendancy has passed. Erik Erikson repudiates such a view, arguing persuasively that the constituent patterns of identity transcend the chronological boundaries of their initial expression and continue to exert a lifelong shaping influence on the evolving self (*Luther* 117–18). In this view the past is not

⁷ Such is the symbolic power of the proper name, Barthes argues in *S/Z*, that the *semes* (all the little units of meaning that constitute the microtexture of narrative) are immediately drawn to it as to a magnet (67), enabling the person to whom the name refers "to exist outside the *semes*, whose sum nonetheless constitutes it entirely." The proper name, the name of a character in a narrative, thus achieves the illusion of "something like *individuality*," even though it is, operationally considered, really only "the point of convergence" (191) of a collection of attributes or predicates (the qualities and behaviors we associate with a character when we unpack its significance). Barthes is especially astute in specifying the transformation of the linguistic "I" into the individual of biographical reference: "In principle, the character who says 'I' has no name . . . ; in fact, however, *I* immediately becomes a name, his name. . . . to say *I* is inevitably to attribute signifieds to oneself; further, it gives one a biographical duration, it enables one to undergo, in one's imagination, an intelligible 'evolution'" (68). Cf. Lejeune, "Autobiographical Pact" 11–12.

inert but dynamic, constantly penetrating the present and interacting with it; what has gone before contributes to the shaping of what is to come, and the reverse, considered from the vantage point of autobiographical retrospect, is also true.

It is all very well to speak of “the past,” but the would-be historian of the self, biographer or autobiographer, needs to know where it resides. In the unconscious and in memory, we reply, and we must rely on psychoanalysis and its technique of free association for access to the one, and introspection for access to the other. As I mentioned earlier, Peter Brooks has demonstrated that the yield of psychoanalysis in this respect is as problematic as it is promising, and memory may not prove much more reliable when it comes to referential truth. In his phenomenological investigation of autobiographical retrospect, Barrett J. Mandel stresses the constant alteration of what we call “the past” as it resides in memory over time. He asserts that the past is always “an illusion because it never really existed”; enjoying no independent existence of its own, “it has always been an illusion created by the symbolizing activity of the mind” (“Full” 63). This conception of the past radically destabilizes the foundations of biographical reference, as Mandel makes clear when he demonstrates that the past “*actually changes*,” since it “only truly exists in the present and since my present is always in motion” (“Past” 77).

The relation between past and present, whether considered as a biographical content or as an aspect of the autobiographical act, would, then, be dialectical: each determining and determined by the other. If in this matter of the self and its past I am prepared to grant so large a place to process, to change, what becomes of the concept of identity that it is the project of any autobiography both to negotiate and to deliver? How can we be said to have any connection with what we were, how can we even share the identical proper name, if our knowledge of what we were—the necessary referent of that name in our discourse—is an inherently unstable category? My answer is, paradoxically, that the alteration Mandel so shrewdly observes in the content of remembered fact and self (in each of its subsequent rememberings) may be in effect what permits the possibility of identity, of our seeming to ourselves to be *in some sense* recognizably the same individual surviving, acting, and feeling over the years. The alteration in our memories of who we were helps to keep the history of that earlier self or selves in sync with the self we have become.

My view of the self and its history, developmentally considered, would be something like this: I would begin by acknowledging the fundamental reality of difference, of instability, of discontinuity in human experience,

positing a self that is constantly changing and evolving. But I would argue that the serial, potentially fragmentary content of this model of life history is radically altered by the functioning of memory, which supplies the possibility of identity otherwise lacking in the biography of the self. In this view memory would be not only literally essential to the constitution of identity (we need think only of the consequences of amnesia) but also crucial in the sense that it is constantly revising and editing the remembered past to square with the needs and requirements of the self we have become in any present. Lest I seem to attribute conscious agency to what is more likely to be a largely unconscious process, let me substitute for this image of memory as a revisionist historian a more distinctly neutral or passive figure of memory as a palimpsest. When we think of a palimpsest, we envision a text whose content has been subject to different temporal accretions, to deliberate erasures and emendations, to overwritings and inadvertent survivals, and, in these ways, a palimpsest may serve to evoke both the conscious and the unconscious dimensions of the relation between present and past that occur in the autobiographical act.

In this experiential model of the transaction of autobiographical reference there is, then, a place for the past, but one that is contingent, perilously mortal as we are ourselves, and accordingly all the more precious in our continuing quest for knowledge of who we are. The unwary have often assumed that a value-neutral memory, functioning as a storehouse of all the discrete moments in the past “as they really happened,” would provide the optimum foundation for autobiography. I am arguing that the apparent gain in autobiographical truth might in fact obstruct the constitution of identity that is the genre’s characteristic, even defining, goal. It is the very impurities of memory—its fallibility, its proclivity for revisionist history—that may prove, paradoxically, to be redemptive, permitting (at least) the literary assertion of identity.

IV. TRUSTING THE TEXT

As these speculations about the nature of memory and the self should indicate, I am unreconstructed by theory when it comes to reference. Even though I cannot subscribe to the correspondence theory of reference in autobiographical discourse—the idea that autobiography could, and should, offer a faithful and unmediated re-creation of a historically verifiable past—I do believe that autobiography can serve the biographer’s quest for referential truth. I could wish for a firmer methodological

ground from which to proceed in this matter, but I am afraid that when it comes to the determination of fact in such texts, a distinctly subjective impulse to trust is going to be decisive in the last analysis. I believe, for example, in the psychic truth of James's retrospective account of the hurt, of his illness, of his sense of difference from William and above all from Wilkie. We need to listen carefully to James in order to understand that he is dealing, in the episode of the hurt, with an order of referential fact that eludes the circumstantial verification traditionally sought by biography. If we assume that the "obscure hurt" is *only* a physical injury of some kind, how then do we account for young Henry's state of mind as the autobiographer recollects it? I quote now the rest of the passage in which James reports the injury in his autobiography:

What was interesting from the first was my not doubting in the least its duration—though what seemed equally clear was that I needn't as a matter of course adopt and appropriate it, so to speak, or place it for increase of interest on exhibition. The interest of it, I very presently knew, would certainly be of the greatest, would even in conditions kept as simple as I might make them become little less than absorbing. The shortest account of what was to follow for a long time after is therefore to plead that the interest never did fail. It was naturally what is called a painful one, but it consistently declined, as an influence at play, to drop for a single instant. Circumstances, by a wonderful chance, overwhelmingly favoured it—*as* an interest, an inexhaustible, I mean; since I also felt in the whole enveloping tonic atmosphere a force promoting its growth. Interest, the interest of life and of death, of our national existence, of the fate of those, the vastly numerous, whom it closely concerned, the interest of the extending War, in fine, the hurrying troops, the transfigured scene, formed a cover for every sort of intensity, made tension itself in fact contagious—so that almost any tension would do, would serve for one's share. (415–16)

The insistent, almost obsessive, repetition of the word "interest," the cheerful ring of such phrases as "wonderful chance" and "tonic atmosphere," the general air of vital excitement generated by the expansive rhetorical energy—all these features of the prose suggest that the apparently disabling injury is an enabling event, associated with health and growth, and forming "a cover for every sort of intensity." James gives us a clue to his meaning here, perhaps, when he speaks earlier in this mammoth paragraph of his literary activity at Newport in 1861–1862 in precisely the same way: his father's rejection of his proposal to attend Har-

vard College had left him free to cultivate “the life of the imagination” “under the rich cover of obscurity” (414). To the extent that we read James’s remarks on the “interest” of his injury literally, they may seem hardly comprehensible as a response to a set of physical symptoms; to the extent, however, that he may be seen to describe the hurt as a psychological event, defining its place in the economy of his imaginative life, they make a good deal more sense.

Another clue illuminating the obscurity of the hurt comes in a phrase from the first part of the passage about the “shabby conflagration” that I quoted earlier, in which James characterizes his effort in the stable fire as causing “a saving stream to flow.” A few pages later, describing his difficulty when he tried to participate in the discussion of the war during meals at his law school boardinghouse in Cambridge, James evokes his painful, embarrassed sense of “the felt . . . limits of *my* poor stream of contributive remark” (421). The hurt, such as it was then, and the passage about it now, in retrospect, are James’s “saving stream.” And “saving stream” seems to me peculiarly apt as a figure for the rhetorical flow of the passage as it performs its work of rehabilitation. Having modulated in the concluding lines of the passage from fire to fire, from the “shabby conflagration” at Newport to the national drama of the Civil War, James concludes—revealingly, I think—that “almost any tension would do, would serve for one’s share.” The stable fire served and serves as James’s metaphorical substitute early and late for his failure to serve in the war.

I have been arguing that James’s hurt really *is* as obscure as he says it was, that it had to be, and it is in this sense that Edel’s well-intentioned attempt to demystify the hurt is wrongheaded: a back injury of 1862 simply will not do as the objective correlative for the psychological confusion young Henry James experienced at the beginning of the war in 1861. What it is that is the matter with him and makes him different is something that by definition escapes the literal probing of the surgeon in Boston. The surgeon would have needed the insight of a Sir Luke Strett, an Erik Erikson, a Howard M. Feinstein—clinicians all—to have grasped the psychological register in which the illness had to be sought. By the same token, the display of the hurt at Portsmouth Grove is controverted by the surviving record of biographical fact, yet it has the truth of wish—not merely the wish of retrospect, I would argue, but the wish of the time recalled as well. If my hunch is right, what James is doing in creating such scenes is drawing on—and probably not consciously—a suitably circumstantial set of biographical facts to serve as the missing verifiable referents for the inner truth that had left no trace. That is the whole point of the

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autobiography, anyhow: to testify to the reality of the small boy's gift, his identity as the artist, in the period preceding the documentation of this reality in his published work. For insight into this generative period of James's history, the autobiography is not only indispensable but, in this case at least, not likely to be surpassed by any biographer—not Edel, not anyone.

Living in History

Nick sat against the wall of the church where they had dragged him to be clear of machine-gun fire in the street. Both legs stuck out awkwardly. He had been hit in the spine. His face was sweaty and dirty. The sun shone on his face. The day was very hot. Rinaldi, big backed, his equipment sprawling, lay face downward against the wall. Nick looked straight ahead brilliantly. The pink wall of the house opposite had fallen out from the roof, and an iron bedstead hung twisted toward the street. Two Austrian dead lay in the rubble in the shade of the house. Up the street were other dead. Things were getting forward in the town. It was going well. Stretcher bearers would be along any time now. Nick turned his head carefully and looked at Rinaldi. "Senta Rinaldi. Senta. You and me we've made a separate peace." Rinaldi lay still in the sun breathing with difficulty. "Not patriots." Nick turned his head carefully away smiling sweatily.

Rinaldi was a disappointing audience.
(Ernest Hemingway, *In Our Time*)

WAR may not loom large in the diminishing perspective of *la longue durée* espoused by the French historians of the *Annales* school, but they are routinely invoked to demarcate historical periods. For better or worse, they function as the most familiar symbols of our collective experience. Wartime propaganda promotes this identification between the individual and society: to enlist is to enlist in history, to participate in a global movement of some kind. The pressure to make such identifications often leads noncombatants to an even livelier grasp of the dynamic at work than that of the veterans themselves. As Henry James put it, speaking from the sidelines of the Civil War, the wounded possess an "indefinable shining stigma," "the strange property or privilege . . . of exquisitely, for all *our* time, facing us out, quite blandly ignoring us, looking through us or straight over us at something they partake of together but that we mayn't pretend to know" (*Autobiography* 384). F. Scott Fitzgerald captures James's sense of exclusion from the leading historical event of his time more succinctly in the title to his own late story about missing the experience of the Great War, "I Didn't Get Over" (1936).

Some individuals, like Ernest Hemingway's Nick Adams in *In Our Time* (1925), seem destined to receive the Jamesian "stigma," colliding with history head-on. Given the disparities of scale between public event and private life in contemporary experience, however, others have a nagging sense of history going forward without them. In *A Romantic Education* (1981) Patricia Hampl observes that Americans in particular see themselves as strangely "unmarked" (181) by history, and so they struggle to establish at the very least a metaphorical connection with it. We know, of course, intellectually, that we are a part of history whether we like it or not, but this knowledge does not necessarily answer to the felt need for a link between the events of our individual lives and those of the larger collective actuality we read about in the newspapers. Hampl demonstrates, as we shall see, that autobiography can make this connection, and in this chapter I want to deal precisely with autobiographies that explore the relation between biographical and historical fields of reference. In the memoir of the usual sort, this relation is taken for granted, providing the individual with that window on history from which the narrative is presumably observed; at the same time, this relation is in principle not a primary topic of comment—indeed the omission of the witness's subjectivity presumably functions as a guarantee of historical objectivity. By contrast, all of the texts I mean to examine here—by Henry Adams, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Alfred Kazin, Michael Arlen, and Patricia Hampl—do display this relation, but none of them displays it *as a structure* quite so strikingly as Hemingway does in *In Our Time*, to which I turn now to illustrate the problematical distinction between public and private, between the historical and the personal, by which we live.¹

I. IN OUR TIME

Reviewing Hemingway's *in our time* (1924), Edmund Wilson singled out the style of its "dry compressed little vignettes" for special praise: the "cool objective manner" of the rendering constituted "a harrowing record of the barbarities of the period in which we live" (*Shores* 120). When Hem-

¹ The most interesting example of an autobiography that experiments with a structural presentation of the relation between self and history would be *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975), by Georges Perec, which alternates between two narratives, one autobiographical, the other a nightmarish fiction that probes the horrors of the Third Reich and the Holocaust. For a study of the structural effects produced by the intercutting of these two narratives, see

ingway revised the book, retitled in uppercase as *In Our Time* (1925), he added to the original vignettes a series of fourteen stories, seven of which featured a semi-autobiographical character named Nick Adams. The incorporation of the stories into the matrix of the vignettes registers a new level of complexity in Hemingway's vision of his world, a complexity that is all the more surprising when one considers the slenderness of the volume and the studied simplicity of its prose. Writing to Wilson, Hemingway described his conception of the collection as follows:

Finished the book of 14 stories with a chapter on *In Our Time* between each story—that is the way they were meant to go—to give the picture of the whole between examining it in detail. Like looking with your eyes at something, say a passing coast line, and then looking at it with 15X binoculars. Or rather, maybe, looking at it and then going in and living in it—and then coming out and looking at it again. (Quoted in Wilson, *Shores* 122–23)

Hemingway's observations to Wilson capture the counterpoint that is the central structural effect of reading the 1925 version of *In Our Time*. Each vignette, identified now as a "chapter" in a numbered sequence and printed in italic type, is followed by a titled story in roman type. The opening "chapters," which concern a war being fought on various fronts in Europe, alternate with a series of stories set in Michigan concerning the childhood, adolescence, and young manhood of Nick Adams. In a first reading the cumulative effect of the movement back and forth between Europe and America, between italic and roman type, is one of contrast and disjunction. The steady rhythm of the alternation between these areas of experience implies a strictly discrete unfolding of two parallel streams of event, that of public history on the one hand and that of private life on the other. The juxtaposition of vignette and story may imply the possibility of connection, and the literal battles of the one realm may seem metaphorically linked to the physical and psychological violence of the other. So far, however, in the early part of the book up through "Chapter V" and "The Battler," the two sets of narrative elements seem to function autonomously, developing along quite separate lines that show no signs of converging.

Magné. One of the boldest experiments with rendering the relation between self and history in terms of narrative structure in a novel is the *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930–1936) of John Dos Passos, which combines traditional narrative with capsule biographies, "Newsreels," and autobiographical units entitled "The Camera Eye."

Thus, when Nick Adams, whose coming-of-age we have been following in the five opening stories, suddenly surfaces in the italic space of “Chapter VI” as a combatant in the war in Italy, the impact of his wound in the spine and of the “separate peace” he would make with history comes with an added shock: the two parallel streams of event, public and private, previously distinct, suddenly intersect in this vignette, making this moment of the wound and the movement of disengagement that it triggers the affective center of the book. The circumstances of the episode, the pairing of the wound with the desire to conclude “a separate peace,” figure the tension that Hemingway explores in the structure of the whole collection, the tension between the individual’s wish for freedom from history and the branding of the individual by history marked in the wound. Following this pivotal, crossover event in “Chapter VI,” the worlds of story and vignette, of public and private life, disengage for the rest of the collection, resuming once more a rhythm of steady alternation and counterpoint in Hemingway’s account of the chaos and disaffection of the postwar years.² The lesson of this book’s structure is that private and public event equally belong to the fabric of life “in our time,” for the convention by which we deem the two to be separate and distinct is just that, a convention, and the notion of a “point of intersection” between them is equally a fiction, although it sometimes takes a war to make us recognize the illusion that would preserve the life of the individual from the determining force of history.

II. “WE ARE *IN* HISTORY AS WE ARE *IN* THE WORLD”

The structure of *In Our Time*, with its counterpoint of story and vignette, may serve as a figure for the two parallel streams of referential fact, biographical and historical, that are presumed to ground the truth of a life in autobiography. The connection between autobiography and history is, if anything, even more venerable in the history of the genre than the connection between autobiography and biography, which I explored in chapter 2. The notion that an account of an individual’s life can provide access to history has always been a major assumption behind much of the literature of autobiography, and it is commonly invoked in any attempt to con-

² Nick Adams may possibly be the subject of “Chapter VII,” but he is not named in this vignette.

struct a taxonomy of the genre. In contrast to *autobiography*, which has emerged since the beginning of the nineteenth century as the umbrella term for self-life-writing, the *memoir* and the chronicle of deeds or *res gestae*, the dominant forms in the earlier history of the genre (with the notable exception of religious confessions), are defined precisely by their orientation toward a historical field of reference.³ In the *res gestae* and the memoir the individual is perceived, respectively, as the actor in or the witness to history.

Wilhelm Dilthey was the first to theorize the relation between autobiography and history.⁴ Dilthey's point of departure is grounded in the experience of the individual subject: "We are historical beings first, before we are observers [*Betrachter*] of history, and only because we are the former do we become the latter." And again: "The world is always there, and the individual not only observes it from the outside but is intertwined with it [*in sie verwebt*]" (quoted in Carr 4). Linking Dilthey's position with the concept of "historicity" developed by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, David Carr interprets these statements as follows: "To say that we are 'historical beings' and 'intertwined with history' is not merely to say that we are all *in* history as part of the historical process. It means that we are *in* history as we are *in* the world: it serves as the horizon and background for our everyday experience" (4). It is this radical stress on the individual as the site where history is experienced, transacted, and known that lies behind Dilthey's bold claim for autobiography as "the germinal cell of history" (quoted in Albert E. Stone 11).⁵

Historians, however, have largely resisted this view, granting autobiog-

³ Wayne Shumaker observes, "Since an interest in psychic individuality is more modern than an awareness that human lives differ widely in outward circumstances, it is not surprising that most early autobiographies are *res gestae*" (56). For the distinction between autobiography and memoir, see Lejeune, *L'Autobiographie en France* 15–23, and May 117–28; see Billson and Smith 163, for a valuable caveat on the instability of this distinction. For a witty update on the whole problem of generic classification in autobiography, see Olney, "Autobiography: An Anatomy and a Taxonomy."

⁴ See Albert E. Stone 10–11, and Spengemann 175–76. Carr's citation of Dilthey is drawn from *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, 5th ed., ed. B. Groethuysen (Stuttgart: B. Teubner, 1968), 277–78. Stone's citation of Dilthey is drawn from *Pattern and Meaning in History*, ed. H. Rickman (New York: Harper, 1960), 85–86.

⁵ Dilthey's belief in the agency of the individual as the central force in history was, apparently, conceptually uncompromising in the extreme, as Jacques Kornberg suggests when he stresses that for Dilthey there are no "superpersonal realities" (314) that shape the individuality of individual consciousness: in Dilthey's practice, historical units that transcend the individual "are actually heuristic devices" and "not real existences" (315).

raphy a peripheral place at best in the study of history when not discrediting its claims to referential truth altogether. Summarizing the professional historian's distrust of autobiography, Kenneth D. Barkin comments, "It is one of the most cherished axioms of the historical guild that consciously created documents, particularly autobiographies, are inherently suspect and are to be treated with bold skepticism" (83). Until quite recently, autobiography studies has tended toward a similar devaluation of the historical dimension of autobiography. Surveying the literature in 1980, William C. Spengemann wrote, "One can discern in the criticism written over the past fifty years or so a shift of emphasis from the biographical and historical facts recorded in autobiography, to the psychological states expressed in the text, to the workings of the text itself" (187). I have already discussed in chapter 2 the consequences of the shift from a documentary view of autobiography as a record of referential fact to a performative view of autobiography centered on the act of composition: the reality of the past seemed quite simply to vaporize. And when poststructuralism had done its work, deconstructing the illusion of reference in language, what remained of autobiography was neither self nor history but, as Paul Jay would have it, an attenuated afterlife of the subject as a "being in the text."

Seeking to reverse the dissociation of autobiography from history observed by Barkin and Spengemann, Philip Dodd joins Janet Varner Gunn and Michael Mundhenk in calling for a critical practice that would display "the nature of autobiography's entry into history" ("Criticism" 11).⁶ Dodd's call is certainly timely, for the conception of "modern autobiography" most widely accepted at the present time derives from Rousseau's *Confessions*. Critics have privileged subjectivity, and they have largely discounted the referential status of autobiographical texts. A telltale sign of this predisposition to the fictive and the confessional is the rarity of commentary devoted to the memoir.⁷ Some students of autobiography, however, never lost sight of the importance of the connection between autobiography and history. I am thinking of the work of James M. Cox (*Recovering*), Philippe Lejeune ("Autobiography and Social History"), and William L. Andrews.⁸ It is also true that in recent years historians have

⁶ Dodd, Gunn, and Mundhenk attack poststructuralism, especially deconstruction, for its reduction of self and culture to a matter of textuality. See also Paul Smith for an elaborate critique of the poststructuralist concept of the subject.

⁷ For an important and relatively recent commentary on the memoir, see Hart, "History."

⁸ For an account of Lejeune's research concerning the historical dimension of autobiography, see Eakin, "Foreword" xix–xxiii.

turned increasingly to autobiography as an invaluable resource in studying the life of the ordinary person, in reconstructing *mentalités*.⁹

If, as Barkin suggests, historians have been put off by the “consciously constructed” nature of autobiographical documents, that is doubtless a sign of the inveterate positivistic cast of so much professional history, a wish for unmediated access to historical “fact.” Responding to these tendencies, Barkin advocates following the example of literary scholars who study “style and structure as well as content,” for analysis of these formal aspects of autobiography has the potential to reveal a great deal about the autobiographer’s “basic conceptual categories”: “The study of a representative series of works ought to illuminate the manner in which a society or subculture makes sense of the world around it” (93). Barkin identifies Georges Gusdorf (“Conditions”) and James Olney (*Metaphors*) as exemplars of this broadly anthropological perspective on autobiography, and to them I would add Philippe Lejeune and Hayden White. As we have seen in chapter 3, Lejeune and White approach autobiography as historians of discourse: autobiographies are not merely sources of fact; they *are* facts in and of themselves. White and Lejeune argue that models of self and life story are never invented out of whole cloth, despite the myth of authority and autonomy characteristically engendered by the practice of life writing; they are derived instead from the repertoire of models of life and identity supplied by culture.

There is a distinct passivity, however, in the conception of the autobiographer implied by this construction of the relation between the autobiographical act and the culture in which it is performed, a passivity of a sort that has led poststructuralists, for example, to speak of the illusion of authorship. Without discounting culture’s role in shaping the autobiographer’s sense of self and life story, which I presented in chapter 3, I am concerned in this chapter, instead, with autobiographies that feature the active, conscious construction of the point of intersection between the individual’s life and the larger movement of history of which it is a part. I shall argue that in these cases, autobiography not only records an imaginative coming-to-terms with history, it functions itself as the instrument of this negotiation.

To formulate my objectives in this way is to create difficulties for the traditional historian, who will be likely to resist on two counts the claims I make for the historical value of the variety of autobiography I shall be presenting here. First, my concern with the agency of the imagination and

⁹ See Barkin, e.g., 86–87.

the presence, consequently, of fiction in these texts will seem to discredit their documentary potential as sources of referential fact. Second, my interest in the individual's constructed relation to history will seem irrelevant to those who conceive of history exclusively in terms of collective experience.¹⁰

I am not suggesting a model of history based on nineteenth-century theories of individualism on the order of Carlyle and Dilthey, but rather, following Carr, I am prepared to accept a phenomenological grounding of the entire enterprise of history in the individual's experience of "historicity." Carr argues that self is constituted in terms of its relation to history: "What the individual *is* is thus a function of his or her place in a historical setting. . . . It means that the individual's self-understanding of himself passes through history" (Carr 115). In this sense, then, the life of any individual is always shaped by the experiential reality of living in history. If this relation to history is indeed intrinsic to self-definition, it remains nevertheless an influence of which many, maybe most, autobiographers seem scarcely conscious; in the autobiographies I have chosen to discuss in the rest of this chapter, however, it is recognized and developed as a central theme. Barkin reports the predisposition of historians to bracket the "consciously created" dimension of autobiography in the interest of extracting some pure ore of documentary fact. By contrast, I want to expand our sense of the modes of historical reference in autobiography, redirecting attention to a fact of an equally interesting kind—equally interesting, that is, if we are prepared to ask, along with certain autobiographers turned historians, what it means to be living in history.

III. HENRY ADAMS ON THE ARA COELI STEPS

What does it mean to live one's life in history? Even to ask such a question is to suggest the comparative novelty of the kind of autobiography that seeks to answer it. *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907) is probably the first autobiography to make the relation between an individual life and history its presiding theme, and it remains the most self-conscious attempt to provide a theory for this kind of life story.¹¹ In the "Editor's Preface" to the

¹⁰ See Dodd, e.g., "History."

¹¹ Commenting on Adams's familiarity with the principal British nineteenth-century autobiographers of his period, Ernest Samuels observes that "none of them had systematically imposed upon their personal experience a philosophic and historical thesis like his" (Adams 542 n. 17).

Education, which Adams wrote himself, he formulates his conception of his autobiographical project as follows:

“Any schoolboy could see that man as a force must be measured by motion from a fixed point. Psychology helped here by suggesting a unit—the point of history when man held the highest idea of himself as a unit in a unified universe. Eight or ten years of study had led Adams to think he might use the century 1150–1250, expressed in Amiens Cathedral and the Works of Thomas Aquinas, as the unit from which he might measure motion down to his own time, without assuming anything as true or untrue, except relation. The movement might be studied at once in philosophy and mechanics. Setting himself to the task, he began a volume which he mentally knew as ‘Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres: a Study of Thirteenth-Century Unity.’ From that point he proposed to fix a position for himself, which he could label: ‘The Education of Henry Adams: a Study of Twentieth-Century Multiplicity.’ With the help of these two points of relation, he hoped to project his lines forward and backward indefinitely, subject to correction from anyone who should know better.” (xxvii)¹²

The autobiography is presented as part of a scientific experiment, founded on the premise that “man as a force must be measured by motion from a fixed point.” By invoking philosophy and mechanics as twin sanctions for his inquiry, Adams identifies the distinctive character of his attempt to bring analytical rigor to the history of consciousness. Thus, if states of mind (man’s shifting “idea of himself”) can be quantified into measurable “units” of historical experience, then Adams can plot man’s existence as a “force” on the graph of history.

It would be hard to improve on Adams’s strategy for dramatizing the novelty of both his situation and his response to it, for the answers to his questions in the age of “Twentieth-Century Multiplicity” were assumed as revealed truth in the age of “Thirteenth-Century Unity.” I do not propose to reconstruct in detail the origins of the kind of autobiography I see Adams as inaugurating in the *Education* but rather to identify the enabling conditions that account for its development in our time. We could just as easily set the *Education* against the “lives” of any of Adams’s New England

¹² In his indispensable edition of the *Education*, Ernest Samuels cautions that “this explanation is a rationalization of the process of composition” (Adams 540), attributing to the pair of books a clarity of informing intention that Adams achieved only gradually as he wrote the autobiography.

predecessors—I am thinking of Thomas Shepard, Cotton Mather, and Jonathan Edwards—and the point would be the same. For the Puritans, the meaning of the individual's life or the community's history is set forth once and for all in the Bible. Whereas Adams pictures his quest as interminable, projecting "his lines forward and backward indefinitely," the Puritan historian of himself or his people sees all lines converge on the preordained paradigms of Christian history. Between these two positions, between the faith and certitude of "Thirteenth-Century Unity" and the doubt and drift of "Twentieth-Century Multiplicity," lie two major and interrelated cultural shifts: a decline of belief in Providential history, and a new sense of the historicity of the individual life.

Peter Brooks connects these two developments when he argues that the "new importance" of "the life-history of societies, institutions, and individuals" in the post-Enlightenment West is a consequence of "the decline in belief in a sacred masterplot," "in a Providential history which subsumed all the errant individual human histories to some justified, if distant, end" (74). The link between autobiography and history is intimate and profound, as Georges Gusdorf recognizes when he posits a historical perspective as the *sine qua non* for the very existence of the genre: "The man who takes the trouble to tell of himself knows that the present differs from the past and that it will not be repeated in the future" (30).¹³ Karl J. Weintraub has argued, however, that a truly historical perspective on the life of the individual emerged only gradually in the two hundred years that stretch between Montaigne and Rousseau. Weintraub associates the critical phase of this phenomenon with the Enlightenment: what he traces in a series of eighteenth-century autobiographies are signs of "the effective interplay of a self and its world, the very process in which the conception of historical *development* rests" ("Autobiography" 832). Although Vico, for example, according to Weintraub, urges that "man be understood as a historically evolving being" (*Value* 278), his account of his own life is governed by what Weintraub describes as "a historical vision of ideas unfolding according to inner necessities," giving his narrative "a strangely 'atemporal' aspect" (*Value* 276). Gibbon, by contrast, "saw his developed character as a consequence and an expression of his circumstances, of his world, and the age in which he lived" (*Value* 289). This "strong shift to-

¹³ This proposition is one of the central premises of Karl J. Weintraub's reconstruction of the history of autobiography in *The Value of the Individual*. Weintraub writes, "The views men have of their collective existence as peoples, nations, societies, or cultures are intrinsically related to their views of individual existence" (261).

ward the historicized vision of life" (*Value* 290) culminates in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*. Weintraub recognizes Goethe as the first autobiographer to insist "that he and his life would have been something entirely different had he been born ten years to either side of 1749" ("Autobiography" 833).

The project informing *The Education of Henry Adams* represents an even later development of the link between autobiography and history traced by Brooks, Gusdorf, and Weintraub. When Gibbon undertakes to write his autobiography, he may well bring to bear a historical perspective on "the simple transactions of a private and literary life" (1), but his memoirs draw no connection between his own story and the larger movement of history.¹⁴ The principal historian of his age reports the origins of his life work as follows: "It was at Rome, on the 15th of October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing Vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind" (85). Set into a paragraph devoted to "the use of foreign travel," this well-known sentence, with its picturesque evocation of the musing traveler and his future project, represents the sum of what Gibbon has to say about the relation between his own life and history. Gibbon's point is quite simple and didactic: his six-volume *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* illustrates one of "the benefits of foreign travel" that accrue to the properly qualified traveler. Later, when Gibbon commemorates the completion of his project, on "the night, of the 27th of June, 1787, between the hours of eleven and twelve, . . . in a summer-house in my garden" (114), the specificity, serenity, and finality of this moment of closure confirm the sense of achieved mastery over history.

Henry Adams uses the example of Gibbon and his grand project to dramatize both the urgency and the impossibility of coming to terms with history. In the first of the series of allusions to Gibbon that punctuate the story of his education, the autobiographer situates the young Henry Adams in Rome in 1860, seated on the steps of the Church of Santa Maria di Ara Coeli. Quoting the passage from Gibbon's autobiography concerning the origin of his *History* and assuming his stance "musing . . . amidst the ruins of the Capitol," Adams contemplates the double failure of the "two great experiments of Western civilization" and of the historians from Tacitus to Gibbon who have sought to understand it. In Gibbon's autobiography, this twilight musing in Rome serves as a comfortable exercise in

¹⁴ Roger J. Porter ("Gibbon's Autobiography") notes parallels between the large-scale plot of decay and decline in Gibbon's *History* and a similar patterning in the autobiography.

the moral picturesque. In the *Education*, the assurance of Gibbon's posture, the self-congratulatory pose of the exemplary well-educated traveler, are exchanged for the skepticism and self-doubt of young Adams as ignorant "tourist." Lining up Tacitus, Michelangelo, and Gibbon, Adams the autobiographer cuts them down to size in the diminishing perspective that is the *Education's* hallmark: "None of them could say very much more than the tourist, who went on repeating to himself the eternal question:—Why! Why!! Why!!!—as his neighbor, the blind beggar, might do, sitting next to him on the church steps" (92). Deployed again and again—in Rome in 1865 and 1868, in Chicago in 1893, in Troyes in 1904—the brooding figure on the Ara Coeli steps becomes a symbol of the historian's failure to understand history: "Martyrs, murderers, Caesars, saints and assassins— . . . chaos of time, place, morals, forces and motive—gave him vertigo. Had one sat all one's life on the steps of Ara Coeli for this?" (471). Adams's well-known confrontation with the dynamo, moreover, is but the most familiar of the numerous variants of the Ara Coeli figure in the text.

Recoiling from the chaos of observed events and the breakdown of the models that would order them, Adams refuses defeat, appealing as a last resort to the resources of his own mind to generate a saving principle of order: "Every man with self-respect enough to become effective, if only as a machine, has had to account to himself for himself somehow, and to invent a formula of his own for his universe, if the standard formulas failed" (472). At this turning point in his struggle with history, a chastened Adams exchanges Gibbon's pretense of mastery for a more reduced and relative aim:

One sought no absolute truth. One sought only a spool on which to wind the thread of history without breaking it. Among indefinite possible orbits, one sought the orbit which would best satisfy the observed movement of the runaway star Groombridge, 1838, commonly called Henry Adams. As term of a nineteenth-century education, one sought a common factor for certain definite historical fractions. Any schoolboy could work out the problem if he were given the right to state it in his own terms. (472–73)

The precariousness of this last-ditch maneuver is suggested here by the anarchic force lurking within these images of order and stability: the fixity of the observer's stance on the Ara Coeli steps shows as an illusion, the mastery of history as a piece of schoolboy bravado; winding thread on a spool is as easy as discovering the orbit of a runaway star.

The odds against the schoolboy are astronomical, as Adams never tires of reminding us, for the human mind partakes of the very chaos of experience it seeks to understand. Thus the historian's stance vis-à-vis the intractable, law-defying complexities of the universe resembles that of consciousness itself in the face of the psyche's "sub-conscious chaos" (433): "an acrobat, with a dwarf on his back, crossing a chasm on a slack-rope, and commonly breaking his neck" (434). The pessimism of this vision notwithstanding, the historian has no other recourse than to "reduce all these forces to a common value, . . . that of their attraction on his own mind" (384), for the upshot of his study of history permits no other conclusion. Adams never abandons his conception of history as "a relation of sequence," but by 1900 revolutionary advances in scientific discovery—of radiation and energy—explode the certainties of "the standard formulas" for history's form and content one by one: "Satisfied that the sequence of men led to nothing and that the sequence of their society could lead no further, while the mere sequence of time was artificial, and the sequence of thought was chaos, he turned at last to the sequence of force" (382).

No modern autobiography, with the possible exception of Sartre's *The Words*, is more systematically governed by a thesis than *The Education of Henry Adams*.¹⁵ I have already quoted the passage from the "Editor's Preface" in which Adams announces his program for the *Education* and *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, and in the author's "Preface" he articulates its implications for his conception of himself:

The young man himself, the subject of education, is a certain form of energy; the object to be gained is economy of his force; the training is partly the clearing away of obstacles, partly the direct application of effort. . . . The manikin, therefore, has the same value as any other geometrical figure of three or more dimensions, which is used for the study of relation. (xxx)

It is, of course, possible to read the *Education* against the grain, pressing it to yield the outlines of a confession on the order of Rousseau's. What is striking, however, is how many of the autobiography's leading features, including its unconventional use of the third person and its omission of twenty years of the author's life, fall into place if we accept Adams's stated intention to use the story of his life not for the revelation of himself

¹⁵ See Lejeune, "The Order of Narrative," for an elaborate analysis designed to prove that the structure of Sartre's autobiography is that of a philosophical argument.

as a person but rather for “the study of relation” between the human mind and history.

Adams quotes Rousseau’s preface to the *Confessions* in order expressly to repudiate any display of the “Ego,” and his choice of the third person for his narrative squares with his programmatic depersonalization of himself in the text: “Henry Adams,” defined as “a certain form of energy,” becomes the site of presumably measurable reactions to force. Again, Rousseau’s resolute baring of the breast would seem to require total disclosure of a life story, whereas Adams deletes the twenty years that include his career as a historian and the tragic suicide of his wife. These twenty years, moreover, are defined precisely by Adams as the span of his life proper: in “Failure (1871)” he writes that “Henry Adams’s education, at his entry into life, stopped, and his life began” (308); when the narrative resumes in the following chapter, “Twenty Years After (1892),” the autobiographer observes that “life was complete in 1890” (316). The second half of the book records the afterlife of the peripetetic “manikin.” If we accept Lejeune’s definition of autobiography as identifying normative expectations of the genre—“retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (“Autobiographical Pact” 4)—the *Education* is clearly an antiautobiography. Adams the historian suffers the same reduction as Adams the person, for by omitting any mention of his monumental nine-volume *History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison* (1889–1891), Adams places his own achievement under the same melancholy erasure as that of his predecessors from Tacitus to Gibbon.

The *Education*, then, is neither history nor personal history but a mixed mode: history as it impinges on the mind of the individual, personal history insofar as it is given over to Ara-Coeli-like encounters with the forces of history: “The church of Ara Coeli seemed more and more to draw all the threads of thought to a centre, for every new journey led back to its steps” (367). Thus the twenty-year gap in the record, canceling both history and personal history, becomes instead the narrative’s most striking symbol of the relation between the two, of the accelerating pace of change that is its dominant theme, for Adams insists throughout on the mismatch between his “eighteenth-century” training and the disorienting reality of the twentieth-century multiverse. His evocation of his return to London in 1865 after the second of his visits to the Ara Coeli steps strikes the note of fragmentation and dislocation that invariably characterizes his “study

of relation": "He saw before him a world so changed as to be beyond connection with the past. His identity, if one could call a bundle of disconnected memories an identity, seemed to remain; but his life was once more broken into separate pieces" (209). This Humean testimony of experience disconfirms the wholeness of self and life story that constitutes the very core of traditional autobiography's sustaining myth. Paradoxically, it is the very anachronism of "Henry Adams" and the rupture of his story that make him up to date. In this sense, the "Henry Adams" of the *Education* leads perhaps the first modernist and even postmodernist life; he is the prototype for T. S. Eliot's Gerontion, for Thomas Pynchon's Oedipa Maas. We can say of him, "*Mon semblable—mon frère.*"

Failure, fragmentation, chaos—these may well be the terms the narrator uses to describe the experience of "Henry Adams," but they do not adequately describe the experience of reading the *Education*. To be sure, we recall "Henry Adams" shuttling back and forth between Europe and America, arming himself with the latest theories, positioning himself as best he can in order to understand the latest developments of contemporary actuality, and then, always and finally, failing in the attempt. Although no stable relation is ever achieved, however, the making of relation is not only constantly transacted in the text, it is the most characteristic, identity-conferring activity of the protagonist. The dogged determination to keep on dealing with force emerges, moreover, as the central metaphor for the autobiographical act, as in this self-portrait of Adams at sixty-five at the end of chapter 31:

As far as one ventured to interpret actual science, the mind had thus far adjusted itself by an infinite series of infinitely delicate adjustments forced on it by the infinite motion of an infinite chaos of motion; dragged at one moment into the unknowable and unthinkable, then trying to scramble back within its senses and to bar the chaos out, but always assimilating bits of it, until at last, in 1900, a new avalanche of unknown forces had fallen on it, which required new mental powers to control. (460–61)

The complex give-and-take between "mind" and "motion," now resistance, now surrender, "barring out" yet "always assimilating"; the struggle for control, being "dragged into" and then "scrambling back"—all these movements draw attention to the play of mind that structures not only the experience of chaos but the prose in which it is recorded. The polished, lapidary style of the *Education*, after all, is anything but chaotic—the syntax is tight and balanced, and the statements are judi-

ciously distilled, pithy and epigrammatic. Despite Adams's deliberate suppression of self and his bold mutilation of his life story, the narrative voice provides an unbroken display of mind that belies the fracture of experience.

But these sense-making, order-conferring qualities of voice and style are sorely tested in the trials of "Henry Adams," who characteristically reads the struggle between theory and reality to a point of rupture. Charles Lyell's theory of geological evolution, for example, founders for "Adams" on the fact of the glacial epoch, which "looked like a chasm between him and a uniformitarian world" (227); instead of solid evidence for Darwin's theory of natural selection, "Adams" finds only an "eternal void" (230) in the fossil record. The laws of his own "dynamic" theory of history, presented in one of the final chapters of the book, fare no better, for they fail to account for the anomalous collapse of the Roman Empire in A.D. 305: "There it was that Adams broke down on the steps of Ara Coeli, his path blocked by the scandalous failure of civilization at the moment it had achieved complete success" (477). The autobiographer brings the lengthening chain of metaphors of rupture and discontinuity in the narrative to a climax in "Adams"'s encounter with the dynamo: "Between the dynamo in the gallery of machines and the engine-house outside, the break of continuity amounted to abysmal fracture for a historian's objects" (381). The impact of the novel electrical force is shattering: "He found himself lying in the Gallery of Machines at the Great Exposition of 1900, with his historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new" (382).

When the going gets tough for the historian, the autobiographer's recourse is to symbol and metaphor.¹⁶ Thus, with science "doubling or quadrupling its complexities every ten years," "Henry Adams" was doomed to break his neck. The autobiographer, however, empowered by metaphor, steps in and projects a new model American to take his place, a godlike "man-meteorite" (489), who by the year 2000 "would know how to control unlimited power" (496). The new universe of force requires a

¹⁶ Thomas Cooley and James M. Cox are two of the small group of commentators who have discussed the *Education* as an autobiography, and both draw attention to the importance of metaphor in the text. Cooley notes Adams's use of a metaphor of drift to explain the puzzling break he observes in historical sequence (37–39). Cox's brilliant analysis of *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, the *Education*, and the relation between them ("Learning" 144–67) is doubly metaphoric, for he appropriates Adams's metaphors of geodetic triangulation and of the magnetic field of the dynamo to generate a "dynamic" meta-metaphor for Adams's vision of history.

new mind to measure it, and in the *Education's* penultimate chapter Adams images this “new centre” as a comet that “drops from space, in a straight line, at the regular acceleration of speed, directly into the sun, and after wheeling sharply about it, in heat that ought to dissipate any known substance, turns back unharmed, in defiance of law, by the path on which it came” (489). In this antitranscendental fantasy of transcendence, in which mind as matter shakes off its mortal coil as it enters a law-defying orbit around the sun, Adams plots the path of “the runaway star Groombridge, 1838, commonly called Henry Adams” after all. In order to close the evolutionary gap between “Henry Adams” and “the new American” of the year 2000, the autobiographer observes that the mind “would need to jump” (498).

To write the *Education* was to make that “jump” from “manikin” to “man-meteorite.” The narrative records the breakdown of the old formulas and a constant assaying of new ones, and the creation of the narrative itself and its attendant metaphors enacts this process of formulation. Once formulated, the narrative is to serve the formula maker as a base from which to project lines—of life, of force, of history—forward and backward in an endless act of formulation. The only possible closure would be either the death of the universe, prey to the inexorable law of entropy, or the death of the formulator, who presents himself as dead and his project as posthumous in spirit anyhow. It would be impossible to resolve the tension that runs like a fault line or rift between the possibilities of order and chaos in Adams’s reading of the relation between mind and history, for the destruction of “Henry Adams” undercuts the promise of the “new American” who is to be his successor. Self, history, and personal history prove to be hopelessly obsolete categories in this peculiar autobiography, yet the autobiography survives as a stubborn testimony that “the forces would continue to educate, and the mind would continue to react” (497).

IV. THE SHAPE OF A LIFE AND
THE SHAPE OF A TIME:
F. SCOTT FITZGERALD AND ALFRED KAZIN

I want to look briefly at two other autobiographies—by F. Scott Fitzgerald and Alfred Kazin—as a corrective to the use I have made of Henry Adams. Granted that the *Education* both inaugurates and theorizes the variety of autobiography I am concerned with here, it is nevertheless not a representative work of this kind in one key respect: where Fitzgerald,

Kazin, and the other autobiographers I shall discuss speak of self, of personality, of identity, Adams speaks exclusively of mind. In their narratives biography and history are more nearly equal players; in Adams's, by contrast, biography is strictly subordinate to the historian's purposes, as we have seen. What makes Adams out of phase with his successors is that, at least in narrative terms, he begins with a radical devaluation of the concept of the self that those to come would only reach—if at all—as the culmination of a life centered on the self. Fitzgerald is a case in point.

To begin with, Fitzgerald and Adams stake out antithetical positions on the self: the decentered center of the *Education* is not the "Ego" celebrated by Rousseau but the "manikin," while Fitzgerald traces the origins of his own sad story of crack-up to a quintessentially romantic brand of "Cartesianism": "I felt—therefore I was" (80), he confesses with all the grandiloquence of Jean-Jacques. Fitzgerald's conception of history is equally *self-centered*, as the first of the autobiographical sketches he wrote in the 1930s makes clear. In "Echoes of the Jazz Age" (dated November 1931) he endows the decade of the twenties with the attributes of the human life cycle: "The ten-year period that, as if reluctant to die outmoded in its bed, leaped to a spectacular death in October, 1929, began about the time of the May Day riots in 1919" (13). For Fitzgerald, the period is a person—a person, moreover, very like himself: its youth peaks early, in 1922; it proceeds to a sudden middle age ("one day in 1926 we looked down and found we had flabby arms and a fat pot and couldn't say boop-boop-a-doop to a Sicilian"), and it sinks in 1927, 1928, and 1929 into "widespread neurosis" (19), violence, and early death.

The outline of the plot in Fitzgerald's work is invariably the same, whether he is dealing with history, with the lives of his characters, or with himself: a luminous early peak followed by decline and fall, "Early Success" followed by "The Crack-Up." Thus "My Lost City," dated July 1932, which relates Fitzgerald's life in the 1920s, tells the same story as "Echoes of the Jazz Age"; history and biography are interchangeable, and Fitzgerald himself is the link. Like the Jazz Age, his career begins early, in 1919, with Fitzgerald cast as the outsider, a failure, poor and unhappy in love; again, like the decade, the young writer achieves a sudden success six months later with the publication of *This Side of Paradise* (1920); once again, like the decade, the rest is a tale of disintegration and premature collapse.

In Fitzgerald's autobiographical sketches, biography and history are identically plotted, and his own birth in 1895, just a few years before the start of the century, doubtless contributed to this identification between

the author and his time—they were always about the same age, with Fitzgerald always wearing out a bit faster. Fitzgerald was convinced, moreover, that his role as a representative figure had been foisted on him by the period, however willingly he may have consented and conspired in his transformation into a mythic figure of the twenties. This is the burden of “My Lost City,” in which he emerges as the fourth in the series of his symbols of New York. The first three symbols of the city’s glamor include the ferryboat to Manhattan, which stood for “triumph,” the showgirl, who stood for “romance” (23), and the elegant and intellectual Edmund Wilson, who stood for “the Metropolitan spirit” (24). After the overnight success of Fitzgerald’s first novel, he joins this series of symbols, “adopted . . . as the arch type of what New York wanted” (26), “pushed into the position not only of spokesman for the time but of the typical product of that same moment” (27). Pursuing this understanding of the intimate relation between his own life and that of his time, the autobiographer could hold up the mirror to his own collapse in the three “Crack-Up” essays of 1936 and behold the collapse of the country: “I think that my happiness, or talent for self-delusion or what you will, was an exception. It was not the natural thing but the unnatural—unnatural as the Boom; and my recent experience parallels the wave of despair that swept the nation when the Boom was over” (84).

The identification between self and history is breathtakingly total, in polar contrast to the case of Henry Adams, who portrays himself as perpetually doomed to be out of sync with the events of his period. Adams sees himself as constrained to invent a unit of measurement in order to bridge the gulf between biography and history, whereas Fitzgerald, in his function as cultural symbol, embodies as it were the unit of measurement and performs its office in his living. Thus the events of private life are a matter of public actuality, as Fitzgerald suggests when, at the end of “My Lost City,” he playfully projects his future in the following headline (33):

MAN OF FIFTY RUNS AMUCK IN NEW YORK
Fitzgerald Feathered Many Love Nests Cutie Avers
Bumped Off By Outraged Gunman

The comparison between Adams and Fitzgerald can be played too easily to Fitzgerald’s disadvantage. To be sure, Fitzgerald’s extreme personalization of history can show as a facile and self-indulgent brand of anthropomorphism. Adams’s strategy is exactly the reverse, for he proposes to solve the riddle of history by depersonalizing the individual, transforming the human agent instead into a force in nature—“Henry Adams” as “run-

away star,” as “comet,” as “man-meteorite.” No match for the mandarin sophistication of the professional historian, the popular novelist was, after all, by his own admission an intellectual lightweight, for whom thought was a cumbersome process, like “the moving about of great secret trunks” (78).

For all these differences, however, there are surprising affinities between Adams and Fitzgerald. The opening premise of “The Crack-Up”—“Of course all life is a process of breaking down” (69)—resembles the historian’s fascination with the law of entropy.¹⁷ Again, Adams’s demonstration of the failure of all “the standard formulas” for history is matched by Fitzgerald’s retrospective deconstruction of the model of identity on which he had based his life, “the old dream of being an entire man in the Goethe-Byron-Shaw tradition” (84). In the aftermath of Crash and crash, Depression and depression, when Fitzgerald writes in “The Crack-Up” that “there was not an ‘I’ anymore” (79) but only “a cracked plate” (75), his experience of rupture and dislocation makes him the cousin of “Henry Adams” lying at the foot of the dynamo with “his historical neck broken.” Paradoxically, it is precisely in defeat that the old “formulas” work: Adams’s demotion of himself to the third-person “Henry Adams” and Fitzgerald’s reduction of himself to the “I”-less “I” of the “Crack-Up” essays testify to the truth of the individual’s embattled relation to the forces of his age. These antiselves are among the most powerful pieces of autobiographical mythmaking that we have.

Facing the demise of the culture’s received models for self and history, Fitzgerald and Adams—and Kazin, Arlen, and Hampl, too—make good the loss with metaphor; they fashion from autobiography a sustaining structure of relation. In this sense, Adams’s metaphor in the *Education* for the act of coming-to-terms with history, the recurring figure of the Ara Coeli steps, is more compelling finally than his formulation of a nomological model of history in the scientific laws of the final chapters. Adams himself seems to concede as much when he prefaces his presentation of the “law of acceleration” with the following observation: “Images are not arguments, rarely even lead to proof, but the mind craves them, and, of

¹⁷ It is worth mentioning that something of the skeptical pessimism of Adams’s vision of history may have been communicated to Fitzgerald indirectly through his contacts with Shane Leslie and Father Sigourney Webster Fay during his student days at Princeton. Robert Sklar identifies Leslie and Fay as “intimates” of Henry Adams, and he argues that Fitzgerald’s enthusiasm for Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (1926–1928) made an important contribution to the historical vision that informs *Tender Is the Night*. See Sklar 170 and 222–26.

late more than ever, the keenest experimenters find twenty images better than one, especially if contradictory; since the human mind has already learned to deal in contradictions” (489).

To solve the problem of formulating the individual’s relation to history, Fitzgerald invested in the notion of the representative character who lives out in his or her own story the story of a generation; this is his strategy in presenting the lives of Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Charlie Wales and Marion Peters in “Babylon Revisited” (1931), Dick Diver and Nicole Warren in *Tender Is the Night* (1934), as well as the “I” of the autobiographical sketches of the 1930s. Alfred Kazin’s point of departure is similar in the second volume of his autobiography, *Starting Out in the Thirties* (1962): an intimate correlation is assumed between the unfolding of life story and the unfolding of history itself. It is the tension between the youthful protagonist’s belief in this correspondence and the middle-aged autobiographer’s rejection of it that structures Kazin’s narrative in *Starting*.

The younger of these two Kazins believes that history promises to redeem his personal and cultural condition: “To be outside of society and to be Jewish was to be at the heart of things. History was preparing, in its Jewish victims and through them, some tremendous deliverance and revelation. I hugged my aloneness, our apartness, my parents’ poverty, as a sign of our call to create the future” (48). This faith of the self-styled “literary radical” from the Jewish ghetto of Brownsville in Brooklyn crystallizes in his desire to write a book that would manifest the convergence of his own story with the forces of history. Such a book would function both as an act of self-creation and as an instrument of social change, and the models Kazin proposed to himself reflected now the one purpose and now the other. James T. Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan* trilogy (1935) and especially Clifford Odets’s *Awake and Sing* (1935) persuaded him that an American art could grow from immigrant culture, that he could “write about the life I had always known” (80), while the revolutionary novels of André Malraux and Ignazio Silone spoke to him of “the necessity of some urgent, personal act of solidarity” (25). For the writer starting out in the thirties, the belief in the continuities between private experience and a larger social reality was fundamental.

The personal narrative of *Starting* reaches its climax in 1938 when Kazin’s quest for America passes into a phase of cultural idyll, a kind of urban pastoral in Brooklyn. Now for a brief time, in the flush of his early

work on *On Native Grounds* (1942), his history of American literature from 1890 to 1940, he achieved in his living a precious harmony between the life of the self and the life of the world. No longer alone, newly married and in love, intoxicated with the spirit of revolution, the literary radical felt a Whitmanesque power to connect the events of his private life with the currents of history. Thus he could formulate the purpose of *On Native Grounds* in the same terms he had used for *Man's Fate* (1934) and *Fontamara* (1934):

I was helping to direct a new impulse into the future. We were in revolution, prodigiously on the move again. . . . I wanted to see a radical slashing insurgency of spirit take over in everything, so that life would be purified and beautiful and everyone would live as Natasha and I lived in the radiance of cultural truth. (137)

“I,” “we,” “everyone,” “spirit,” “life,” “revolution,” “truth”—all fuse in the rosy wash of his idealism. History was his to do with as he would.

Against these youthful dreams of power an older Kazin, looking back, projects a darker vision of history recorded in the Moscow trials, in the Spanish Civil War, in the Nazi-Soviet pact. These are the events that cast a lengthening shadow of force and fate over Kazin’s revolutionary aims in these pages. *Starting* is the story of a young man’s entry into the world counterpointed against the disintegration of the world he was entering, for the future of *On Native Grounds* was an illusion. Even as he was writing the book in Provincetown in the summer of 1940, pushing to a conclusion the work that would make his name, its spiritual premises were being sacked by history. In the final chapter, autobiographical hindsight interprets his stance on the left as suddenly obsolete, while Mary McCarthy is portrayed as the prototype of the new literary radical without any idealism whatsoever. The revolutionary faith in “the great transformation” (158) to be brought about by heroic writers working in tune with the spirit of the age was the greatest single casualty of the war.

The conflict between the redemptive and the deterministic conceptions of history played out in Kazin’s story ends with the respective climaxes, the publication of *On Native Grounds* and the Holocaust, occurring offstage. The narrative proper, breaking off in 1940, is followed by a brief epilogue that situates Kazin in a newsreel theater in London at the end of the war, watching “the first films of newly liberated Belsen” (166). In 1936 the newsreel form had expressed Kazin’s exhilarating sense of connection with a beneficent dialectic of historical progress:

The daily onrush of events fitted so easily into a general pattern of meaning, seemingly supplied by the age itself, that every day was like a smoothly rushing movie of the time—and I loved newsreels, the documentary novels of Dos Passos with their own newsreels, documentary movies, especially now that in tribute to the emergency of the times there were movie houses in Times Square that showed nothing but newsreels. I was as excited by history as if it were a newsreel, and I saw history in every newsreel, my love and hatred of the historical actors rising to the music on the sound track like a swimmer to the surf. (86–87)

This cozy, romanticized, domesticated version of history as popular art, the rush of time neatly packaged in serial installments and received with all the gush of a soap opera, is obliterated by the war. By 1945, the enormities of the historical record had annihilated the power of any art to confer on them a human order. As Kazin watched the British Army bulldozers preparing a mass grave at Belsen for “an enormous pile of bodies, piled up like cordwood” (166), and listened to the people around cough and even laugh in embarrassment, his alienation from the audience and that of both together from history was overwhelming. Literary radicalism was dead, and with it the belief that the events of one’s personal life and the events of the world could converge in a revolutionary experience of solidarity.

In the first volume of his autobiography, *A Walker in the City* (1951), Kazin celebrated his youthful belief in the possibility of making connections between private and public experience, between the self and history. With *Starting Out in the Thirties*, however, Kazin disconfirms the redemptive possibilities of art even as he performs the work of autobiography, for the war definitively destroyed the young man’s dream of a charmed unfolding of personal and national time in an optimistic progress that would take the form of a book.

The formal elements of this narrative survive in *Starting* as an ironic ghost of Kazin’s dream. His unit of measurement for life story and history is the year; the narrative is divided into sections as follows: “Part One: 1934,” “Part Two: 1935,” “Part Three: 1936,” “Part Four: 1937,” “Part Five: 1938, 1939,” “Part Six: 1940,” “Epilogue: 1945.” Undercutting this deployment of chronology as the structure of a story, of the years as “parts” moving toward closure, of time as art, is the omission of the years of the war. Analogous to the twenty-year break in the *Education*, the gap serves as a structural marker of the rupture inflicted by the war, disconfirming the hope of any art to bring the chaos of history to heel. Like

Fitzgerald's Jazz Age, the period of Kazin's story is that of a decade, and its contours resemble Fitzgerald's plot of early hopes followed by disillusionment. The younger Kazin had believed that he could impose the bildungsroman pattern of his "start" in the thirties on history itself, while the older, autobiographical Kazin, looking back, erases this wishful shape for the time, writing "the age of Hitler" in its place.¹⁸

V. IDENTITY THROUGH HISTORY: MICHAEL ARLEN AND THE CRIMES OF THE FATHERS

Henry Adams makes the story of his life serve his search for a viable theory of history; in Michael Arlen's *Passage to Ararat* (1975) the priorities are reversed, with the autobiographer turning to history for answers to his quest for self-discovery: "At a particular time in my life, I set out on a voyage to discover for myself what it is to be Armenian" (3). Arlen had known as a schoolboy in England and America that he was somehow "different," and that to be "different," moreover, was "to be alien and unprotected" (7). His father had responded to the threat of difference by shedding his Armenian identity as Dikran Kouyoumjian to become Michael Arlen, the popular English novelist and best-selling author of *The Green Hat* (1924). But the shadow of difference and the fear that it engenders persist for his son. Nineteen years after his father's death, at the age of forty, Arlen is drawn into an exploration of his Armenian identity, an inquiry that takes the form of a physical, historical, and psychological journey centered on his relation to his father.¹⁹ The autobiographer undertakes a six-thousand-mile trip to Erevan, the capital of Soviet Armenia, and he reconstructs five thousand years of Armenian history in an effort to penetrate the mystery of origins he locates in his unresolved feelings for his father: "He was my father. But also I was afraid of him. Something always lay between us—something unspoken and (it seemed) unreachable. We were strangers" (12).

¹⁸ At the opening of "Part One: 1934," Kazin writes, "Every day and every week, for exactly eleven years more, Hitler was to be at the back of my mind like a bad dream" (11). This eleven-year period coincides exactly with the span of Kazin's story in *Starting*.

¹⁹ In fact, *Passage to Ararat* represents the second stage of this journey, which can be properly said to begin with the writing of an earlier memoir, *Exiles* (1970): "I . . . tried to make a kind of contact with him [his father], and with my mother, by writing about their life together and his career" (*Passage* 12). *Passage* transacts the business left unfinished by the earlier book.

Passage to Ararat, then, is a narrative about fathers and sons, and its basic outline is established in the opening pages in a tale of persecution by the Turks told to Arlen by an elderly Armenian in New York. The old man's father and brother were killed by the Turks; he and his mother and sisters had fled—a family hated and destroyed for no reason: “My father had committed no crime—can you believe it? He had done nothing wrong.” Arlen concedes the truth of the story, but he is repelled not so much by the Turks as by the Armenian victims. This is to be the pattern of Arlen's reaction to Armenian experience, and he seeks to distance himself from the figures of father and son that he discovers in the story. “This old man—this boy—had been made to run and hide and to become small in his fear. What kind of a son was that? What kind of father?” Arlen's reflex of repudiation is visceral; he recoils from the teller of the tale as though he were a leper—“I found I wished his arm away from mine, wished away his frail hand, his tears” (23). The unmotivated hatred and cruelty of the Turks; the fear, flight, and suffering of the Armenians—these are the themes that lurk at the heart of Armenian identity, and the old man's plaint, “My father had committed no crime,” functions as a leitmotiv in the rest of the narrative, signaling Arlen's conflicted response to the problem of affiliation that structures history and autobiography alike: “There seemed to be something terrible buried in that admission, although whether the negative electrical charge I felt lay in the statement or in me I couldn't tell. Only that I hated it” (25). The ambiguity here about the target of Arlen's hatred is crucial, and the lesson of his passage to Armenia is that the persecution which shaped his people shaped his father and himself as well.

Passage to Ararat presents both the history of the Armenian people and the history of Arlen's reading of that history; both of these narratives are stories of repression. Arlen recognizes instinctively that the clue to the mystery of his attitude toward the old man, toward Armenians, toward his father, toward the “buried” thing that repels him yet draws him on, resides in “the post-First World War literature on the massacres” (30). He prefers instead to begin by reading about “the faraway, historical past” (32), losing himself in the heroic exploits of the Armenian kings and warriors of antiquity. Arlen's confrontation with the matter of the Turks, however, cannot be indefinitely postponed: when the history of the Armenians shifts from the story of an independent nation to the story of a subject people, he is obliged to come to terms with a second model of Armenian identity, that of the despised trader: “When did the Armenians . . . stop being warriors and start being traders or rug merchants?” (102).

This is the transition that Arlen seeks to negotiate historically and psychologically in the rest of the book. When Sarkis, his Armenian guide in Erevan, recalls that this ethnic stereotype was the occasion for much teasing when he was a boy, Arlen finds himself speechless with rage, and he realizes that his “secret” is “that I have always hated being an Armenian” (101). Pursuing his analysis, Arlen recognizes that he hates his father because of his complicity in this denigration of Armenian identity, because he gave his son “the values of the Europeans and *they* despised the Armenians” (102). This is the “crime” of the Armenian father, this the betrayal of the Armenian son that Arlen intuitively grasped in the story of the old man’s suffering, and he invokes the old man’s refrain here—“My father had committed no crime”—to mark the connection. Arlen’s reading of his own story is confirmed the next day when Sarkis relates the great sorrow of his youth: he had been employed by an English businessman in Cairo, who had treated him like a son; when he fell in love with his employer’s daughter, however, the Englishman and his wife repudiated him as unworthy, an “‘Armenian Jew’” (108–9). In accepting the values of the Europeans, in taking on an English identity, Arlen’s father had made himself over in the image of Sarkis’s Mr. Peterson. This, at any rate, is the disconcerting logic informing these stories of fathers and sons.

For the rest of his stay in Erevan, Arlen focuses his inquiry on the history of the Turkish persecutions of the Armenians, beginning with the violent episodes recorded in *Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts, 1301–1480*, continuing with the large-scale massacres provoked by Abdul-Hamid II at the end of the nineteenth-century, and coming to a grisly climax with the Armenian genocide engineered by the Turks during the First World War. The motives of the Turks are of secondary importance to Arlen and remain largely inscrutable. He is concerned instead with the Armenian response:

“But what did the Armenians do?” I asked. . . .

“The Armenians did nothing,” said Sarkis. “They were the slaughtered.” (125–26)

Disturbed by the plaintive passivity of “the Armenian refrain” (126), by the absence of some cathartic retaliatory rage, and by his own lack of compassion for the victims, Arlen continues his research into the calamities of Armenian history. Gradually he pieces together a theory of collective repression to explain the condition of his people. He comes to see Sarkis, his father, William Saroyan—indeed all contemporary Armenians, even himself—as profoundly scarred by a “racial memory” (156) of the massacres:

“It was as if a particular poison had entered the system several generations back” (186). The peculiarity of the Armenian “trauma” (185) stems from the fact that the Turks had never accepted hatred from their victims, “had made no official admission of guilt or criminality toward the Armenians” (248). The rage of the victim, deprived of its object, turned inward, “beneath the skin” (189), “toward the self” (248).

Arlen’s reading of the psychology of the victim is yet more complex, however, for this “self-hatred” (248) is curiously compounded by the father-son relation. Arlen speculates that Armenian sons experienced the torture and murder of their fathers as a form of betrayal, the child intuitively hating the self-hatred of the parent and hating himself, moreover, for hating his father, and so on, the insidious cycle of racism perpetuating itself from father to son. The consequences for identity are disastrous, for Arlen traces the etiology of the Armenian “‘virus’” (186) to a fundamental principle of dehumanization, “the pain of being hated—hated unto death” (189): “Genocide not only killed its victims but dehumanized them, in the ultimate sense of ignoring the particulars that had made each one individual: save only the most basic and unindividual of all characteristics—the supposedly racial” (190).

Arlen understands this dehumanization of the victim specifically as a form of emasculation, something associated with the shameful identity of the merchant that had succeeded the heroic identity of the warrior. The “buried” subtext of this history of atrocities is castration; this is the unspeakable “crime” of the “Turkish” father, this is the “trauma” of the Armenian son who “had been made to run and hide and to become small in his fear.” Reflecting on Mr. Peterson’s cruel treatment of Sarkis, Arlen writes:

Later that night, I thought, I am a son, and how can a son turn against his father? How dreadful it is! But then what strange creatures are fathers: these household Abrahams, with their knives raised on high—knives that take on all manner of shapes and forms, that descend in all manner of arcs. I thought, My father never raised his knife over me. I am no Isaac, and he was no Abraham. (109–10)

The recognition of Oedipal hostility, the threat of mutilation, is immediately disowned, yet when Arlen’s father had disowned his Armenian identity and accepted the values of the Europeans, what was to distinguish him from Mr. Peterson and the Turks? The Armenian father as “Turk”? The workings of racism are never more deadly than when the victims are seen to share in their own oppression. Meditating on the genocide, Arlen writes:

In that one traumatic period, how many Armenian sons had felt betrayed by their fathers' absence—for what do children comprehend of reasons and explanations, what does a child understand in his soul of a father's nonappearance in a time of need?

Abraham, the father, threatened his son Isaac with a knife stroke—an act of demonic or holy passion, a *massacre*. . . . How does a son knowingly hate a father who sired him, protected him, and only then (and for the rest of the son's life) abandoned him as the result of his own murder? (247, my emphasis)

The disconcerting metaphor here is “massacre,” linking the Armenian fathers with the hated Turks. In the light of this terrible history, Armenian identity shows increasingly as an essentially unstable category marked by betrayal and repression. Arlen concludes: “I wondered how many Armenian sons had felt abandoned by their fathers: abandoned into nothing more than their Armenianness, that racial psyche of guilt, of anger without an object and always disguised as something else” (250).

Arlen tells his story with a disarming simplicity that belies the convoluted psychology it displays. His use of the metaphor of disease (“virus,” “poison,” “trauma”) proves to be uncannily on target, for he himself does not escape infection from the perverse logic of racism he seeks to understand. In scene after scene he pursues his cold, clinical probing of the Armenian malady without regard for the feelings of his Armenian interlocutors. Indeed he constantly risks insult and injury in order to expose the nerve of the painful experience of oppression, pressing Armenians to disclose memories of humiliation and shame.

This is especially the case with Sarkis, “this volunteer kinsman” (138), who functions throughout the story as a surrogate for Arlen's dead father. All of Arlen's ambivalent feelings toward his father are played out in his turbulent relation with his Armenian guide. In one of the frequent stormy encounters between them that punctuate Arlen's progress across the mine field of Armenian history, Sarkis reproves him for his “Anglo-Saxon coolness and detachment”: “Not like a proper son!” (136). Sarkis in his victimhood recognizes in Arlen's unfilial behavior the mark of the oppressor: “You come here to Armenia and all you care about are the Turks” (135). As Sarkis prompts like a member of the chorus, the father, Arlen's father, is the connecting link between history and personal history in *Passage to Ararat*, and Arlen, paradoxically, in his apparently unfilial and unfeeling detachment is the very type and image of his father.

A strange, hallucinatory experience midway on seems to the autobiographer to confirm the key assumption of the book: that his own story and

the story of the Armenian people belong to a single narrative, that history can be understood as a form of collective biography. During a visit to the museum in Erevan Arlen recognizes his father's face in the portrait of an eighteenth-century merchant from Erzurum, a man wearing a blue velvet hat. The apparent identity resides in the betrayal of passionate feeling that escapes the control of an otherwise "impassive" composure: "Burning eyes in a frozen face!" (140). The man in the blue velvet hat becomes Arlen's leading symbol for the repression of feeling in all Armenian fathers and sons, in his own father, and in himself. *Impassive* is the recurring, binding term in the text, and the likeness turns on the psychology of repression, for Arlen knows that beneath the "coolness and detachment" that types him for his friends, he, too, like his father and the merchant of Erzurum, was "anything but cool" (138).

With the achievement of insight into the historical sources of this identity-defining, identity-destroying state of mind, Arlen is prepared for reconciliation with his father and acceptance of his own Armenianness. During his first visit to the monument to Armenian martyrs in the plain of Ararat, he had "felt nothing" (72). His exploration of history, however, proves to be therapeutic, and during his second visit to the monument, just before his departure from Erevan, Arlen experiences a profound release, surrendering at last to a public demonstration of affiliation, returning in healing tears to father, to past, to self, to home. History, previously the record of alienating violence and cruelty, is transformed into a beneficent and nurturing companion: "I thought, How strange to finally meet one's past: to simply meet it, the way one might finally acknowledge a person who had been in one's company a long while. So, it's you!" (253–54). Then Arlen experiences an instant of mystical union with his father in which he seems to feel the touch of his hand, and this moment of uplift is presently doubled when he is embraced by Sarkis; "I thought, Kinsman, brother . . . so be it. I thought, We Armenians sweat a lot" (255). With the solidarity of this "we" his journey is complete.

VI. PATRICIA HAMPL AND "THE GOLDEN LIGHT OF METAPHOR"

More than any other autobiography I know, Patricia Hampl's *A Romantic Education* (1981) traces the dawning of the self's understanding of its relation to history. In Hampl's view, the movement from self outward into history that is her story is doubled by the performance of the autobiographical act, which transforms "the self-absorption that seems to be the

impetus and embarrassment of autobiography” into “a hunger for the world”: “In the act of remembering, the personal environment expands, resonates beyond itself, beyond its ‘subject,’ into the endless and tragic recollection that is history” (4–5). For the child she had been, however, such a proposition would have seemed highly unlikely (had she been capable of such a thought), for she saw herself growing up in St. Paul in a family “where, it seemed, nothing happened” (6). In the first part of her autobiography, “St. Paul—The Garden,” it is the historyless child’s hunger for history that provides an organizing theme for an otherwise loosely structured gathering of happy childhood memories.

To the nine-year-old Patricia, history meant nostalgia, the funny stories her parents told about their life in the thirties: “They spoke of themselves as if they *were* the Great Depression. . . . They had been historic. ‘You want to know about the Depression? I’ll tell you about the Depression, honey,’ the principal players of history said as I sat in their laps” (20). The little girl’s Czech grandmother represents the possibility of a further reach of history, but one that remains tantalizingly inaccessible: “There, at the head of the family where history should have been with its culture intact, its relation to the nation assumed, was my grandmother, the rootless wonder, our oak that lived in air, not earth.” The grandmother, after all, had lived through “a brisk recapitulation of European history” that carried her from “a feudal childhood in Bohemia” to “the atomic age” (23) of Hampl’s own childhood. Unlike Patricia’s parents, however, who could be counted on to dish out history in colorful tales of fifteen-cent steaks and gangster escapades, her grandmother had no stories to tell: “She didn’t bother to have a store of anecdotes, a makeshift biography, something to hold up alongside history” (45).

The grandmother is a riddle precisely because the plenitude of her experience of living in history remains unexpressed. As a result, the old woman is stubbornly resistant to metaphor, the primary cognitive instrument of the poet Patricia Hampl would become. Of “the hunger for metaphor” she writes:

“What was it *like*?” we say when we really want to know the truth of something. We don’t say, “What *is* it?” What it *is* is nothing, is hardly the point. What it is like—that is the metaphoric reality, the ripple of seemingly discrete things into each other, the field theory of life, of transformation. And that, we sense—language senses—is *it*. (93)

When Hampl’s Aunt Sylvia supplies the frustratingly elliptical definition of the grandmother’s identity, she precisely does not say what she was *like*. “She knew what she was” (43), Aunt Sylvia pronounces proudly, and

the child instinctively recognizes that the statement admits of no appeal (“Well, what *was* it?” she wants to ask). The family may well be content with easy tautology (“Grandma was something, wasn’t she?” . . . “Yeah, she was something” [44]), but Patricia finds her grandmother’s “wordless, elemental manner” infuriating. How could she be so indifferent to the “possibly thrilling” (45) involvement of her life in what the child makes out as the romance of history? “Europe,” “the Old World”—these are the grandmother’s laconic answers to the child’s endless pestering about her past.

Nevertheless, the autobiographer, looking back, does find a metaphor for her elusive grandmother, planting the family’s “rootless wonder” firmly in the vegetable garden that had been the grandmother’s special joy. Cultivating the garden of memory, Hampl flirts with the possibility of a language of absolute presence that would obviate the poet’s necessary recourse to metaphor, giving instead a direct, unmediated access to reality: “I would like to take a bean, . . . and snap it under your nose (the eyes are closed) and wait for the smile, the nod, that says I have written the perfect description.” But the vegetables, like their gardener, are “dark,” mysterious essences that “cannot be described” (80). Paradoxically, however, in the incantatory lines (“dillweed . . . dillweed”) that close this first section of the autobiography, Hampl manages to create a language that can capture the “wordless” essence she seeks, appropriating what was “dark and not mine,” and making it “securely there”:

The other garden, the real one, remains dark in its undescribed, curtailed, memory. Dillweed, like a sensation, fills the air of the whole square plot with a scent that gets heavier and heavier as summer goes deeper. . . . A fringed curtain of dillweed obscures that place sheerly with the pungency of its remembered scent: the eyes close. I can’t get beyond it. I don’t want to, just as we never really want to see the future, but just to glimpse its light and know that, like the past, it is securely there. (81)

Even though the “real” remains “dark,” “undescribed,” and “curtailed,” “the eyes close” in pleasurable recognition of the truth of her own memory, affirming the experience of knowing what cannot be expressed. Metaphor for Hampl is an art of transformation, making good the grandmother’s refusal of language and history by putting her own past in its place.

In the second part of her autobiography, “Beauty,” Hampl extends her search for history beyond the charmed, closed, first world of family into

a broader experience of culture. She is now a university student, a protester against the war in Vietnam, a poet living in a commune, but before all these, a young woman afflicted with “the beauty disease.” “The primary identity for women has been related to beauty” (99), Hampl argues, and she documents her enslavement to this cultural construction of gender as she recalls her obsession with her appearance and her compulsive shopping for fashionable clothes and cosmetics. “The beauty disease” is transmitted by women’s magazines, which “have plotted out a woman’s life in progressive publications”—from *Seventeen* to *Mademoiselle* to *Vogue*—“whose single theme is beauty” (129). The model of gender identity they project—Audrey Hepburn was its avatar in Hampl’s youth—is the model or mannequin, and Hampl notes that this “haute couture figure has not changed . . . since the Great War” (132) despite the principle of change which governs the world of fashion.

Just as memory opens out into history, so Hampl interprets her preoccupation with beauty as part of a profoundly disturbing cultural malady. In the “stark” (131), “bruised,” “desexed” (130) body of the mannequin, “thin to the point of horror” (129), Hampl beholds “the image of the slaughter of war in our century” (131), specifically “the vacant starved face of a just-liberated prisoner of Auschwitz” (129). She discovers in this “grotesque ideal” of beauty an unmistakable reference to the Holocaust, which links “the gaunt anorexic girls in American hospitals” to “the camp prisoner with the bones that can be counted with the eye” (133). The young woman coming of age in St. Paul, dreaming of beauty, buying fashion magazines, and endlessly shopping, was making herself up in the image of history. To support this reading of the connection between beauty and history transacted in the medium of culture, Hampl refers to *A Backward Look* (1979), a book by the American journalist Daniel Lang, who relates his interviews with Germans who had been young soldiers at the time of the Second World War. A schoolteacher in Aachen, haunted by memories of “a work detail of *skeletons* from Buchenwald” (125), reports to Lang that “his sense of beauty had been damaged,” and he quotes a line from Adorno, “‘To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’” (126).

Lest Hampl’s readings seem overdrawn, lest her claims for the historical significance of her own experience seem unearned, it is important to note that she is careful to distinguish between the bold reach of the autobiographer’s cultural analysis and the humble daydreams of her earlier self. “The twinishness” she saw “in the faces of beauty and history” as a young woman had more to do with her romantic vision of life than anything else. Thus she experienced an intuitive affinity between the period glamour of

her idolized Aunt Lillian and the family's tales of the Great Depression. "Beauty and history were not so much related in my mind," Hampl recalls, "as they were the same thing, the thing I wanted and had at the time no name for. They were metaphor. I had to have beauty, I had to have history: they transformed. Later I had to have poetry for the same reason" (92). Hampl's meditations on women's identity, on the body as metaphor, on "the beauty disease" as a cultural sickness, are compelling in their complexity because of her fidelity to the confusions in her own thinking that resist any easy simplification for the sake of scoring a point. Her sense of beauty is "troubled," "clouded," "splintered" (113), in no small part because the word *beauty* is "a touchstone for too many things," "a switchboard through which I route and connect the various desires and disappointments of my own life" (114).

In the long third section of the autobiography, "Prague—The Castle," an older Hampl achieves fresh insight into her perennial preoccupation with beauty and history, moving to a different kind of making, exchanging makeup for metaphor. This shift is precipitated by the death of her grandmother, her primary symbol for the missing presence of history in the first world of family: "Our personal Europe dead and buried, I decided I must go there" (142). Hampl's account of her journey to the country of history, her two trips to Prague in the years after her grandmother's death, recapitulates—in reverse—her grandmother's untold story of "Europe," the "Old World." Hampl is clearly involved in a kind of time travel, for she has an uncanny sense in Prague that she has landed in the thirties: "I'd finally arrived in my parents' decade" (151). When she had set out for Czechoslovakia in 1975, Hampl had seen herself as "a third generation American" (146) returning to the country of origin to recover a lost sense of place, language, and ethnic identity. She soon abandons her original intention of visiting her grandmother's village, however, and with it any notion of "a strictly personal history," history "reduced to genealogy" (148), as answering to her search. Hampl keeps her distance from the story of the rootless American descendant of immigrants who undertakes a sentimental journey to Europe in order to lay her head on "the goose-down pillow of history": "I didn't find my grandmother," she observes wryly, "or I found her and she was wearing a miniskirt" (174).

The autobiographer believes that in her case "the urgency of the classic search for personal identity," the familiar *Roots* phenomenon of the 1970s that has become one of the staples of American autobiography, was transferred to the history of a country: "Its long story, its history, satisfy the instinct for kinship in a way that the discovery of a distant cousin could

not" (148). As before, beauty is the register of metaphor in which the poet records this new sense of history that she discovers in Prague: "The beauty of the Old World is broken, . . . this brokenness was what I had been missing" (174). This new awareness of history not as plenitude but as lack, the major lesson of her first trip to Prague, is accompanied in Hampl's narrative by a new instinct to present herself as a representative individual: "The sense I have, as someone born immediately after the Second World War," she observes, "is that I—or anyone born after 1945—was born into an elegy" (175). When Hampl asserts her "kinship" with European history, when she identifies herself with a twentieth-century "anyone," however, she raises a fundamental problem with which she wrestles for the rest of the book: in what sense can a provincial, sheltered girl from St. Paul, growing up in a family in which "nothing happened," be said to share in the burden of history that damaged the sense of beauty in Daniel Lang's schoolteacher from Aachen, oppressed by his memories of the living skeletons of Buchenwald? Hampl's sense of herself as both an American and a poet are central to her solution of this historical conundrum.

Immediately following Hampl's implication of herself in the calamity of Western history comes an episode that places a young American's relation to that heritage in question. En route to Prague a second time in 1977, she has a curious encounter with a Czech who runs a small luggage shop in London where she stops to buy a travel clock. When they fall into conversation about her trip, their interchange takes a sudden and darker turn, focusing on what "we" have destroyed, not only "the manmade things" but "nature": "'And that,' he said, holding his palms up, 'is the end.' He was very angry, almost frantic" (180–81). Then, "just as suddenly," the shopkeeper backs away from this apocalyptic vision of history, telling Hampl to forget these things and enjoy the music in Prague. To the man in the shop, whom she associates with the Holocaust survivors in her poetry class in St. Paul (who had "those blue numbers tattooed on their arms"), Hampl imagines that Americans, in their "inexperience as a nation of what the War really meant," must seem to be "fabulous creatures," "strange, attractive, even dangerous in our unmarked eagerness for life, our appetite for our roots" (181).

Refracted in the mirror of European history, American innocence is revealed as a threat. The scene is wonderfully resonant—one is reminded of Henry James's Maggie Verver and her purchase of a flawed golden bowl in a similarly dark shop in London—and Hampl's treatment is deft and sure: when she leaves the shop, she has acquired not merely a "red

leatherette travel clock” but one of “the emblems of exile and history,” “an explanation, the reason I was drawn . . . to the heart of Europe, the sadness of the century” (181–82). Hampl has embarked, this second time, on a journey toward a deeper vision of history, a history constituted no longer by the comic depression anecdotes she savored as a child but instead by something tragic, the source of that cultural sickness she had known as “the beauty disease.”

Once in Prague, in the course of her many walks in the old city and her readings and meditations on its past, Hampl develops a thesis about the design of Western history. “*Zlatá Praha*,” she begins, “golden Prague”—this had been the title of an album of romantic nineteenth-century photographs of Prague she had dreamed over as a child of five in her grandmother’s house in St. Paul—and it is surely no accident that she gives the same beginning to her own story and to the history of the West. She associates the golden light in the city with the pervasive use of gold in the medieval icons of its churches and in the practice of alchemy for which it became a center. Reflecting on the golden age of Czech history, the creation of a national identity by Jan Hus and the flowering of Prague as a city of learning and cultivation under “the philosopher-king” (216) Rudolf II and his successor Frederick, Hampl celebrates the dawning of “a holistic civilization,” fostered by “a consciousness that could hold together ancient spiritual, psychic values and the newer progress of the analytical process.” This brief period of enlightenment ends abruptly with the defeat of Frederick and Bohemia at the Battle of the White Mountain on November 8, 1620, which marks the beginning of the Thirty Years’ War. To this “wounding” of Western consciousness Hampl traces the pernicious “mind-spirit split” (218) in modern Western culture that leads to the “intellectual fear” of spiritual value in the ideologies adduced to justify “every atrocity in our immediate history” (219). “Central Europe, is, after all,” she reminds us, “the land of the concentration camp and the ‘final solution’” (218).

This is a poet’s version of history, and Hampl looks, accordingly, to metaphor as a symbol of the possibility that the lost unity of Western consciousness may be restored. “The golden light of metaphor,” she writes, “which is the intelligence of poetry, was implicit in alchemical study”; both poetry and alchemy are “spiritual and transformative” (219). In asserting this curious linkage Hampl counters her theory of history as rupture, placing herself in a continuous tradition of creativity stretching back to the Middle Ages. In this sense, to practice her art is to project herself in wishful retrograde back across thirty years of the “gray” (220) world of Czechoslovakia’s existence behind the Iron Curtain, back across

the Thirty Years' War, in order to recapture Prague's early world of gold. In support of this view of metaphor's redemptive power is Hampl's conception of language as "the unconscious storehouse of a people's culture, values, point of view" (197). Thus, for the poet, language affords the creation of a link—through metaphor—between the individual and history. (Interestingly, Hampl attributes essentially the same belief to Hus: "Language, for him, was culture, and culture was the nation" [217]).

Challenging the trust that Hampl would place in metaphor, however, are the extremities of twentieth-century cruelty and suffering that defy the power and even the legitimacy of art to restore. Reading *The Captive Mind* (1953) by the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz prompts Hampl to ask, "What *words* can transform (or should transform) such experience?" (244). Hampl's relation as a poet to this terrible passage of history is complicated by her identity as an American. She had imagined herself as "unmarked" in the eyes of the exiled shopkeeper in London, and had he not been right? "*Nothing bad has ever happened to me. . . . I have no 'story,' no documentation of the camps, the tortures, the cruelties*" (252–53).

Yet in another sense, as an individual living in culture, Hampl has been marked by these things, just as she was by "the beauty disease." Lurking behind the often-asked question of people's guilty knowledge—"Did you know about Auschwitz? . . . did you know about My Lai?" (250)—is the notion that the individual might lead an existence beyond, and free from, history; but for Hampl even the "unmarked" ("an ordinary citizen in the Midwest," for example, "with no special information") "know." She dates the beginning of her own initiation into this darkest reach of history to a "full-color picture" she saw in *Life* "years before My Lai" of "a GI wearing a string of ears slung around his waist." This shocking image documents not only the fate of the victims and their persecutor but a "perversion of the national self" (251). As with "the beauty disease," so with these wartime atrocities, the media bring home to the individual an ineluctable complicity.

Perhaps the deadliest consequence of this exposure to evil for the poet and for her trust in metaphor is her Orwellian recognition that language itself is damaged along with the victims: "Atrocities . . . appear first in language: *We had to destroy the village in order to save it*" (251). The figure of the innocent American, untouched by the mark of history, of Cain, is the myth that Hampl deconstructs in these pages; her purchase of the clock, her journey to Prague, her writing *A Romantic Education*—all are stages in her assumption of this knowledge and her attempt to transform it. For Hampl, in our time there can be no separate peace; the "indefinable shining stigma" that James reserved for the wounded belongs to all of us.

The myth of American innocence, however, is not so easily dispatched, for Hampl does not lose sight of the sense in which she is indeed “untouched,” “unmarked”; she cannot forget the fact that the story of her own life, comparatively speaking, represents “an odd, protected history or nonhistory to have in this century” (252). From this perspective, history is somehow alien, something that belongs to others, something that only the authentic victims have the right to speak about. Yet in a curious way Hampl’s narrative about her lack of history is compensatory, endowing her precisely with a representative story, and so she finds herself thinking, “The value of my inquiry *is* that I am unmarked” (252).

Complicating the predicament of the American poet who would presume to bear witness to the unspeakable events of the age is the disabling proposition articulated by “so many of the real witnesses,” that “silence *is* the only response” (252). Nevertheless, the poet in Hampl refuses this prohibition, and she concludes this meditation on the relation between the individual and history by reaffirming her faith in metaphor. Against her lively sense of the moral imperative behind the injunction to silence Hampl sets the poet’s “innate urge to utterance,” and she looks to other writers for possible models of the artist’s response to the modern world—to Rilke, to H.D., and especially to Kafka, with whose name she stamps whatever strikes her as quintessential in her experience of Prague. She realizes that she returned to Prague the second time because “here, in this part of the world (it happened elsewhere of course, but for our culture, it happened here), the imagination was wounded” (280). Matching this insight is another, “harder truth” about “the relation between horror and creativity” (281), that “the imagination was enriched by this terrible history” (280). She challenges “the taboo of silence” (281) enjoined by so many of the survivors with these words from Kafka, which could serve as an epigraph for her own undertaking in *A Romantic Education*: “The war didn’t only burn and tear the world, but also lit it up” (283).

Hampl’s commitment to metaphor is severely tested in a series of encounters with Czech survivors. There is her friend Ružena, whose pathetic hunger for “culture” expresses itself in a greedy acquisition of cheap, tasteless goods from the West. Her tiny apartment, where Beethoven is thrown cheek by jowl with Snoopy, offers a dispiriting parody of Hampl’s metaphoric effort to repair the split in Western consciousness. There is Ružena’s friend Eva, “whose *woman things* had been taken out by the Nazis,” who confronts the poet with the forbidding reality of the individual broken beyond the power of metaphor “to transform the wounds that events have made” (297).

The tension between the intractable, broken reality of twentieth-century history and the irrepressible drive of the poet's imagination to "*make something*" (281) comes to a climax in Hampl's relation with Anna. The terms used to describe Anna—"terribly thin" (289), an "Audrey Hepburn look-alike" (287)—associate her with "the beauty disease" of Hampl's youth. The nightmare of twentieth-century history, moreover, has marked her as surely as any of the minimalist mannequins that inspire the dreams of anorexic American girls: Anna is Jewish, and her relatives perished in the Holocaust; her husband David is an angry and disillusioned survivor of the Prague Spring of 1968. Thus, when Anna becomes her companion in a series of walks in the Malá Strana, the ancient core of the old city steeped in a "buttery haze" (291) of golden light, Hampl is accompanied in the country of metaphor by a guide who represents the broken beauty of the history of the West.

The dark truth at the heart of Hampl's romantic vision of "*zlatá Praha*" is revealed to the poet late one night, when the two young women struggle helplessly to unlock the door of the flat where Hampl is staying. When a policeman appears, Anna becomes frightened, for she does not have her identity card. The lock finally yields, the policeman departs, and Anna collapses in terror in Hampl's arms. As they stand in a long embrace in the darkened hall, Hampl experiences the power of the totalitarian state to wound and dehumanize, for Anna without her identity card is no longer a person or even a body: "just the double rhythm of her heart: shudder-crash, shudder-crash" (299). The poet touches bottom here, living the legacy of history, the split in consciousness, directly on the pulse, in a "language before language" (300), without any mediation of metaphor: "Now I held the thing" (299).

In this existential encounter the essence of history shows not as a beneficent presence, an integrity, a plenitude on the order of her grandmother and her garden, but rather as an emptiness, a darkness, a lack, the unmaking of metaphor. Associating the shuddering of Anna's heart with a memory of her own adolescent beginnings as a poet, her discovery of rhythm and vocation, Hampl recognizes that beneath the euphoric innocence of her dawning self-assurance "the terror . . . must always, no doubt, have been there" (299), lurking at the core of the art that she was to live for. Metaphor and poetry, that is, partake of the very reality they propose to transform. Hampl's own, answering "terror" is "the knowledge that couldn't be kept off any longer that I didn't know anything about anything in this misty crazy city I kept trying to claim" (298).

Hampl's narrative ends, however, with the poet as maker of metaphor

in the ascendant. On her last day in Prague she returns for a final walk in Malá Strana, and from a garden beneath the Hradčany castle she writes a postcard reaffirming her romantic vision of the city: “It’s still here, lilacs and roofs, steeples and gold” (304). The “‘romantic light’” of golden Prague continues to cast its spell—“polluted, stinging my eyes a little” (306)—and Hampl, incurably drawn to the “‘poetic’” (305), resolves to write about her grandmother’s garden. Despite the self-deprecating modesty of her project to recapture a small piece of her country of origins, the American autobiographer turns to her task marked in her own way by her journey. The vegetable garden in St. Paul, like the terrified beating heart of the young woman in the hallway in Prague, is a dark essence, but a life force that abides, “undescribed, curtained,” in memory. When the narrative circles back on itself, linking garden to garden, Old World to New, the poet makes the only gesture she can, and must, toward healing the split in Western history.

VII. MAKING HISTORY

In presenting history—whether it is a question of a decade (Fitzgerald, Kazin) or centuries (Adams, Arlen, Hampl)—all of these autobiographies have essentially the same story to tell: namely, the decline and fall of a world of unity and order. Separating the present from this lost world of the past—idealized variously as a time of national identity, a period of religious faith, a mythic age of gold—is a cataclysm of some kind, a violent rupture usually associated with unspeakable atrocities.²⁰ To discern in the unfolding of history the shape of so familiar a plot, however, may prompt us to ask whether history can properly be said to be a story at all. To what extent are these writers, emboldened by the self-reflexive license of the autobiographical mode, recasting history in the mirror of their own concerns? Many of these accounts offer distinctly personalized, individualized versions of historical reality: for Fitzgerald (the extreme case), the decade is a person like himself, peaking early and plunging into breakdown and collapse; for Arlen, history is family romance played out collectively in the life of a people; for Hampl, history is the story of the mind of the West, of the consciousness of a culture suffering a grievous wound. Henry Adams, on the other hand, the only historian of the group, rejects

²⁰ For an enormously suggestive study of the patterns of apocalyptic history and its “doctrines of crisis, decadence, and empire” (14), see Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending*, especially parts 1 (“The End”) and 4 (“The Modern Apocalypse”).

the notion of history as “the sequence of men” or even a “sequence” of society or time or thought, settling instead for history as “the sequence of force.”

In a seminal study published in 1980, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” Hayden White deconstructs the conventional view of history as a story of some kind, suggesting instead that events in themselves, prior to their finding a place in the historical record, are lacking in narrative value. White hypostasizes historical reality as “mere sequence” (24), and he suggests that the annalist, with his reliance on chronological order, comes closest to rendering its unorganized truth. For us, by contrast, he argues, for whom narrative form has become so deeply naturalized and internalized that we unthinkingly accept it as the mark of the real, history is properly historical only when it achieves the shape and closure of a story. I shall return to White’s argument in the next chapter when I consider the status of narrative as a structure of reference in autobiography. At this point I want to focus on a certain ambiguity in White’s discussion of history, which turns on the distinction to be made between events (the stuff of history) and what we make of them (the history we write).

“It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories,” White observes, “that their narrativization is so difficult” (4). White is making a point here about the imposed nature of narrative in historiography, whereas I would say, by extension, that whatever we know of historical reality necessarily partakes of impositions supplied by the observer. To begin with, we decide what constitutes an event, what is worthy of record; the annalist of Saint Gall (White’s example) apparently had some principle of selection in mind that resulted in his frequently passing an entire year without making an entry. In this sense we cannot speak of “real events” as “offering themselves” to us ready-made, for there is no value-neutral historical reality that we can know anything about. History is equally constructed whenever it is written, whether as annal, as chronicle, or as narrative.²¹ *History* (the real) and *history* (the record)—we readily conspire in the ambiguity of the term, for we want to construe the history we write as history itself. The ambiguity stems from the implication of the observer in the thing observed.

²¹ Countering the privileged place we assign to narrative as, in an evolutionary sense, a “higher” form of history than the chronicle or the annal, White doubtless savors a turning-of-the-tables in which the annal emerges as a truer representation of the real. What I am suggesting is that the point he makes in connection with narrative history concerning the “need or impulse to rank events with respect to their significance for the culture or group that is writing its own history” (10) can be extended to all forms of historiography.

This ambiguity points to a fundamental problem faced by these autobiographers in conceptualizing the relation of the individual to history. “The relation of the individual to history”—the very formulation suggests that the “individual” is to be distinguished from “history.” Such a notion is implicit in the myth of American innocence that informs so many of the works we have looked at in this chapter: history is to be encountered abroad, in Italy, in Armenia, in Czechoslovakia; history is something distinct from us, that we can get mixed up in or not, depending on our fates. In this sense historical agents—veterans of the war, survivors of the Holocaust—would bear the mark of their difference. The lesson of the journey into the country of history, however, in Hemingway, in Arlen, in Hampl, is that history dwells in us. As Carr observes, “We are *in* history as we are *in* the world.” Or, as Hampl puts it, whether or not we are literally marked by Auschwitz or My Lai, there is no escape from history; we “know.”

Although history is “in” us, part of us, makes or marks us, although its “stigma” brands all of us—not just the wounded and the survivors of the camps—these autobiographies at the same time collectively suggest by their very existence that we also make history. This emphasis on the witness as maker is especially strong in the protagonists of the “educations” of Adams and Hampl, the aging historian brooding over the ruins of civilization on the Ara Coeli steps, the young poet in Prague compelled to “*make something*” out of the “broken beauty” of the West. Citing Terrence Des Pres’s study of concentration camp memoirs and “the will to bear witness” which they express, Hampl suggests that “we are all, in a fundamental sense, witnesses of history,” and she agrees with Des Pres that “the passionate desire to witness—to make a record—*is* the essence of true survival” (*Journal* 60).

If we accept Kenneth Barkin’s account of the professional historian’s reservations about the “consciously created” aspect of autobiographical documents, we could conclude that this emphasis on the witness as maker in these narratives vitiates any historical value they might otherwise have. Alternatively, we could say that such disclosure reveals the necessarily subjective dimension of all historical making. In chapter 2 I noted the ways in which writing autobiography functions as an analogue for writing biography: it is a constitution of identity and not merely the expression or record of one. Similarly, writing autobiographies like these functions as an analogue for writing history: what these historically oriented autobiographies display is precisely the personal component, the “consciously created” dimension of historiography, that professional historians by disci-

plinary convention suppress. Historians understandably prefer to think of language as a conveniently transparent medium, and if Barkin is right, they doubtless read such essays as Hayden White's "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" and "The Fictions of Factual Representation" with discomfort—if they read them at all. There is, however, no getting around the fact that when we write history, we make it talk. Even White seems to honor the historian's ambition for objectivity, holding up the laconic annal as less made (made over? made up?) and hence presumably closer to historical reality than the comparatively loquacious chronicle or narrative.

What, finally, is the historical value of autobiographies like these? I began by setting aside the traditional memoir with its avowedly documentary, evidentiary purpose in order to discuss instead a class of autobiographies in which the role of the witness or shaper and maker of the history observed is openly, even aggressively, disclosed. To be sure, we do learn something about the history of Armenia from Arlen, about the history of Czechoslovakia from Hampl, but this is secondary to what we learn about the autobiographer's relation to history. As we have seen, interpretations of this relation are as various as the individuals who record them in these narratives: a search for identity (Arlen), a commitment to a revolutionary ideal (Kazin), a quest for history on the part of an apparently historyless girl (Hampl). In none of these texts, however, is the individual prepared to settle for the nature of history as she discovers it. It is not enough merely to record the alienating rupture of atrocity or the scatter of events—this is true even of those witnesses who make the most of history's resistance to form. Adams stresses the neck-breaking, historian-killing pace of the acceleration of force, and Kazin ends *Starting* with a chilling episode in which his dream to be one of the shapers of his age ends in shattering disillusion. Adams is determined, however, for all his skepticism, to chart the declension of history from unity to multiplicity, measuring "man as a force" by making metaphors. Similarly, Kazin is sustained by his belief in the redemptive power of language:

The life of mere experience, and especially of history as the total experience we ridiculously claim to know, can seem an inexplicable series of unrelated moments. But language, even when it is most a mimicry of disorder, is distinguished from violence, atrocity, deceit, by relating word to word, sentence to sentence, thought to thought—man to this final construct on a page—always something different from mere living. So that is why I write, to reorder an existence. ("Self" 42)

CHAPTER FOUR

“Mere sequence,” “mere living”—historical reality as we know it, especially in its alienating extremity, its formlessness, is unacceptable. As Hampl and Des Pres teach us, “the will to bear witness” in these autobiographies is both mimetic *and metaphoric*. In the conjunction of history and autobiography we encounter once more the fundamental paradox of a referential art: the simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the constraints of the real.

Autobiography and the Structures of Experience

IN THE PRECEDING chapters I have been investigating various dimensions of the world of fact to which autobiographies characteristically refer: biographical (chapter 2), social and cultural (chapter 3), and historical (chapter 4). At the same time, following the paradox intrinsic to the very nature of autobiographical discourse, I have had occasion to emphasize the fictive dimension of autobiography, especially in my analyses of William Maxwell in chapter 1 and Patricia Hampl in chapter 4. There I presented the making of metaphor as a response to the otherwise unacceptable testimony of the facts of experience: the death of the mother, the betrayal of the friend, the barbarities of history in our time. Moreover, in discussing the cultural construction of self in chapter 3, and inspired in particular by the work of M. Brewster Smith (“Metaphorical”), I spoke of the self as a metaphor and of autobiography, consequently, as a metaphor of a metaphor. Our associations with metaphor, however, too easily prompt us to understand it narrowly as an exclusively linguistic and literary phenomenon. In this final chapter I want to argue that the principal large-scale metaphors of autobiography, the self and its story, play a primary role in the conduct of experience before they ever come to serve, secondarily and derivatively, as representations of experience in texts.

In emphasizing the experiential basis of metaphor I draw on the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their aptly titled study, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980).¹ Metaphors, they argue, are not merely distinctive features of the language we use to express thought; instead, “human *thought processes*” themselves are “largely metaphorical” (6). Believing that metaphors “structure how we perceive, how we think, and what we do” (4), they proceed to create a typology of the metaphors that organize our lives. In every case they locate the origins of metaphor in cultural and especially in physical, bodily experience. Perhaps the most obviously physical in derivation of the various classes of metaphor they identify are “orientational” metaphors (“up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow,

¹ I am indebted to M. Brewster Smith (“Metaphorical”) for alerting me to the interest of Lakoff and Johnson’s work in connection with conceptions of selfhood. See my discussion of Smith in chapter 3.

central-peripheral”), which “arise from the fact that we have bodies of the sort we have and that they function as they do in our physical environment” (14). Invariably Lakoff and Johnson stress “the experiential grounding, the coherence, and the systematicity of metaphorical concepts” (17); there is little of the “arbitrary” (14) or “random” (41) in our daily use of metaphor in thought and speech. So pervasive is the role of metaphor in our “conceptual system” that, they are prepared to claim, there are no concepts “that are understood directly, without metaphor” (56). “Environment,” “interaction,” “physical,” “bodily”—these are the recurring terms in what they identify as an “experientialist” account of the human mind and its way of understanding truth.²

In presenting autobiography as a referential art, I have been approaching the issue of reference largely as a content, the world of private and public experience that lies beyond the text—Henry James’s “obscure hurt,” Richard Rodriguez’s conflicted embrace of an “Anglo” model of identity, Michael Arlen’s brooding on the Armenian genocide. Now I want to consider reference as a structure, “the content of the form,” in Hayden White’s phrase: how do the characteristic strategies of autobiographical discourse—the use of the first person, the employment of narrative—relate to the world of reference they are called on to represent? Are self and life story only arbitrary literary constructs, convenient formulas that we impose on our lives when we come to re-create them retrospectively, after the fact, or do they, in the Lakoffian sense, function first as primary structures that shape the living of a life? Although Lakoff and Johnson do not happen to deal specifically with self and narrative, they usefully remind us of the roots of all our stock of metaphors in physical and cultural experience. Having already dealt extensively in chapter 3 with the contribution of culture to our operative sense of identity, I want to begin, in the following section on the work of Oliver Sacks, by directing attention to the bodily, somatic dimension of selfhood.³ Then, in sub-

² For a useful summary of this “experientialist” approach, see the preface (xii–xviii) and the section titled “Experiential Realism” (265–66) in Lakoff’s recent study, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* (1987).

³ I should point out that the distinction between the physical and cultural dimensions of experience is an arbitrary one. Lakoff and Johnson make the point clearly: “What we call ‘direct physical experience’ is never merely a matter of having a body of a certain sort; rather, *every* experience takes place within a vast background of cultural presuppositions. It can be misleading, therefore, to speak of direct physical experience as though there were some core of immediate experience which we then ‘interpret’ in terms of our conceptual system. Cultural assumptions, values, and attitudes are not a conceptual overlay which we may or may not place upon experience as we choose. It would be more correct to say that all experience

sequent sections, I shall present narrative as a second, complementary illustration of the relation between autobiographical form and the structures of experience.

I. STARTING FROM THE BODY: OLIVER SACKS AND “THE NEUROLOGY OF IDENTITY”

Following Elizabeth Bruss, James Olney, Barrett J. Mandel, and others, studies of autobiography routinely distinguish between the recollecting and the recollected selves of autobiographical texts, placing special emphasis on the autobiographical act performed by the “I who writes,” or, in the formula of Jean Starobinski, “the man who held the pen.” Roland Barthes, at the height of his strict structuralist, narratological phase, urged the necessity of making a further discrimination, pointing out that “the one *who writes* is not the one *who is*” (261). Life itself, however, is messier than these constructions of theory, as John Updike suggests when he reports that the signature of “the man who held the pen” fails to live up to the neatness of such conceptual categories:

When I sign my name, which I seem to do ever more often, to books and checks, I find it increasingly difficult to get past the “d”—something in the rhythm of the “Up” produces a forced rest, a freeze in the little motor muscles, at the top of the “d,” so that the ink, if from a felt-tip pen, begins to bleed, and to make a blue star, and to leak through to the other side of the paper. This unprompted hesitation, in what should be a fluent practiced signature, I think of as my self—a flaw that reveals my true, deep self, like a rift in Antarctic ice showing a scary, skyey blue at the far bottom. (213)

Updike reads the very “rift” in his representation of his own name as a revelation of his “true, deep self.” The signature of “the one *who writes*,” we might say, is displaced by the signature of “the one *who is*.” The hand that holds the pen does so imperfectly, idiosyncratically; it also has a distinctive smell:

Since adolescence, I have frequently noticed that, when I lift the first knuckle of the index finger of my left hand to my nose, I can detect a distant putridity, a faint bad smell that is always (somehow satisfyingly)

is cultural through and through, that we experience our ‘world’ in such a way that our culture is already present in the very experience itself” (*Metaphors* 57).

there, no matter how often I wash my hands. Such embedded data compose my most intimate self—the bedrock, as it were, beneath my more or less acceptable social, sexual, professional performance. (214)

It is this other register of selfhood, involuntarily expressed in the ink that “leaks” and “bleeds,” in the finger with its reliably inescapable odor, that I want to examine in the work of Oliver Sacks.

Roger J. Porter has noted the curious “reluctance of autobiographers to focus thematically and psychologically on the body” (“Figuration” 2). “Even Rousseau,” he adds, “subordinated descriptions of bodily function to his predominant concern—his relation to society” (1). Porter has studied two important exceptions to the rule, Herculine Barbin’s *Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite* and Edward Dahlberg’s *Because I Was Flesh* (1964), and Shirley Neuman yet another, the three-volume autobiography of Violette Leduc, *La Bâtarde* (1964), *La Folie en tête* (1970), and *La Chasse à l’amour* (1973). Confirming Porter’s view, Neuman interprets “this near-effacement of bodies in autobiography” as a form of cultural “repression” (1). In order to explain the persistence of this phenomenon throughout the history of the genre in the West, she points to the Platonic, Christian, and Cartesian dualisms between body on the one hand and soul or mind or spirit on the other, and to the consistent identification of “self” with the latter in these traditions (1–2).⁴

In his autobiography, *A Leg to Stand On* (1984), the neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks concurs, scorning “the absurd dualism of philosophy since Descartes” (71) for its failure to recognize that body and identity are intimately, organically linked. Sacks is brought to this knowledge through a grave injury to his leg during a hiking expedition on a mountain in Norway. Muscle and nerve are so severely damaged in the accident that he loses all power to move or even feel the leg. During the nightmarish phase that follows his surgery in London, he experiences a disturbing alienation from the injured leg, a visceral, Sartrean sense of nausea and nothingness in which the leg, “unalive, unreal,” defies the very categories of being: it seems altogether displaced from the world, neither “part of my body” nor “anything else” (73).⁵ Replicating Freud’s observation that “‘the Ego is first and foremost a body Ego’” (81), Sacks writes: “One has oneself, one

⁴ I am not in complete agreement with Porter (“Figuration”) and Neuman about the absence of the body in autobiography, for they do not take sufficient notice of the extensive literature of illness. There are many examples that could be mentioned—by Richard Brickner, Stewart Alsop, Paul Monette, and Eleanor Clark, to name only a few, and, of course, *A Leg to Stand On* by Oliver Sacks, which I shall present in this section.

⁵ Sacks cites Hobbes here to make his point: “‘That which is not Body is no part of the

is oneself, because the body knows itself, confirms itself, at all times, by this sixth sense [what Sacks terms *proprioception*],” “a constant flow of incoming information, arising ceaselessly, throughout life, from the muscles, joints and tendons” (71). The consequences of the neurological death of Sacks’s leg are, accordingly, direct and shattering for his sense of identity: the injury is “*not just a lesion in my muscle, but a lesion in me*” (67).⁶ Deeply troubled by, even at moments panicky about, this rift in his sense of himself, Sacks pins all his hopes for clarification and reassurance on his postoperative visit with the orthopedic surgeon, a certain Dr. Swan.

When Sacks attempts to share with the surgeon the terrors of his ruptured relation to his leg (“And . . . and . . . I have difficulty locating the position of the leg” [104]), however, he is met with a cold rebuff from Dr. Swan: “‘Nonsense, Sacks,’ he said sharply and decisively. ‘There’s nothing the matter. Nothing at all’” (105). The surgeon’s repudiation of the experiential dimension of the case leaves Sacks doubly disabled, with “no leg to stand on” (108), plunging him into spiritual crisis, a “dark night of the soul” (111) in which the injured doctor discovers the “limbo” (108) of patienthood, an abyss of powerlessness and despair. Rewriting the familiar script of spiritual autobiography, Sacks presents the story of his recovery from the injury as a conversion narrative in the neurological mode.⁷ Thus the climax of this existential drama in his first successful attempt at walking is experienced as a restoration of bodily and spiritual integrity, a joyous return to life, a “revelation” (149), indeed “the mystery of Grace” (150). Differing from the Christian prototype with its approach to salvation through self-transcendence, Sacks’s conversion leads him to affirm rather than disown the earthly, bodily foundations of selfhood: the recovery of the leg, he insists, signals “the triumphal return of the quintessential living ‘I’ . . . not the ghostly, cogitating, solipsistic ‘I’ of Descartes, which never feels, never acts, *is not*, and *does nothing*; not this, this impotence, this mentalistic fiction” (149–50).

Sacks’s impassioned critique of the Cartesian self here strikes a note

Universe . . . and since the Universe is all, that which is not Body is Nothing—and No Where” (73).

⁶ Sacks’s own experience here parallels that of his patients: “Every patient with a severe disturbance of body-perception or ‘afferent field’ had an equally severe disturbance in his *conceptions*, in ‘body-image’; and every disturbance of body-image was felt as an equally severe disturbance of *self*, or ‘body-ego’” (203).

⁷ Sacks is quite explicit about his sense of his story as a conversion narrative: “Within the religious ceremonies and stories, I found a true parable of my own experience and condition—the experience of affliction and redemption, darkness and light, death and rebirth . . . a spiritual drama—on a neurological basis” (190).

that resounds through the conclusion of the narrative, for his conversion is intellectual as well as spiritual in its import, prompting a major reorientation in his understanding of his profession as a neurologist. Reviewing the history of his discipline and his own early attraction to it, he indicts the “classical neurology” of Hughlings Jackson and Henry Head for its mechanistic drift, its “refusal to hear or allow significance to the experiential” (214). Even “the ‘new’ neurology,” the neuropsychology of A. R. Luria, whom he reveres, proves inadequate in its denial of “the experiencing, acting subject” (218). Calling for “*a neurology of the soul*” (219), Sacks concludes with an attack on the misguided empiricism of David Hume. Citing Hume’s celebrated observation that “we are nothing but a bundle or collection of different sensations, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement,”⁸ he comments: “But there is nothing *behind* these perceptions, this flux and movement—there is no experiencer, no actor, no *person* at all” (218).

Hume and the Humean Dr. Swan were simply not prepared to understand that the loss of a leg could entail a loss of self. Failing to recognize the organic roots of selfhood in the body, Humean empiricism had no way of grasping that patients like Sacks undergo “a profound ontological experience” (203), “a fundamental, if involuntary, experiment in identity” (204). This disjunction between theory and experience that structures Sacks’s story of his injury and his quarrel with “classical” neurology is an insistent theme in a number of twentieth-century autobiographies. I am thinking here not only of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Words* (1964) and André Gorz’s *The Traitor* (1959), but also of two autobiographies I presented in earlier chapters, Ronald Fraser’s *In Search of a Past* (1984), and Roland Barthes’s *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975). All of these autobiographers report that they reached a point in their lives when the theories to which they were deeply committed—in Sartre’s sense of life-informing “project”—simply did not square with the affective reality of their experience.

Sacks’s attack on the Humean man of “classical” neurology resembles Paul Smith’s critique of the subject in contemporary theory: in each case the model is rejected because it is insufficiently based in experience and lacks a capacity for action. The lessons of Sacks and Smith apply with

⁸ Sacks quotes the same passage from Hume in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (30). I have substituted the wording of the passage as it is given there for the version in *A Leg* because it is more familiar, containing the celebrated phrase, “a bundle of sensations,” which Goronwy Rees, incidentally, borrowed for the title of his autobiography in order to capture his sense of lacking “a continuous personality” (9).

particular point to poststructuralist readings of autobiography, for drawing on Lacanian notions of the split or decentered subject, such critics have rejected the fully constituted self of so-called classical autobiography, which they see as discredited by its association with bourgeois culture, and they have proceeded to predict the end of the genre altogether.⁹ Smith's analysis of the limitations of poststructuralism in *Discerning the Subject* (1988) is especially interesting, for he is a theorist himself who shares the poststructuralist repudiation of the unified self, identifying it as the ideological servant of mainstream capitalism. For Smith, however, the emphatically deterministic view of the subject in contemporary theory lends itself all too easily to a posture of moral indifference, notably in the deconstruction of Derrida. In reaction against the static, closed, textualized version of the poststructuralist subject, Smith champions an alternative, dynamic view, in which the subject is construed as a living psychological agent with a capacity for political resistance. In this respect he seems to be moving out of the dead world of text and trope into a more fully human realm of experience, of life in time and history.

Yet if Smith repudiates the "unificatory" self of traditional Western humanism, he is equally uneasy about the scatter of the poststructuralist alternative, the split or fissured subject that is its stock-in-trade. Although he defines the "subject/individual" as an open-ended series of "subject-positions" extending one by one over time, he seems to feel the need to posit a glue of some kind to hold it together. Thus we find him speaking variously of the "constitutive non-unity" (22) of the subject, of the "binding" and "underpinning" that "negativity" and "contradiction" provide. In the last analysis Smith's own model of the subject comes off less as a psychological entity and more as a creature of theory, despite his condemnation of theory's tendency to replace the human agent with an abstraction. Much more promising is an observation that Smith makes at the very beginning of his study: "None of us lives without reference to an imaginative singularity which we call our 'self'" (6). It is precisely the quasi-instinctive, taken-for-granted nature of this assumption that constitutes its interest for me, and I turn once again to Sacks, this time to his collection of case studies in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985), for sobering insight into what a life without reference to self might be like.

The proposition governing Sacks's presentation of the case of Jimmie G., the foundation of identity in memory, is announced in an epigraph

⁹ For characteristic poststructuralist pronouncements, see, e.g., de Man, Lang, and Sprinker.

from Luis Buñuel: “You have to begin to lose your memory, if only in bits and pieces, to realise that memory is what makes our lives. Life without memory is no life at all” (23).¹⁰ Jimmie is suffering from Korsakov’s syndrome. In Luria’s account of this disorder, which involves an acute loss of memory, such patients “lose their integral experience of time and begin to live in a world of isolated impressions” (30). Jimmie has virtually no short-term memory, and neurological degeneration has produced a retrograde amnesia that has erased all memories of his adult life, leaving him a gray-haired man of forty-nine who, in 1975, when Sacks first meets him, believes himself to be living in 1945, a youth of nineteen at the end of the Second World War. Sacks portrays Jimmie in his clinical notes as an individual “isolated in a single moment of being, with a moat or lacuna of forgetting all round him. . . . He is man without a past (or future), stuck in a constantly changing, meaningless moment” (29). Associating Jimmie’s condition with Hume’s notion of identity as “a bundle of sensations,” Sacks comments that Jimmie “had been reduced to a ‘Humean’ being” (30), and he wonders “whether, indeed, one could speak of an ‘existence,’ given so absolute a privation of memory or continuity” (29).

Sacks is deeply shocked as he contemplates Jimmie’s life, for the Humean norm proves to be a nightmare. At first Sacks proposes to Jimmie that he keep a diary in which he would record his experiences, fashioning as it were a substitute for the memory he had lost. But Jimmie fails to recognize the diary as his own, and the entries, moreover, record nothing more than “a sort of Humean drivel” utterly lacking the “power to provide any sense of time or continuity”—“‘Eggs for breakfast,’ ‘Watched ballgame on TV’” (35). In the wake of this failed autobiographical experiment, unable to help, Sacks is appalled by the affectless state to which Jimmie is doomed by the atrophy of his memory. Seeking to determine whether there were “depths in this unmemoried man” (35) unrecorded in the trivia of the diary, Sacks asks him about his feelings:

“You don’t enjoy life,” I repeated, hesitating somewhat. “How then *do* you feel about life?”

“I can’t say that I feel anything at all.”

“You feel alive though?”

“Feel alive? Not really. I haven’t felt alive for a very long time.” (36)

Recoiling from the chilling erasure of identity, the “Humean dissolution” (39), that Jimmie’s condition displays, Sacks consoles himself with the

¹⁰ See my discussion in chapter 2 of the role of memory in the construction of identity.

thought that Jimmie does have a soul after all. Prompted by the nuns to observe Jimmie rapt in his devotions at Mass, Sacks is convinced that his “lost mariner” (23) retains a “‘moral being’” (38), a spiritual home.

In his account of a parallel case of Korsakov’s syndrome, that of William Thompson, Sacks highlights the role of narrative in constructing the temporal experience of selfhood, which will be my subject in the rest of this chapter. Remembering nothing “for more than a few seconds” (109), Thompson devotes all of his waking energy to “frenzied” (110) acts of self-invention to bridge “the abysses of amnesia” that “continually opened beneath him” (109): “such a patient *must literally make himself (and his world) up every moment.*” Continuing, Sacks proposes narrative as the defining constituent of selfhood: “We have, each of us, a life-story, an inner narrative—whose continuity, whose sense, *is* our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives, a ‘narrative,’ and that this narrative *is* us, our identities” (110). As for Thompson, however, writing his endless stories of ever-new selves on the shifting waters of each present moment, his “veritable delirium of identity-making” (115) is utterly lacking in continuity and stability because it is no sooner performed than forgotten. As with the diary record of Jimmie G., so with the stories of Thompson—the effort is all a matter of surfaces, and Sacks is repelled by the “ultimate and total loss of inner reality” (113) that it predicates. Again, as with Jimmie G., Sacks is reluctant to consign Thompson to the permanent limbo of those who have lost their selfhood forever, and so he concludes the case with a wishful portrait of his patient in a garden, in “a deep wordless communion with Nature itself, and with this the restored sense of being in the world, being real” (115).

Sacks defines his discipline suggestively as the “neurology of identity” (viii), specifically the entire range of neurological disorders or “‘deficits’”—“loss of speech, loss of language, loss of memory, loss of vision, loss of dexterity” (3) and so forth—that can affect a patient’s sense of self. What his case studies teach us is that possession of some operative concept of identity is absolutely essential for our survival as functioning human beings. At the end of *Fictions in Autobiography* (275–78) and again at the conclusion of the first chapter of the present volume, I spoke of the self-invention that takes place in the autobiographical act as obeying an existential imperative, and Sacks provides supporting empirical evidence for this view when he writes that in case after case “there is always a reaction, on the part of the affected organism or individual, to restore, to replace, to compensate for and to preserve its identity, however strange the means may be” (6). The aim of Sacks’s clinical interventions, accord-

ingly, whether in his work with Parkinson's disease, recorded in *Awakenings* (1973), or in his work on the astonishing variety of disorders affecting "body-image" and consequently "body-ego," recorded in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985), is to assist in this work of restoration: to find and evoke "a living personal center, an 'I,' amid the debris of neurological devastation" (*A Leg* 219). The cases of Jimmie G. and William Thompson illustrate by its very lack the vital importance of identity for the conduct of life as we know it. The alternative—for Sacks, and I should think for anyone—is unacceptable.

II. NARRATIVE, TIME, AND THE CONSTITUTION OF IDENTITY

Is narrative in autobiography, especially chronological narrative, an arbitrary and distorting literary form, retrospectively imposed on the formless—or at any rate nonnarrative—experience of selfhood? Or is narrative itself a mode of consciousness, rooted in phenomenological experience? Can the self, moreover, be said to be narratively structured, as Oliver Sacks claims in his analysis of William Thompson's frenetic attempts at self-invention? Those who hold the first view have protested the dominance of narrative in autobiography, and they have promoted in its stead a variety of forms for both the autobiographical act and the life that is its subject, all of them supposedly more "natural," closer to what our experience of living and our writing about it are really like. John Sturrock's "new model autobiographer," for example, is free-associative, inspired by psychoanalysis,¹¹ while Evelyn Hinz's is dramatic and performative. Again, various feminists have proposed the diary as the appropriate form for women's autobiography, arguing that its cyclical, daily rhythms capture the reality of women's lives in ways that the linear teleology of "male" narrative is not equipped to do.¹² Dissenting from the tendency to define autobiography generically in terms of narrative, Michel Beaujour (*Miroirs*) points out that many of the great autobiographical texts—Montaigne's *Essais* would be the premier example—belong to a distinctly different literary tradition, that of the self-portrait, which he would elevate to the status of a separate genre.

¹¹ See chapter 3 for discussion of the relation between psychoanalysis and autobiography.

¹² See, e.g., Jelinek ("Introduction") and Juhasz.

In assessing the relative merits of these rival claims we do well to bear in mind the warning of Elizabeth Bruss against confusing form with function, for different forms may serve as the identifying generic sign of autobiography in different periods of literary history (1–18). James Olney has emphasized the multiplicity of forms that an autobiographer's sense of *bios*, of life, may take, and he is prepared accordingly to accept as autobiographies works that represent an exceedingly broad and heterogeneous set of possibilities. Thus in his group of illustrative texts Paul Valéry's *La Jeune Parque* and W. B. Yeats's *Autobiographies* find a place alongside the more familiarly narrative example of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* ("Some Versions"). At this point I should note that in making the case for narrative in autobiography in the discussion that follows, I have no intention of adopting a prescriptive stance. When it comes to defining the genre, I would want to align myself with the catholicity of Olney, with Barthes's commitment to *le pluriel*, for the range of autobiographical modes of self-expression is very wide at the present time, including work in painting, film, and photography. My concern, however, is with written autobiography: in this medium autobiography has been primarily a prose narrative form throughout its history, and, for reasons that I shall develop, is likely to remain so.¹³

What kind of sense does it make that autobiographers should resort to narrative, especially chronological narrative, when they come to represent their lives? The key critical text here is the opening of Philippe Lejeune's essay "The Order of Narrative in Sartre's *Les Mots*." Lejeune rightly insists that structure represents an important opportunity for self-expression in autobiographical narrative, although most autobiographers neglect it, assuming instead that content and style will serve to communicate their sense of individual uniqueness. When it comes to structure, he suggests that nine out of ten autobiographers either ramble formlessly at the whim of memory or else settle for the mindless linearity of chronological order borrowed from biography and the novel. Even though Lejeune can advance a number of reasons to account for the prominence of chronology as a structure for life history (its role in the daily commerce of our relations with others, and so forth), he argues that any appeal to the order of memory will discredit the notion that chronological order is somehow an in-

¹³ But see Jay, *Being*, e.g., for an argument that the history of autobiography from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes illustrates the rise and fall of narrative as the genre's dominant form.

trinsically “natural” representation of human experience. Only Sartre and Michel Leiris, he believes, among modern autobiographers, manage to escape the trap of chronology, inventing new narrative structures and, in so doing, new models for the description and explanation of human beings.

Yet even when autobiographical narrative seems to espouse some alternative to the principle of chronological order, we are likely to find chronology cropping up anyhow, if not calendar chronology, for example, then chronology of the unfolding of the autobiographical act (in the case of Leiris) or chronology of an illness (in the case of Sartre). Narrative and chronology surface like the return of the repressed in even so programmatically antinarrative an autobiography as *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975). As Paul Jay suggests (*Being* 175), Barthes’s deliberately fragmentary text, with its entries given in (more or less) alphabetical order, attempts to block the tendency of autobiographical discourse to fall into sequential, narrative connectedness, coalescing into a single structure that would be the model of a coherent self. Yet for all the bias against narrative and the suspicion of reference, the fragmented body of the text not only includes many a micronarrative and microchronology of autobiographical retrospect, but it is framed by sections of narrative and chronology invoking the novel (in the opening sequence of photographs) and biography (in the concluding apparatus)—the two forms that Lejeune and Sturrock identify as sources of the historicist paradigm of classical autobiography.¹⁴ Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory* and Ronald Fraser’s *In Search of a Past*, which I discussed in chapter 3, also exemplify the decisive contribution of narrative and chronology to autobiographies ostensibly governed by nonnarrative conceptions of form.

What are we to make of this persistence of narrative and chronology in autobiography? Does it represent an artistic failure, as Lejeune claims, or is it symptomatic of some deeper tendency guiding the performance of the autobiographical act? Before taking up narrative in general, I want to begin by considering chronological narrative, which offers a deceptively easy target for criticism. To be sure, its limitations are soon told, and Lejeune’s mockery of it is certainly justified in countless instances, for chronological order in a narrative—autobiographical or other—frequently does represent a lack of imagination. Autobiographers routinely prefer the ready-made solution of chronology to the strenuous creativity that would

¹⁴ The original French edition contains a chronology of Barthes’s published work, and all the citations in the text refer to it; the citations and the chronology have been omitted in the English edition.

exploit the possibilities of structure as a primary means of self-expression. Note, though, that in his stress on innovation, on experimentation, on artistic choice, Lejeune tends to make of the matter of structure an exclusively literary issue, one belonging to the theater of autobiographical retrospect—his attack on slavish imitation of the biographical model is indicative of this slant—and he dismisses “the very idea of a ‘natural narrative’” as “absurd” (71).

By contrast, I want to investigate the possibility of a direct, organic connection between narrative structure in autobiography and the world of reference it represents. In this view narrative would be not only a literary construct imposed on the reality of our experience; it would be originally a constituent part of that reality.¹⁵ A narrowly literary approach to structure, for example, fails to grasp chronology as a manifestation of the fundamental temporality of human experience. No autobiography is merely chronological, for pure chronology is inevitably the symbol not only of order but of dissolution as well, the sheer unredeemed successiveness of ticking time that destroys life and meaning. In this sense we could plausibly argue that chronological structure is not the least but the most truthful of the structures of life history. From this perspective we could say that the final, annalistic section of Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography, for example, frequently dismissed as the least successful because least shaped of the three sections posthumously united in a single volume, offers in fact the most truthful picture of Franklin’s experience. Although we may not prefer the third section to the artful narratives of the first and second sections, we should be wary of privileging the truth of an autobiographical structure to the extent that it is other or more than “merely” chronological.¹⁶

The question of the referential status not merely of calendar chronology but of narrative in general has been most strikingly posed by Hayden White in his much-discussed essay “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality.” Starting with White, I want to review briefly the

¹⁵ As I suggest in my discussion of Lejeune’s work in chapter 3, he has become increasingly interested in the years following the essay on Sartre in the cultural derivation of autobiographical narrative. See the essays collected in the second half of *On Autobiography* and my comments on them in the third section of the “Foreword” to that collection.

¹⁶ In his study of the comparative estimation of the annals, chronicle, and modern narrative history, Hayden White identifies a parallel tendency among contemporary historians to privilege the well-made closure of narrativity as the sign of the real, and in so doing to reject the unnarrativized (apparently random) chronicity of the annals as a failure to achieve a truly historical representation of reality (“The Value of Narrativity”).

debate among historiographers on this issue to provide a context for my own view of the referential import of narrative structure in autobiography.¹⁷ White distinguishes “between a historical discourse that narrates and a discourse that narrativizes” (2). To “narrativize” historical reality is to impose on it the form of a story, endowing events with “a structure, an order of meaning, that they do not possess as mere sequence” (5). The preeminence of this “narrativity” as a value in the writing of history stems from its status in our culture as the mark of “the real,” and hence it functions as a guarantee of historical truth. As a result, historians transform narrativity from “a manner of speaking” about historical reality—one among a possible range of alternative modes of representation (White mentions the chronicle and the annals)—into “a paradigm of the form that reality itself displays to a ‘realistic’ consciousness.” White concludes:

The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, reveries. Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories . . . ? Or does it present itself more in the forms that the annals and chronicle suggest, either as mere sequence without beginning or end or as sequences of beginnings that only terminate and never conclude? And does the world, even the social world, ever really come to us *as already* narrativized . . . ? (24–25, italics added)

On the face of it, it would be hard to dissent from White’s position here, for the notion of the world plotted like a story (a “well-made story” at that!) seems patently unlikely. But the “as already narrativized” formulation in the final line of the passage makes trouble: we have no knowledge of the world *apart from* its “coming to us,” and so we have no basis on which to reject a narrativized version of reality in favor of some other, presumably truer model of the real—“mere sequence,” for example. What we do have knowledge of is the human perception of events, and we can inquire into its structures. Perhaps we are so constituted that our perception of events, of the world, is necessarily narrativized, as phenomenologist historiographer David Carr proposes. If this is the case, then we cannot ultimately adjudicate the nature of the real, but only the nature of the real *for us*.

Consistently stressing the discontinuity between historical narrative and the otherwise unstructured reality—the “mere sequence”—of events,

¹⁷ For additional discussion of White’s essay, see the concluding section of chapter 4, “Making History.”

White reads the choice for a narrative form of representation as an arbitrary one, sanctioned by a culture-specific moralizing tendency that has elevated narrativity to the status of a value. Countering White's emphasis on the arbitrary and the discontinuous, Paul Ricoeur argues that narrative form is ideally suited to represent the structure of the human experience of time and history. Drawing on Augustine and especially on Heidegger, Ricoeur connects—level by intricate level—"the epistemology of the narrative function" with "the phenomenology of time experience" ("The Human Experience" 17), asserting that "narratives, on the one hand, are the modes of discourse appropriate to our experience of time; and time experience, on the other hand, is the ultimate referent of the narrative mode" (25).¹⁸

Drawing similarly on the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, Carr takes Ricoeur's position one step further, arguing not merely that there is a structural parallel between narrativity and temporality, but that the former is rooted in, derived from, the latter. Carr believes in the "structured and organized character of *pre*-reflective experience" (37) such that White's "mere sequence" becomes for him "configured sequence" (44):

Before we dismember them analytically, and even before we revise them retrospectively, our experiences and our actions constitute narratives for us. Their elements and phases are lived through *as* organized by a grasp which spans time, is retrospective and prospective, and which thus seeks to escape from the very temporal perspective of the now which makes it possible. (69)

The province of narrative is usually held to be "aesthetic" (with reference to fiction) or "cognitive" (with reference to history), whereas Carr would identify it first and foremost as "practical" (70–71), relocating it in the theater of daily experience in which "we are constantly striving, with more or less success, to occupy the story-teller's position with respect to our own actions" (61).

White asks, in effect, when it comes to representing reality, why privilege narrative? Carr boldly replies that narrative is the "bedrock" (44) of experience: "In our view there is nothing below this narrative structure,

¹⁸ "The Human Experience" (1979) and "Narrative Time" (1980) offer the essential outline of Ricoeur's position, which he has elaborated in his magisterial three-volume study, *Time and Narrative* (1984–1988). I believe that Janet Gunn was the first critic writing about autobiography to stress the fittingness of narrative to represent the experiential reality of selfhood (especially the experience of temporality). Her reasoning borrows extensively from phenomenology.

at least nothing that is experienceable by us or comprehensible in experiential terms” (65–66). This claim strikes me as unnecessarily extreme. As I suggested in chapter 1, I am much more inclined to side with Nathalie Sarraute, for example, who believes that “tropisms”—defined by one of her commentators as “the myriad subconscious and rapidly shifting reactions to external stimuli” (Besser 155)—constitute the true atoms, the basic units, of experience. Sarraute’s view would be closer to the somatic grounding of experience in the “experientialism” of George Lakoff or the neurology of Oliver Sacks. According to Lakoff, “conceptual structure,” the makeup of our mental categories (of which metaphor would be a primary example) “is meaningful because it is *embodied*, that is, it arises from, and is tied to, our preconceptual bodily experiences.”

The chief problem confronting this proposition is its assumption “that our bodily experience itself has structure, that it is not an unstructured mush”—“structure, after all, cannot arise from something that has no structure whatever.” By way of solution, Lakoff and Mark Johnson propose that there are “two kinds of structure in our preconceptual experiences,” a “basic-level structure” defined by “the convergence of our gestalt perception, our capacity for bodily movement, and our ability to form rich mental images,” and a “kinesthetic image-schematic structure” (*Women* 267).¹⁹ Much in Lakoff’s position remains speculative, and he and Johnson are the first to concede, for example, that “we do not know very much about the experiential bases of metaphors” (*Metaphors* 19), but the testimony of Sarraute and the case studies of Sacks suggest nonetheless that the body’s contribution to the structures of consciousness will be empirically confirmed in the time to come.

It would be a mistake to draw too stark a contrast between the two sides of the debate I have presented about the nature of human experience and its representation, for positions on both sides are surprisingly nuanced despite the categorical cast of some of the pronouncements. Thus Carr, for all his talk of narrative as the bedrock of experience, cautiously dissociates himself from any claim for narrative as “a transcultural—or rather omni-cultural—phenomenon” (67). Indeed, Carr comes rather close to White in the concluding pages of his book, where he allows that narrative structure may be “culturally bound” (184).²⁰ For his part, White opens his

¹⁹ Lakoff and Johnson also address a second and related problem, the derivation of abstract concepts and abstract reason from bodily experience. See *Women* 266–68 for a brief summary of their experientialist approach to the origins of mental structures.

²⁰ For Carr on narrative as a cultural phenomenon, see 66–68 and 178–85.

brief for narrativity as a culture-specific value by presenting narrative as “a meta-code, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted” (1). White may well insist on the discontinuity between narrative form and the experience it represents, yet he has speculated elsewhere that the basic narrative paradigms of history—Northrop Frye’s master tropes—may be derived ultimately from the fundamental structures of consciousness (*Tropics* 12).

If we accept the view of Clifford Geertz that not only thought but emotions can be said to be “cultural artifacts in man” (*Interpretation* 81), if we believe with Lakoff and Johnson that “every experience takes place within a vast background of cultural presuppositions” (*Metaphors* 57), then it is obviously difficult to define narrative exclusively as either a cultural value (in White’s sense) on the one hand or as an aspect of phenomenological experience on the other. Obviously, it would be a hopeless task to specify the respective parts of nature and nurture in this matter of narrative and the representation of experience, and my emphasis on the bodily dimension of selfhood, by way of the neurology of Sacks and the phenomenology of Carr, should be understood as a complement to my discussion of cultural models of identity in chapter 3. As far as autobiography is concerned, it would be a mistake to argue that narrative form is either entirely “natural” or entirely arbitrary. Narrative in autobiography is always a retrospective imposition on remembered experience, but the choice of narrative is justified by its roots in that experience.

Carr’s *Time, Narrative, and History* (1986) offers the most sustained treatment I know of on “the narrative character of everyday action and experience” (64), and he claims that several other critics, historians, and philosophers share his view, including Barbara Hardy, Peter Munz, Wilhelm Schapp, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Frederick Olafson (16–17). The case he makes for narrative has special relevance to autobiography, for he conceives of the self as narratively structured. Thus the autobiographical act of self-invention would be a special version of a narrative process continuously going forward in our living: “It is not as if a story was being imposed on or invented for events that originally had none; . . . we are composing and constantly revising our autobiographies as we go along” (76).²¹ The motive for this incessant making of stories about the self is the

²¹ See Mancuso and Sarbin for an argument that “people conceptualize the first order self, the I, by treating self, metaphorically and literally, as a storyteller” (236). Carr in effect locates the autobiographical act on both sides of the ledger, in both literature and life. Simi-

desire to assert “narrative coherence in the face of an ever-threatening, impending chaos at all levels” (91). Carr’s reading of the psychology of identity formation resembles Sacks’s comment on the desperate situation of the memory-damaged and hence identity-impaired William Thompson: “To be ourselves we must *have* ourselves—possess, if need be re-possess, our life-stories” (*The Man Who* 111).²²

At the beginning of this chapter I spoke of the self and its story as the principal large-scale metaphors of autobiography, but Carr and Sacks teach us to understand this pair more properly as complementary, mutually constituting aspects of a single process of identity formation. If narrative is the supremely temporal form, as Ricoeur and many others argue,²³ then it is admirably suited on the grounds of verisimilitude for representing the experience of selfhood in autobiography. In this sense, Lejeune to the contrary, narrative is indeed “natural,” for the self and the story of its formation are doubly temporal in nature and origin: in addition to the fact that its consciousness, phenomenologically considered, is structured by the experience of temporality, the self is itself a developmental, time-embedded construct. The destabilization of identity that results from the amnesia of Sacks’s Korsakov’s patients testifies conclusively to the role of memory as the foundation of continuous identity.

In *Fictions in Autobiography* (1985) I presented an ontogenetic schema to outline my sense of autobiography’s place in a lifelong process of identity formation:

The autobiographical act (when it occurs) figures as a third and culminating phase in a history of self-consciousness that begins with the moment of language in early childhood and subsequently deepens in a second-level order of experience in childhood and adolescence in which the individual achieves a distinct and explicit consciousness of himself or herself as a self. In this developmental perspective, the autobiographical act

larly, Jerome Bruner argues that “the mimesis between life so-called and narrative is a two-way affair. . . . Narrative imitates life, life imitates narrative. ‘Life’ in this sense is the same kind of construction of the human imagination as ‘a narrative’ is. . . . There is no such thing psychologically as ‘life itself’” (“Life as Narrative” 12–13). See also Carr on “life” and “life-story” (78–80).

²² See also Schafer, who holds that “the self is a telling” (35), and Bruner, who writes, “In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (“Life as Narrative” 15).

²³ Probably the best-known presentation of this view would be Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending*. Bruner comments: “We seem to have no other way of describing ‘lived time’ save in the form of a narrative” (“Life as Narrative” 12).

is revealed as a mode of self-invention that is always practiced first in living and only eventually—sometimes—formalized in writing. I view the rhythms of the autobiographical act as recapitulating the fundamental rhythms of identity formation: in this sense the writing of autobiography emerges as a second acquisition of language, a second coming into being of self, a self-conscious self-consciousness. (8–9)²⁴

Recent work by Jerome Bruner provides empirical support for this view. His investigation of identity formation in early childhood confirms that the process of self-narration “begins with the very onset of language” (“Invention of Self” 31). Bruner’s findings are based on a series of monologues of a two-year-old girl named Emily, whose parents, university professors, collaborated with Bruner and his colleagues by placing a cassette recorder near her crib before she went to bed. The resulting research, edited by Katherine Nelson in *Narratives from the Crib* (1989), documents the importance of this proto-autobiographical activity in the life of a very young child. The family plays a decisive role in the construction of identity, serving as what Bruner calls the “vicar of the culture,” indoctrinating the child in the received “genres of life-accounting” (32).²⁵ It is worth noting that of all the various commentators on self and narrative, Bruner is surely the most radical, for he claims that “mind is formed to an astonishing degree by the act of inventing self” (“Invention of Self” 31): “Eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very ‘events’ of a life” (“Life as Narrative” 15).

Further confirmation of the ties among narrative, identity, and temporal experience comes in the resistance to this linkage reported by autobiographers themselves, who not infrequently register a desire precisely to unbind the connections that constitute selfhood. We have seen that Sacks posits the integrity of self as necessary to the normal conduct of human experience, and he accordingly terms a “deficit” that failure of memory which hinders the narrative formation of continuous identity. At the con-

²⁴ I am indebted to the work of Erik Erikson, especially *Young Man Luther*, for my sense of identity formation as a lifelong process. Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice* demonstrates that gender must be a decisive consideration in any developmental investigation of the growth of selfhood.

²⁵ See also Mink, who observes that “story-telling is the most ubiquitous of human activities, and in any culture it is the form of complex discourse that is earliest accessible to children and by which they are largely acculturated” (133). See also my discussion of the relation between self and culture in chapter 3.

clusion of chapter 3, however, I noted a tendency in a number of recent autobiographers to dissent from this normative process of individuation. In an inversion of Sacks's perspective, self in their narratives shows as itself a deficit, an incompleteness, a lack, achieved at the price of separation from the mother. A work like Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*, for example, ostensibly celebrates the culture of individualism, relating the tough-minded acquisition of a powerful Anglo identity. Yet lurking at the heart of the book is a lyric counterplot expressing an insistent, regressive wish to undo this story of entry into selfhood in order to return to the timeless, first world of union with the mother.²⁶ In this case, and in the parallel ones of Roland Barthes, Ronald Fraser, and Maxine Hong Kingston that I associated with it, the impulse to write autobiography is accompanied by a counterimpulse that is strikingly antiautobiographical, antinarrative, antiself in its drift.

Thus Kingston traces the origins of *The Woman Warrior* to a list she kept as a child "of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat" (229). The goal of the child's narrative program is, ultimately, not to narrate but to come to the end of narration; to have said all of "the true things" about herself would be to have closed the gap that separates her from her mother and abandoned the solitude of her autonomous identity.²⁷ Burton Pike's speculation concerning the apparent "fixation on childhood in so much autobiographical writing" (334) suggests, moreover, that Kingston's "Maxine" with her wish for a storyless existence—"I moved carefully all the next day so as not to do anything or have anything happen to me" (231)—may be only a peculiarly heightened instance of a much larger phenomenon. Pike recalls Freud's association of timelessness with the realm of the unconscious and early childhood, whereas "the division of time into a succession of discrete moments," characteristic of the adult perception of time, would be "a creation of the ego and the super-ego": "Since the child's ego develops slowly, he only gradually loses his

²⁶ In a recent essay H. Porter Abbott identifies works by Augustine, Wordsworth, and Beckett as belonging to a special variety of self-writing in which resistance to narrative would be the defining generic criterion. Abbott interprets the "displacement of temporal narrative" in these texts as a symbolic "displacement of the father" and the archetypal story of identity formation associated with him, "the narrative of parents begetting children" ("Narratricide" 40). With regard to the autobiographer's motive for resistance to narrative, I see Abbott's emphasis on displacement of the father as complementary to my own on reunion with the mother.

²⁷ For a more extended analysis of Kingston's childhood experience, see Eakin, *Fictions* 266–73.

closeness to an undifferentiated sense of time” (333). According to Pike, the pull experienced by the time-bound adult autobiographer toward the timeless world of childhood “may be a way of blocking the ticking of the clock toward death, . . . and it may also represent a deep fascination with death itself, the ultimate timeless state” (335).

Whether selfhood is to be affirmed as an experiential necessity or cultural value, or to be rejected as a condition of psychological deprivation and loss depends on context and point of view. Because it is a temporal construct, diametrically opposed readings of timelessness follow accordingly. From the clinical perspective of Sacks, the frozen stasis of Jimmie G.’s affectless existence and the frantic instability of William Thompson’s prison of the present offer a repellent, pathological version of the timeless state; to Sacks these patients are less than fully human, their impaired identity reflected in the incompleteness or absence of life story from which they suffer. From the perspective of the autobiographer looking back, however, the seemingly timeless world preceding the formation of self may represent an idealized shelter from the mutability of experience and the burden of narrative, a fantasy locale in which lost wholeness can be restored in an unstoried continuum of maternal love. I want to turn now to John Updike’s recent autobiography, *Self-Consciousness: Memoirs* (1989), which provides a particularly lucid account not only of the role of time, narrative, and the body in the constitution of identity but also of the mixed feelings of both child and autobiographer toward the process of individuation.

III. JOHN UPDIKE’S *SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS*: “BEING OUT OF THE RAIN, BUT *JUST OUT*”

John Updike’s several narratives in *Self-Consciousness* concerning his psoriasis (“At War with My Skin”), his stuttering and his asthma (“Getting the Words Out”), and his teeth (the concluding section of “On Not Being a Dove”) insist on the extent to which the body shapes our experience of selfhood. The usual narrative of the writer’s formation and career, which Updike refers to dismissively as “a fortunate life, of course—college, children, women, enough money, minor fame” (41), is supplanted by various chronologies of his bodily ailments.²⁸ Updike’s autobiography is particularly interesting for its identification of a kind of primary *Ur*-self, which

²⁸ The penultimate sketch, “A Letter to My Grandsons,” a conventional archival reconstruction of family history and genealogy, is the exception that proves the rule.

he associates both with the body and, by metaphoric extension, with place: “I loved Shillington . . . as one loves one’s own body and consciousness, because they are synonymous with being” (30).

In “A Soft Spring Night in Shillington,” the first—and finest—of the six sketches that make up *Self-Consciousness*, Updike walks the streets of his Pennsylvania childhood, circling and circling “the tenderest parts of a town that was also somewhat my body” (40), until he stands—both in memory and in his literal reenactment in the remembering present—at the very center of the consciousness of the boy he had been. Significantly, in the twin instances of the child’s supreme happiness, his posture is just off-center: in the first he is seated on the curb in front of his house, watching the traffic go by; in the second (“really a variation of the first”) he is crouching under the overturned wicker furniture on the side porch, savoring “the sensation of shelter, of being out of the rain, but *just* out” (34). Both memories present the relation of the self to the world of passing things—to traffic, to the rain, to time itself.²⁹

Updike reports his mother’s story that he resisted being drawn away from the street (“No, I want to be where the people are” [23]), yet the child’s awakening hunger for experience, which Updike identifies as the prototype for the writer’s expansive self-consciousness, is tempered, curiously, by the autobiographer’s recollection that he also drew on imagery of “things going by . . . beyond my control” to put himself to sleep: “logs floating down a river and then over a waterfall, out of sight.” The autobiographer associates this “sweetness of riddance” with “mailing letters, flushing a toilet, reading the last set of proofs” (34). As Updike extends his meditation on the posture of what he calls “the essential self,” the nature of the pleasure in “riddance” becomes clear: the innocent child’s thrilling happiness derives from his sense of the safety of his position as witness: “If we keep utterly still, we can suffer no wear and tear, and will never die.” For the child, then, the opening out to experience is balanced by a simultaneous withdrawal from it, and Updike captures the regressive movement of these charmed timeless moments when he writes, “The experiencer is motionless, holding his breath as it were” (35).

In these moments of heightened consciousness, when Updike believes he was most himself—in his watching on the curb, in his crouching on the porch—he inhabits, nevertheless, the place of the other, of his father, of

²⁹ The association between rain and time is even more explicit in another memory that Updike interpolates into this passage: “I would lean close to the chill windowpane to hear the raindrops ticking on the other side” (34).

his mother. Latent in this pair of memories of the boy as witness is Updike's sense of his story, a story of a sensitive only child deeply marked by the unfulfilled lives of his parents that cast a shadow across his quickening consciousness: "Bright life, indeed, lay about me in all directions in Shillington, while there was something of a musty stillness, of balked and abandoned tendencies, in the long white house where I ate and slept and soaked up strength and love" (25). Thus he associates his early desire to be out on the curb with his father's "diffuse and confused hunger to be 'out,' searching for something" (23), while his posture on the porch locates him near his somewhat reclusive, stay-at-home mother, whom he recalls "tapping away in the front bedroom at her unpublished stories" (12), "hiding from the town, in our house and yard" (27).

Coloring the evocation in these pages of the happiness of his childhood in Shillington, where "time had moved slowest, had all but stood still in reference to a child's future that would never come" (40), where he seemed precisely to enjoy living a life free of the burden of having any story at all, is another kind of time, of stillness, which Updike describes as a "waiting," a waiting to leave the town that had been a comfortable extension of his own early self. By the time he was in high school, Updike was made to feel increasingly conscious, especially by his mother, that his destiny lay beyond Shillington, that he was to "avenge all the slights and abasements visited upon [his] father," that he was to "'show'" (33) the town and vindicate his mother's thwarted artistic aspirations. So intimately bound is his own life to these other lives that his homecoming is inevitably a reworking of their stories as well as his own. Thus, revisiting the haunts of his own early life, the autobiographer has an uncanny sense of repeating his father: "Walking the streets of Shillington this misty spring night was his act as much as mine" (23)—and writing about it, we might add, was doubtless his mother's act as much as his own. Are we surprised, then, when Updike confesses at the very end of this sketch that he feels strangely dispossessed of the life which his Shillington self desired to lead? As he returns from his walk to join his mother and daughter, "to resume my life," he concludes: "A fortunate life, of course—college, children, women, enough money, minor fame. But it had all, from the age of thirteen on, felt like not quite my idea. Shillington, its idle alleys and darkened foursquare houses, had been my idea" (41).

In the last section of the sketch, Updike associates the Shillington "idea" with his memories of Nora, his first "*real*" girlfriend, whose home is the final destination of his journey into the past. Stationed opposite her house, on a porch across the street, Updike imagines a reunion with this

maternally comforting girl of his youth. Unlike his mother's idea of "the perfect girl" who "would take [him] away from Shillington" (37), Nora functions as an alternative mother associated with safety, with sexual intimacy, with staying close to home. Updike recalls his relation to Nora as "furtive" and "sneaking" (38), for to see her, to succumb to the pull of Shillington, was to defy the future plotted for him by his mother: "I was never allowed to relax into her. . . . My avenging mission beckoned."³⁰ His relation with Nora marks, to be sure, his entry into adult sexuality ("in the relative scale of our youth and virginity, she did for me all that a woman does for a man" [37]), but it is also something more and quite different—at least in Updike's retrospective account of it.

As the older Updike waits for her to come out to comfort him in his position of shelter, he rejoins once more his primary self, the child "*just* out" of the rain, the child of the porch and curb, "fulfilled," "suspended"; he is, he says, once more "by myself." Calling attention to this suggestive locution, Updike speaks of it as "a phrase whose meaning could not be deduced by a stranger to the language even though he knew the meanings of 'by' and 'myself.'" Latent in the autobiographical act, as Updike intimates here, is the wish to be the author of oneself. As if in tacit recognition of the regressive tendency of the Shillington "idea," however—the wish not to have a "life," a "story," the wish to return to the timeless first world of the body before its inevitable separation from the mother—the "intense happiness" of Updike's reenactment of the past is presently interrupted by a slowly passing car with its message of prohibition: "Perhaps by sitting on this porch . . . I was doing something illegal. I, a child of the town, arrested, with my gray head, for trespassing!" (41).³¹

³⁰ In a parallel passage Updike represents himself as having internalized this narrative duty: "I did not let Nora's satiny skin and powdered warmth and soft forgiving voice prevent me from going on with my show" (38).

³¹ The feeling of prohibition doubtless refers to the maternal dimension of the relationship with Nora. In a passage preceding the interruption of his reverie about Nora by the slowly passing car, Updike summarizes his return to Shillington and the autobiographical act that presents it as follows: "I had propelled my body through the tenderest parts of a town that was also somewhat my body. Yet my pleasure was innocent and my hope was primitive. I had expected to be told who I was, and why, and had not been entirely disappointed" (40–41). Updike's conception here of the act of retrospect is not easy to unpack, for he moves quickly with the assertion of innocence and passivity in the second sentence ("I had expected to be told") to disarm the possibly sexual, perhaps even incestuous (the maternal associations) overtones of the first ("propelled my body through the tenderest parts"). And then the equivalence between the body of the town and his own body suggests that the sexual metaphor is ultimately connected to self-creation, the desire—Oedipal or otherwise—to be his own father.

What structures and strengthens this sketch, making it a great deal more than a familiar exercise in nostalgia, is the tension felt by the autobiographer and his early self between safety and riddance, between staying and leaving, a tension beautifully contained by the perfect balance on porch and curb between things passing away and the self that abides. In the last of the six sketches in the autobiography, however, which relates a visit seven years later to his aged mother living alone in the old sandstone farmhouse outside Shillington where she was born, this sustaining equilibrium undergoes a fundamental and decisive shift. Despite the wishful title of the sketch, "On Being a Self Forever," a changing, aging self has supplanted the child on the porch who, by keeping "utterly still," would "suffer no wear and tear" and live forever. Extending and refashioning the child's existential refuge, Updike in his maturity had turned to religion (230) and to art (231) for "shelter"—this is the recurring metaphor explicitly connected with the *Ur*-self on the porch—from the cost of passing things. He writes with considerable urgency about his need to assert the reality of self, the order of life as a story, against the faceless impersonality of the universe. What has changed for him is the ineluctibility of change itself, and his earlier appeal to imagery of passing things as a "sweet riddance," a soothing soporific, wavers in these pages between a sense that they offer in the very hum of their existence "a sustaining otherness" (233) to the burden of solitude and a sense that they remind him of the "inexorable" linearity, the tragic "once-and-doneness" (241), of living.

If the safety of the curb and the shelter of the porch encouraged the child's belief in his immortality, so now the autobiographer's inclusion of himself within the stream of passing things heightens his awareness of his mortality. Not yet sixty, "I am old," he writes, "though not as old as my mother" (236). In the final version of the relation between the self and the world, the author lies awake in the old farmhouse listening to the heavy breathing of his mother in the next room. The time of the child in Shillington had been timeless; now, he concedes, "time moves slowly here but does move, and is overtaking my mother" (237)—and it is overtaking Updike, too, as he acknowledges when he writes, "My mother was my future, as well as my past." The sheltering house had been the anchor of his childhood self; now, cast adrift in it, he writes, "My sleeping mother and I seem to be out on a precarious, swaying limb. . . . The house is too noisy, the bed clammy as though I am already dead" (242). This is his sense of her ending and his own.

In "A Soft Spring Night in Shillington" Updike indulges the fantasy of a return to the very beginning of selfhood, whereas in "On Being a Self

Forever” he acknowledges that there is no repose in the house of origins, no respite from the mortal drift of the world. So the trajectory of desire runs its course in the writing of autobiography. Updike recognizes that the self-invention of autobiography is essentially a defensive strategy for coping with the otherwise “unbearable” knowledge “that we age and leave behind this litter of dead, unrecoverable selves” (226). That the self is, finally, unrecoverable Updike notes at the very outset in the foreword to *Self-Consciousness*, where he emphasizes that “a life-view” is “provisional,” distorting, and necessarily incomplete; “a background of dark matter—all that is not said—remains buzzing” (xii).

IV. JAMES MCCONKEY’S *COURT OF MEMORY*: “WE ARE WHAT WE WERE”

I have presented the case for narrative in autobiography as an appropriate form for the representation of a life, given the narrative quality of selfhood and its experience. In fact, however, autobiographies that portray this phenomenological narrativity of perception postulated by Oliver Sacks, David Carr, Jerome Bruner, and others are comparatively rare—passages in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *The Words* (1964) offer perhaps the best illustration of it.³² On the whole, the characteristically retrospective posture of autobiographical discourse does not seem to lend itself easily to the re-creation of past consciousness unfolding moment by moment in the successive presents of the past. Even when they stop short of re-creating the narrativity of perception itself, though, many autobiographies do testify to the conditioning of consciousness by exposure to the store of narratives that so largely constitute any cultural world. I am thinking, for example, of Maxine Hong Kingston, who traces her own performance of autobiography to her saturation in her mother’s endless “talk-stories” of Chinese myth and legend, or of Sartre, again, who demonstrates how the living of the life he records was already decisively shaped by a consciousness steeped in the teleology of nineteenth-century biography, a teleology that provided him with structures for the emplotment of a life and the creation of an identity.

Despite belief in the likeness between text and life that the writing of an autobiography would seem to presume, the psychology of the autobiographical act does not necessarily promote a sense of continuity between narrative and experience. One of the enabling fictions of a great deal of

³² See Eakin, *Fictions* 126–80.

autobiographical discourse is that the self and life story to be represented are in some fundamental sense complete. In order to sustain this sense of the matter of autobiography as stable and integrated, we can come to understand the autobiographical act as somehow taking place outside time, apart from the life it is engaged in re-creating.³³ One-shot autobiographies, especially when written at a comparatively advanced age, are apt to mask the fact that the autobiographical act is itself a part, frequently a decisive part, of the life that it seeks to represent.³⁴ Some autobiographers, however, practice their art over many years—I am thinking of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, of Henry David Thoreau—and some of them—Frederick Douglass, Lillian Hellman, Michel Leiris, Maya Angelou—produce several autobiographies; in these cases the continuity between writing and living a life is harder to ignore. Although the autobiographical act is always embedded in the life it relates, only occasionally does an autobiography dramatize this fact: Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957) is one example, and Kim Chernin's *In My Mother's House* (1983) is another. James McConkey's *Court of Memory* (1983) provides an especially revealing illustration of the role that autobiographical narrative plays in the process of living a life.

Court of Memory is divided into two volumes, *Crossroads* and *The Stranger at the Crossroads*. The individual autobiographical sketches that make up each volume are organized chronologically by date of composition. The eleven numbered (and otherwise untitled) sketches in the first volume run from 1960 to 1966, at the rate of one or two per year; the twelve numbered sketches of the second run at a similar rate for a similar period, from 1976 to 1981; and a final sketch, "1982," serves as an introduction to the whole collection. McConkey has engaged in life writing for the better part of a lifetime, for his project with its two sustained phases of activity separated by a ten-year lapse spans more than twenty years.³⁵ In the introduction he begins by *remembering* the circumstances that led to the first sketch in the series, making clear that the writing of this sketch—and of all the others—now belongs to autobiographical retrospect; it is to be understood as an integral part of the living of his life and not merely as a record of it.

The original impulse grew out of a mood of cultural crisis, a "sense of imminent catastrophe" (xiii) that the autobiographer associates with the Cold War and the threat of nuclear holocaust. On a particular January

³³ See Eakin, "Malcolm X."

³⁴ See chapter 2 for an extended treatment of this issue.

³⁵ *Crossroads* was published separately in 1968. By reissuing it with the later volume, McConkey suggests that both belong to a single, long-term autobiographical impulse.

night, he writes, “I underwent a change so radical that it transformed my apprehension both of the world and of valid modes for writing about people” (xi). Filled with a sense of “the sacredness” of “the ordinary and the commonplace,” McConkey undergoes an experience tantamount to a conversion. Abandoning the writing of fiction and taking up autobiography in its stead as the only way in which to express this new and life-altering vision of the truth of his feelings, he determines to write about “a botched-up night stand I had built as a child for my mother” (xii), and so his project is launched.

I have already suggested that by adopting chronology of composition to date and organize the sketches sequentially, McConkey makes the large-scale structure of *Court of Memory* stress the embeddedness of autobiographical writing in the life it seeks to represent. Within each sketch, however, the origins of the autobiographical act, the story of the story, are traced to an intricate network of observation, memory, and dreams that constitutes McConkey’s consciousness in the brief period—usually a few days or weeks—reconstructed by a given sketch. This procedure invites us to understand autobiography as experiential process, first growing out of experience and then, looping back, coming to be a part of its structure. In the specular circularity of McConkey’s court of memory, the story of the nightstand (dated 1960) that was to mark his turn from fiction to autobiography is the story of its own genesis.

This genesis, moreover, is double, the story of the story’s composition in the 1960s when the autobiographer is in his early forties, and the story of the nightstand’s construction some thirty years before when he was an adolescent growing up in the depression.³⁶ McConkey places the two stories in a causal relation, for it is a recurring dream of the nightstand, “identical” (7) night after night, that prompts him to write about it. In Wordsworthian fashion the adult artist, caught in a period of stalled creativity, revisits the hiding places of imaginative power associated with a homely piece of childhood making—the child is father of the man. McConkey playfully attributes to the nightstand a volition of its own: “Rejected, . . . it rose into my dreams, haunting me for my neglect of it” (8). Once authorized to find its place in his conscious artistic life, the nightstand, hitherto repressed, reactivates memories of what proves to be the central period of his identity formation, his father’s abandonment and di-

³⁶ The original title of this sketch when it was published separately in 1960 was “A Night Stand,” alluding both to the central object of memory and to McConkey’s nocturnal conversion, the “stand” he takes on the value of autobiographical truth.

voice of his mother and the subsequent breakup of the family during the depression. In the traditional narrative of autobiographical retrospect this material would be presented once, in chronological sequence, whereas McConkey goes back to it many times as particular events in the present trigger returns in memory to these key events of the past. Thus he reverts to this core passage of his history in seven of the twenty-one sketches: in 1960, 1963, and 1964 (sketches 1, 6, and 7 in the first volume), and later on in 1978, 1979, and 1981 (sketches 4, 8, 10, and 12 in the second volume).

The structure of *Court of Memory*, which preserves in discrete, dated units the record of the autobiographer's successive engagements with the past, produced seriatim over the years, reminds us to use a certain care in distinguishing between past and present in autobiography, for the past as past is never over and done with but is always in the process of being redefined by a constantly revisiting present, a present suffused with memories of the past. In the introduction McConkey recognizes the evolving relation between present and past as the "plot" of his autobiography, and time as the driving force of plot: "Time itself imposes the progression—but progression as we normally perceive it, a continual interweaving of current happening and related remembrance, with certain memories (those leitmotifs of our lives, the events that early shaped us) recurring more frequently than others. . . . We are what we were" (xiv). In telling one truth here, about the fundamental temporality of experience, McConkey partly obscures another, for the "recurring" memories are more than merely "leitmotifs." McConkey's "time" is not only "progression" or even "progression as we normally perceive it" but a psychologically configured time in which remembering consciousness and imaginative art collaborate to work through unfinished business from his past. Taken in conjunction with the six other sketches devoted to the McConkey family crisis of the depression years, the story of the nightstand is revealed in effect as a kind of screen memory for an abiding feeling of insecurity that is only confronted definitively in the sketch that concludes the second volume of autobiography twenty years later. McConkey's emphasis on a serial, temporal "plot" masks a progressive, developmental, psychological "plot," for it is a single nucleus of memories that establishes both the themes of his autobiographical art and the rhythms of its performance.

McConkey understands the creativity that went into the building of the "wobbly" (8) nightstand and the writing of his early failed stories that followed ("ten-page thrillers, . . . all with happy endings") as an exercise of power over a world he was otherwise powerless to control: "Playing

God, . . . I could bring love to hate, peace to violence, unity to chaos” (9). And his mother, moreover, had preserved this pledge of his love through all the displacements and wanderings of the McConkeys during the depression; the little table functions as an emblem of stability, which he explicitly associates with her hope, expressed to him in a letter, that “*our whole family can be together again*” (11). McConkey concludes his reminiscence by playfully evoking a moment of vision in which all the elements of the sketch, past and present, are drawn into a pattern of coherence and order as he walks his dog under the cold January stars:

Except for the Big Dipper, the stars above me form no familiar constellation; and yet they are everywhere. The night is frigid but still, and the air hangs heavy with the cold: it magnifies the stars and makes them shimmer as through water. And as I watch, the dog pacing at my side, they form into dozens of constellations, each one a perfect table, each a flawless little night stand. It is, I suppose, my imagination. But I marvel, and am pleased. And, as I circle the filtration plant for the second time, I think I see my neighbor the dean plodding ahead of me, his cane tapping into the ice; upon the hill across the road, ghostly in the starlight, my other neighbor glides softly among the tombstones. (13)

McConkey’s “ghostly” conceit of the heavenly nightstands may be a textbook example of the pathetic fallacy, but conceit and fallacy alike speak to the human need for order, and many of the sketches conclude with a vision of this kind in which all the apparently disparate and fragmentary materials of experience are revealed as interconnected, constellated into a single and edifying structure of meaning.³⁷ Including the figures of the two neighbors, introduced earlier in the sketch as signs of the real hitherto excluded from his art, the author marks the shift in his posture toward the world. The full significance of the second figure, however, a woman slowly regaining her health after a bout with cancer by climbing one headstone higher each day in the cemetery on the hill across the street, is not to be fully disclosed until the equally slow process of McConkey’s own restorative confrontation with his childhood fears of death is completed twenty years later.³⁸

The frequent theme of guardianship—making the rounds of the house late at night, checking the sleeping children in their rooms, walking the

³⁷ See, e.g., the conclusions to sketches 3 and 4 in the first volume, and the conclusions to sketches 5 and 8 in the second.

³⁸ Interestingly, McConkey’s unresolved concern with death dating from his own childhood is included in this first sketch, but displaced, surfacing in an account of his second child’s fears.

dog before he goes to bed—upholds quotidian routine as a guarantee of his family's safety. It is McConkey himself, however, who is most in need of reassurance; this is what gives these reminiscences their edge. There is nothing easy or untested about his celebration of traditional bourgeois values of home and family. Even though he recognizes and fears in his overprotectiveness toward his children a tendency to cherish "whatever was precious to me until my embraces had choked it" (70), he cannot stop himself from wanting to construct a "psychological bomb shelter" within which "we can be as protected as if we were snowmen within glass-ball paperweights" (20). Central to his passionate outbursts of feeling, his sudden angers and anxieties, is an imagination capable of an extremely heightened, even "feverish" sensitivity to the vulnerability of those he loves:

The pattern of moles on Larry's thin chest: I had of course seen these moles countless times, but to see them now, as the boy lay sleeping in the little room he himself had chosen for its bright wallpaper and its view of the pond, was to see the whole terrifying extent of a thirteen-year-old's vulnerability. They were tokens of mortal life and, as marks shared with me, of a heritage over which the child had no control; and they made me wish to stand above him the whole night, listening to his every breath. (63)

The task of many of the sketches, accordingly, is to relate McConkey's coming to terms with existential fear and to confirm the moment of resolution in the patterns of his art. This therapeutic work of reassurance, initiated in 1960, is constantly renewed from sketch to sketch, yet it is also true that by 1966 McConkey had apparently achieved a more permanent equilibrium that was to last for ten years (from 1966 to 1976) during which no further autobiographical sketches were written. It is his progressive recognition of his own vulnerability in his solicitude for others—the boy's moles are "marks shared with me"—that makes possible this momentary stay.

The seventh sketch, written in 1964, is the longest and in many ways the most searching of the pieces in the first collection, and it is here that McConkey deals most explicitly with the motive for his autobiographical art. "Perhaps in our middle years," he writes, "we would make order of our past because of the very anarchy of our feelings." Returning to the "landscape" of the past, McConkey surveys various "separate squares of land, each with its fences" (104), that he associates with the achieved serenity that is to be his lifelong quest. The first of these, and the prototype for those that follow, is a recollection of a year of childhood happiness

when his family lived on South Cedar Street in Little Rock during the depression. Supporting his evocation of a small boy's games and simple pleasures is the sustaining figure of his father, a tower of security and strength upon whom the "child of eight or nine" was "wholly dependent" "to carry me to comfort and dreams" (106). The boy's father, a ne'er-do-well dreamer, was a traveling salesman, and McConkey recalls missing him "with a lonely passion" (108). For all the autobiographer's wishful figure for remembered happiness as a self-contained, fenced-in square of land, the terrain recalled here inevitably expands to include the father's subsequent betrayal, his divorce of the mother and his abandonment of the family. Resisting the father's abdication of his protective role, McConkey concludes the reminiscence by turning back the clock to the time before his father abandoned them, to the perfect moment "when I awaited simply the scheduled appearance of a father who could endow me so richly, on each faithful return, with a past and future that—whatever *his* trap—I was freed to live in the present" (111–12). For the boy he would be again, not to have to remember is to be home free. The autobiographer, however, is driven to remember by a profound sense of lack. Following the logic of this need, we can speculate that any prolonged pause or cessation in McConkey's practice of autobiography signals that he has in some sense reached home.

In the rest of the sketch McConkey associates the happiness and security of the childhood year on South Cedar Street with various later episodes, including time spent with a little band of cronies in France at the end of the Second World War and memories of the tranquil life of a couple of refugees from Nazi Germany "who had known how to live in the present" (131) in a tiny college town in the eastern Kentucky hills. During a recent visit to Reims, McConkey discovers in the shattered and rebuilt cathedral an atmosphere of serenity "for which I had been searching since my childhood" (130). His feelings about the cathedral are not easy to sort out, for if the structure, scarred by history and gutted by fire, leads him to ponder on the "purposelessness," the "meaninglessness" (131), of the past and the future, it also speaks to him of the yoking of peace and tranquillity with violence and outrage and of the necessity for restoration and repair: "Look," his companion observes, "this whole building has been destroyed and put back together" (130).

Countering the boy's profound sense of loss, of betrayal into the burden of time, the autobiographer affirms the redemptive power of memory in which the past and the integrity of the self are preserved: "For we are the totality of our pasts; we lose nothing, and each day is the summation of

everything that has preceded it" (133). Numbering the unities of feeling—the joy and desolation of the child are one with the joys and desolations of the adult—McConkey meditates on the consequences of this growth “by accretion—a pile of joy here and a pile of desolation there”: “The irrational intensity of our feelings in middle age comes from the awful size of the piles, and we’re lucky if we can find in our minds some cathedral grand enough to hold them both.” No wonder, then, that the autobiographer takes the lesson of Reims to heart, purchasing a household fire extinguisher “guaranteed effective against all types of fire” (134). The modest scale of McConkey’s autobiographical sketches and the commonplace nature of his symbols of totality and order—a nightstand, a merry-go-round, a dehorned Kentucky calf—belie the Augustinian ambition of his architecture of memory. The title and epigraph for his own cathedral of retrospect come from the *Confessions*: “All this I do inside me, in the huge court of my memory. There I have by me the sky, the earth, the sea, and all things in them which I have been able to perceive. . . . There too I encounter myself.”

In the tenth sketch, which dates from 1966, James Rodney McConkey presents a pseudo-Chekhovian dialogue between “Jimski” and “Rodneyovitch” on the nature of personality that clarifies the autobiographer’s attraction to the world-inclusive grandeur of cathedral and court as figures for his consciousness and its representation in his art. McConkey credits Chekhov with the view that “personality . . . is a conscious and unconscious arrangement of attitudes and beliefs to serve as bulwark against the incomprehensible concepts of infinite time and infinite space” (173), and, he goes on to add, “in moments of depression I can imagine the unique self to which I hold on so dearly in danger of being sucked off at any instant into the near vacuum of black space” (174). In the second sketch (dated 1961) McConkey uses a newspaper story in which a young man on board a tiny plane is sucked out into space in exactly this fashion to recount a premonition of a disaster that does not, in the event, take place. In the present instance he confirms the Chekhovian view of personality as “a precarious stay against negation” (179) by reporting a similar experience when he “once melted, vanished wholly away, in the swarm of a Long Island beach on an August afternoon.” This memory of the dissolution of self prompts some reflections on stargazing, a favorite pastime but not without its dangers, for McConkey recalls a close call when he was driving alone one night along a Kentucky road, and “the three stars of Orion’s belt, bright through the windshield, drew me toward them, emptied me of all feeling” (174). One of McConkey’s defenses against an identity-

threatening universe is to “humanize” (175) it by means of a gadget called a “Starfinder.” Even cheaper than the cathedral-preserving fire extinguisher of the seventh sketch, this handy plastic and cardboard device for identifying constellations trains the eye to discover “that high in the heavens the name of each star is printed beside it” (174), thus replicating the reassuring vision of the myriad nightstands inscribed among the stars in the opening sketch from 1960.

In his living McConkey employs various world-building strategies to shore up his sense of self, the principal ones being his role as protective father and, complementary to it, his loving restoration of a Greek Revival farmhouse (acquired in 1962) as a bastion of permanence for himself and his family in a world of uncertainty and change. These activities, in sketch after sketch, provide the most characteristic material associated with McConkey’s life in the present, and the autobiographer knows that his preoccupation with family and farm represent an extension of self, a grounding of identity: “I am as placed, as surrounded by my possessions, as Hector ever was” (163). He is, in effect, rewriting the script of his childhood, correcting its flaws by becoming the father his father had failed to be, and in the deeply domestic art of *Court of Memory* he fashions a Starfinder and fire extinguisher of his own design, at greater cost, meant to last. Two episodes in 1966, however, the last year of the first cycle of sketches, make clear that McConkey’s hopes for all this building in his art and living are pursued without illusion.

In the first of these, at the end of the “Chekhovian” sketch, McConkey is stationed with his wife and his youngest son “in a nest of dry weeds” in a glen at the center of the woods that surrounds the farm. The little family group has blazed a trail to its hiding place, and a note on the door of the farmhouse by the road instructs the two older sons where to find them when they return from school. Here, if ever, McConkey is “placed,” in possession of himself and master of his past, and it is surely no accident that the rare moment of wholeness which follows is the fruit of a scene of anticipated family reunion staged by a loyal father for the benefit of home-returning children whose trust is not betrayed:

For a moment I had the extraordinary sense of completion. I was a clear identity, a man of blood and soul, sitting with two of the people I loved and awaiting the other two. The glen did not become the center of the universe; from this secret navel no mystic cloak of unity moved out in waves to descend on every man and animal and tree here on earth or on the strange creatures sitting on their haunches or crawling across the vast

plateaus of the dark and unknown planets circling Alpha Centauri. It was a limited victory, one that vanished as quickly as it came; but it was there, and worth the seeking. (181)

The fantasy of humanizing the universe is explicitly refused—this time no comfortable Starfinder’s vision of a child’s nightstand is invoked to domesticate the alien stars—and yet, curiously, through the autobiographer’s use of a Ciceronian preterition, “the limited victory” spreads and lasts in the expansive language that assigns it to the realm of passing things.

In the second episode, McConkey claims for the world-building of his art the power to shape his life for good: “I end my account in my forty-fifth year, thereby managing to keep myself and my world reasonably intact, my wife at forty-two, my old dog Black Judy still alive, and my sons at home, unmarried, and too young for the draft.” Intractable reality, however, calls the autobiographer’s bluff, countering his overreaching for control by burning down part of the cathedral of the farm: “I end too late to save my old barns. . . . Nothing remained at nightfall but a little universe of blinking red stars. . . . Some of the little stars in the ash heap went dead while others burst into flames that consumed whole galaxies.” It is, in truth, a minor apocalypse—“a little universe” with “little stars”—but the aftershock is nonetheless profound. The sudden collapse of McConkey’s confident sense of an ending brings home the vulnerability of the self and its defenses, and he turns in revulsion from “everything I could see or that had the power to touch me through the dark with its presence.” Recovering and gradually rebuilding, the self that emerges from the fire is tested and chastened, radically altered yet serene, like the cathedral at Reims. “I like again what I see, but I know the limitations, the threat, of putting all of myself into the landscape, into the house or the new barn, into the family” (182–83). Even though the autobiographer’s ambitions have been severely corrected by the fire, he reaffirms them nonetheless, turning at the last to his fascination with late-night call-in shows on the radio as a homely figure—like the nightstand—for the existential imperative that guides his art: “It is as if the expression late at night of one’s feelings to an unknown public, to the heart of America, will close some gap, will heal some psychic fear, will bring one safely to earth” (184).³⁹

³⁹ The notion of being brought back “safely to earth” probably alludes to McConkey’s fear, described in the previous sketch, of being sucked away into the personless void of outer space.

When McConkey resumes his autobiographical writing ten years later, in 1976, it is a distinctly older man who holds the pen. The self of the earlier cycle of sketches had been a man in his prime, the father of young children, the builder of home and farm; the self of the second cycle is facing the changes that the intervening years have brought, his children now grown up, his large house increasingly empty of the world he had meant it to contain. The autumnal mood of these pieces, though frequently running to melancholy, is nonetheless increasingly accepting of change. The defensive, “bulwark” mentality of the earlier years has been exchanged for a greater openness to the unrelenting work of time that brings him face to face with his own advancing age, of which there are many reminders in these pages. A seminar on retirement plans strikes McConkey, on the edge of his sixtieth birthday, as a strangely “disquieting” rite initiating him “into the secrets of old age” (310) (sketch 10, written in 1981); a visit from married friends whom he has not seen for many years (sketches 6 and 7, written in 1979) leads him to reflect that “the partners of a long marriage . . . are aware, if but on some barely conscious level, that one of them inevitably is to be made desolate by the death of the other” (262); and two of the sketches record the deaths of his father (4, written in 1978) and his older brother (8, written in 1979). All these gathering signs of his own necessary end flower in the penultimate sketch (11, written in 1981), which registers a profound understanding of himself and of the autobiography that he has written over a period of so many years.

On the sesquicentennial anniversary of the building of his house by one Thomas Kelsey in 1831, McConkey beholds in the Greek Revival structure “a dream of order” created “to represent its original owner’s sense of himself and what he could achieve as well as a spiritual attitude that justified his striving” (320). McConkey’s restoration of the old house and farm and his construction of his *Court of Memory* are twin manifestations of a single impulse to fashion a romantic metaphor of self along the lines of Jeffersonian pastoral: “For a long time I believed that, through place, I could become whole, achieving that balance of mind and spirit, of body and soul, that we ascribe to the Greeks” (320–21). The autobiographer recalls his first sight of the farm as the realization of the ideal, an Arcadian vision of the world of origins, “the omphalos of the universe.” This discovery of a “long-sought home” (320) for the self, however, yields in later years to “a sudden sense of unreality, as if all my efforts at wholeness through belonging were a kind of playacting, and I a person without substance” (321). If McConkey understood his turn to autobiography in 1960 as a conversion to the sacredness of the real in all its commonplace, now

in the late 1970s, during a trip to Greece, where he inspects “the remains of the temples whose pediments the twin pairs of wooden gables of our house simulate” (322), he undergoes a deconversion, radically disconfirming the premise of his building: “I neither could nor desired to belong to my farm or any other place” (328).

The motive for autobiography would seem to have run its course, and McConkey accepts the dying fall of his spiritual quest, his Greek Revival dream of a revival of faith, as the natural consequence of aging. His visit to Patmos, moreover, the “most religious” (325) of the Greek islands, leaves him with a sense of living at the end of a civilization from which the spiritual has ebbed forever. “And yet how the real-estate metaphor hangs on, in my subconscious dreaming!” he writes, reporting a recurring dream in which he and his wife visit an unlocked, empty house. In it he proceeds alone into a “long-unused” wing “much older than the rest of the house” which both fascinates and repels him—“We buy a cozier house, in town.” McConkey interprets the dream as a revelation of the secret “longing to escape” that lurks within “the yearning to belong,” “as if the self were the ultimate barrier to union”: “I want to hold on to my identity,” he concludes, in marked contrast to his aged mother who “doesn’t worry about holding to hers” (329): “In that diminution of her personal desires she is achieving that state which to Eastern religions is the necessary condition for blessedness” (330). And so, in the final passage of the sketch, McConkey falls into the old, familiar placing and centering activity of stargazing—“It was a pleasure to be alive with my wife and son beneath the constellations and to sense the dark presence of a comforting house behind us” (331).

The autobiographer’s strange dream of the empty house, especially his mixed feelings about its oldest and long-unvisited part, prefigures the startling peripeteia of the final sketch (12, also written in 1981). Here the mood of Olympian detachment achieved in Greece is shattered by a passionate outpouring of feeling and memory that recalls the volatile temperament displayed so often by the younger McConkey of the earlier cycle of sketches. The twelfth sketch opens with a discussion of the reasons for the recent move of his wife and himself from their upstairs bedroom of many years to a foldout couch in his study: was it to be within call of his ninety-eight-year-old mother? was it to recapture a sense of their relinquished role as young parents? McConkey recalls waking in the middle of the night—at “that hour of dread” (333) when he had learned of his brother’s death seven years ago—and finding himself overwhelmed by “death—the imminence of it, and not only for my mother” (335). Taking up the manu-

script of the eleventh sketch, he cannot bring himself to read it: “To finish the chapter and then the book constituted a frightening closure to my life” (336). This fear of narrative closure completely reverses the redemptive promise of McConkey’s conversion to autobiography in 1960 that the narrative of memory could be the medium by which he might discover a life-enhancing “personal order” (xiv).

It is precisely at this moment that he recalls the name of his father’s second wife, which he had seen written in full only once, in a letter to his mother that he found in her dresser drawer, calling on her to divorce his father, and so the deep subject of the autobiography, his father’s betrayal of his mother and himself, surfaces for one final time. McConkey’s resistance to the narrative and spiritual closure of the eleventh sketch makes clear that the sense of disengagement from selfhood that it projects was incomplete, just as the equilibrium of the ten-year period between the first and second cycle of autobiographical writing was only provisional. The episode with the stranger at the crossroads that inaugurates the second cycle and provides its title as well (sketch 1, written in 1976) suggests how much unfinished business from the past remained for the autobiographer to transact. The stranger is a strangely ingenuous young man in his thirties, vulnerability incarnate, whom McConkey recognizes as a kind of alter ego (xiii); he represents what the child in the autobiographer would look like if nakedly disclosed. The encounter with the young stranger functions as a symbolic reopening of an unhealed wound, and the unlocked door in the house of dream confirms McConkey’s readiness to make a final accounting with the past.

McConkey’s stranger, interestingly, is watched over by a devoted and protecting father, as McConkey himself was not, and the theme of his betrayal by his father returns again and again in the second cycle of sketches: in his great happiness (“of a kind and intensity I had never experienced” [224]) when he is finally able to forgive his father in the period shortly before his death (sketch 4, written in 1978); in his grief at the death of his older brother, who had functioned as a surrogate, protecting father in the time following the father’s abandonment of the family (in sketch 8, written in 1979); and in his recovery of a memory of happiness that the autobiographer describes as the return to “an authentic state of being, . . . an island of feeling toward which I had ever since been swimming” (314–15), when his father “became as carefree and affectionate as I had known him to be before he left my mother” (317). This island of security in the father’s love, the perfect structure of his world *before* the fall, is the time-

defying original that McConkey later seeks to replicate in his building of farm, cathedral, and court.

As I have noted before, there is a regressive vision in a number of autobiographies that expresses resistance to the process of individuation and the achievement of autonomous selfhood. This resistance usually takes the form of a desire to recapture an earlier mode of being associated with the mother. Why is the figure of the mother replaced in McConkey's case by the figure of the father? Perhaps it is because the mother in her abandonment by the father functioned as the alter ego of the abandoned child. No wonder that the adolescent McConkey, basking for once in the charmed precinct of his father's love as he walks the streets of a town he saw once "for only an hour or so," dreamed of extending the blissful present to become the story of his future as well: "Eventually I would return, marry somebody like the waitress [in the drugstore where he stops to have a Coke], and have children who loved me as I would love them." The fantasy is something on the order of Updike's Shillington "idea"; to inhabit it is to find shelter, like Updike on the porch, "out of the rain, but *just* out." Looking back, McConkey recognizes the "miraculous" quality of his happiness in the town of Oregon, Illinois, a triumph over time: "Though it was behind me, it was ahead, as mysterious and incorporeal as the nature of God" (317). The relation between father and son emerges as a metaphor for the relation between the autobiographer and his earlier self: "This kind of happiness within his own life reconciles a man in his sixtieth year to the child within him" (318).

The involuntary recall of the stepmother's name in the final sketch, then, carries with it all this freight from the past. It precipitates—in a kind of multiple exposure—yet one more rehearsal of the father's betrayal of the child McConkey had been during the depression, juxtaposed with memories of the father's "various departures and apologetic returns," the remarriage of his parents, and the father's death. Despite his refusal to reread the book of the past that he had written, the autobiographer finds himself obliged to face its contents anyhow. Remembering that his father's death "had presaged to me my own, I also was a child," he writes, "running off into a ravine in the woods to be alone, for my mother's grief had now become mine, and I had no idea as to what would happen to her, my brother, and me. In that ravine, I asked myself, 'What is the worst possible thing that can happen to you?' and replied, 'Your own death, you dope,' an answer that gave me, however false it was, a sense of solace and even of peace, as if God had touched my forehead with His hand" (337).

In this climactic final version of the betrayal, McConkey touches the bottom of his lifelong insecurity, the threat of the extinction of his own identity that somehow lurked at the heart of his father's infidelity. Then, circling back once more to the moment of his father's death, he relives his words of consolation to his mother—and surely to himself as well—“*that ‘this’ was no ending*, that everything she and my father had experienced together still existed . . . and would continue to exist, so long as memory endures” (338, italics added).

McConkey's fear of reading the finished text of the previous chapter and his involuntary recall of his stepmother's name and the memories associated with it pose the essential problem of time, narrative, and identity: to write is to conclude, making narrative the accomplice of death, while to remember is “to continue to exist.” Taken together, the eleventh and twelfth sketches present opposing views of the burden of time and individuation: the former relates a story of maturation and acceptance of age, of progressive disengagement from self and place, while the latter, resisting closure, reverses field, initiating a countermovement back into the past in order to remove the sting of death. Memory nurses McConkey through his confrontation with his existential fears, subsiding only when the work of the entire narrative has been undone: “The house with its sleeping occupants . . . had regained the holiness I had felt for it in those years in which I had been a young father, a guardian against the dark; and the pages on the table before me no longer held any intimation of my end.” Canceling the ending of the end, McConkey's memory becomes “quiescent” (338), and he falls asleep.

The autobiographer's triumph over time at the last, which seems to place memory and narrative in an adversarial relation, may be psychologically reassuring, but it is puzzling in the light of Sacks's demonstration that memory is the sine qua non of the narrative of continuous identity by which we live. An argument that pits memory against narrative may provide a resolution to McConkey's nocturnal crisis in the twelfth sketch, but it is flatly contradicted by the eleventh sketch and by the larger drift of *Court of Memory*. Narrative not only carries the autobiographer forward to the end but, as the story of memory, it carries him back to the beginning, both to the “prenarrative,” timeless moment (or “island”) of happiness and wholeness sustained by the father's love, and also to the narrative necessity of loss, of betrayal into time and mortality by the father's infidelity. Narrative is the story of both, just as memory is the memory of both—hence the beauty of McConkey's pairing of the last two sketches, for the tension between them, between the knowledge of one's condition on the

one hand and the resistance to it on the other, generates the drama that McConkey's *Court of Memory* is built to contain—"how the real-estate metaphor hangs on!" The structure of the autobiography expresses this double movement of the life of the self: the circular, cyclical rhythms of memory, beginning again and again its story of the past, are counterpointed against the linear succession of the units of narrative, given one by one in the chronological order of their composition, and named for the passing years; McConkey's successive returns to the past carry him inexorably forward into the future toward his end.

V. LILLIAN HELLMAN'S *MAYBE*:
 "NEAR AN EDGE IS NOTHING"

One of my principal themes in this chapter, and indeed throughout this book, has been the need for self and for narrative as the instrument of its construction. I turned to Oliver Sacks's description of Korsakov's patients for an illustration of what life might be like if we were unprovided with the operative sense of identity we so easily take for granted. McConkey's forays into autobiography year by year may serve as an analogue, a bodying forth, of narrative's role in our mostly unwritten lives; each is a "precarious stay against negation" (179), requiring constant revision and renewal. *Court of Memory* reminds us that the sense of completion which sustains most autobiography—the finished self, the finished life—is a fiction, for the work of narrative self-construction is never done. In *Maybe: A Story* (1980) Lillian Hellman dramatizes the consequences for one's sense of identity when narrative intervention fails. The aging autobiographer's desperate condition suggests the Humean plight that awaits us with the end of self-invention. As James Olney has put it so well, "For better or worse, we all exist and only exist within the circumference of the stories that we tell about ourselves: outside that circumference human beings know nothing and can know nothing" ("All" 134–35).

The difficulties Hellman faced (and talks in the text about facing) in achieving a narrative order for her material in *Maybe* make it hard to organize a discussion of this book. Let me cling, then, to a threefold idea of story in this shifting work: ostensibly, it is the story of Hellman's elusive friend, Sarah Cameron, but it turns out to be, more significantly, the story of Hellman's own life, her sense of her life *as* "a life," and it is finally the story of the story, an inquiry into authorial motivation and narrative epistemology. A brief synopsis will suggest the interconnectedness of

these three aspects of story in *Maybe*; reference in the case of both the other and the self proves to be subject to the limitations of narrative as an instrument of cognition, of biographical and autobiographical understanding.

Maybe opens as the story of Sarah Cameron, but it is hardly a promising beginning, for the second sentence reads: “At a few points I know what happened, but there’s a good deal I don’t, because of time or because I didn’t much care” (11). Acknowledging her uncertainty about where she first met Sarah, Hellman soon shifts to her memory of a dinner at the restaurant “21” with Ferry Dixon, Sarah’s prep-school roommate, and their discussion of Hellman’s first affair with a man named Alex. At this point the narrative moves into an intensely confessional vein, for Hellman relates Alex’s devastating assertion that she (Hellman) has “an interesting but strange odor” (20). From this point on, displacing the story of Sarah to a distinctly subordinate position, Hellman’s obsession with her purported smell invades the narrative, centering her quest for identity—Sarah’s? her own?—on her body. The recollections that follow concern her interminable anxieties on this score and her compulsive bathing, a downward spiral of self-doubt that is finally checked by an encounter with Sarah who tells Hellman that the promiscuous Alex had told *her*, Sarah, the same thing about the way *she* smelled during the course of *her* affair with him.

This scene of disconfirmation, however, is itself subsequently disconfirmed, when Ferry Dixon, in the hysterical aftermath of a dose of drugs, tells Hellman that Alex had told her, Ferry, Hellman’s shameful secret. Ferry goes on to assert that Sarah had never even known Alex, that Sarah’s real name is not Sarah. Obviously disturbed by unreliability in her knowledge of her own body, Hellman brings this first phase of the narrative to a conclusion with a meditation on the ultimate uncertainty of human experience, on the impossibility of grounding one’s identity on a stable foundation of remembered fact:

So much of what you had counted on as a solid wall of convictions now seems on bad nights, or in sickness, or just weakness, no longer made of much that can be leaned against. It is then that one can barely place oneself in time. All that you would swear had been, can only be found again if you have the energy to dig hard enough, and that is hard on the feet and the back, and sometimes you are frightened that near an edge is nothing. I guess that is what the Camerons are to me. (42)

In the second phase of the narrative, Hellman resumes her story of Sarah, shifting from autobiographical introspection to a more distinctly

memoiristic concern with the other, which she identifies as her original motive for writing this text. Taking up Sarah's purported involvement in the Macpherson shootings in Los Angeles, Hellman makes a preliminary attempt to authenticate the facts of the incident in the manner of documentary biography, but the contemporary newspaper accounts make no mention of Sarah Cameron. At this point, seeking to anchor Sarah's story in some demonstrable field of referential fact, Hellman appeals to "memories I have of her that I know to be accurate," although she immediately subverts their authority when she continues, "I do not always know what she was saying or if what she said was sometimes based on her fantasies or the fantasies of others" (44). In this connection she relates a curious, dreamlike encounter with Sarah on a chateau terrace in France somewhere near the Loire, and Sarah's account of herself and her circumstances on this occasion (later revealed to be riddled with errors) is so obscure and disorienting to Hellman's own sense of identity that Hellman ends this failed passage of communication by stating flatly, "Sarah, my name is Lillian Hellman and I thank you" (49).

At this point, halfway through *Maybe*, and as if in conscious response to her sense that her materials have failed to yield anything like the narrative coherence promised by the subtitle, *A Story*, Hellman interrupts the fugitive chronicle of Sarah Cameron with a second and longer meditation on the mutability of human experience and the impossibility of capturing its truth in this—or any—text. "*Why am I writing about Sarah?*" she asks, and doubtless the reader with her, especially when she goes on to state that Sarah "*is of no importance to my life and never was*" (50). It would be possible to answer her question by interpreting the passage and the entire narrative as motivated by apology, by the need to make clear to her detractors that in this and in her three earlier "*memoir books*" "*[she] tried very hard for the truth.*"⁴⁰ But "*the truth,*" as Hellman goes on to explain, is for her—and, she believes, for everyone—an inherently unstable category; the unreliability of others together with the fallibility of one's own perceptions at the time and the shifting memories of them and their stories later on conspire to make of "*the whole damned stew*" a "*puzzle*" that defies "*sorting out*" (51–52). Thus when Hellman does stubbornly persevere in setting down Sarah's story of her involvement in the Macpherson shootings, what we get, counterpointed against this sensational tale of awakening naked in a

⁴⁰ *Maybe* was preceded by three earlier volumes of autobiography, *An Unfinished Woman* (1969), *Pentimento* (1973), and *Scoundrel Time* (1976). For examples of the kinds of charges leveled against her autobiographies, see Gellhorn and McCracken.

purple room to witness presently three gangsters shoot it out in another room down the hall, is a running commentary on Sarah as a narrator and Hellman as a listener. If this story within a story is any indication, Hellman's existential appeal to narrative to establish the order of a life and an identity is doomed to failure. Sarah is "fuzzy" (60), indifferent to names and dates, and "there was no coherence" in her tale, while Hellman is only "half listening" (56), "bored" (58) and distracted by turns. This is the stuff out of which *Maybe: A Story* is made: maybe a story, maybe not.

This second phase of Hellman's narrative, centering on Sarah's involvement in the Macpherson shooting scandal, plays itself out in a series of disconfirmations, for disconfirmation of the truth increasingly seems to be the only truth in the disordered world of *Maybe*. "It's no news that each of us has our own reasons for pretending, denying, affirming what was there and never there" (64). And the stakes are high, as Hellman keeps reminding us, extending a line of thinking about the self that stretches back to John Locke. Possession of the sense of continuous identity is sustained by the agency of memory, and if the circumstantial web of names and facts and dates that we recall is broken, our very sense of self may be placed in jeopardy. Thus, in Hellman's last certain meeting with Sarah in the rooftop restaurant of the Hotel Hassler in Rome, the reciprocal recognition of identity is jarred by Sarah's curious determination not to be herself:

When I decided to go back to my room I moved to pass the table where Sarah was sitting. I stopped, touched her shoulder.

"Sarah, I'm Lillian Hellman."

Sarah said, with a warm smile, "*Lei ha sbagliata, Signora, mi chiamo Signora Pinelli.*"

"That's fancier than Sarah Cameron," I said, and started to laugh. I don't know how many years since we had met, but she was still at the old loony stuff. (67)

Following Sarah's disconfirmation of her identity as Sarah, Hellman presents a subnarrative of her own relationship with the gangster Frank Costello, which culminates in his disconfirmation of Sarah's story of her adventure in Macpherson's "purple penthouse" (73). Finally, a letter from Ferry Dixon reporting Sarah's death in Italy seems to end her story.

Hellman opens the last phase of *Maybe*, devoted to her relationship with Sarah's husband, Carter Cameron, with a confession of her uphill battle to bring the disorder of experience to heel in the structure of her narrative: "It's like the rest of all this, I do not know where he belongs, or even if he belongs at all" (75). The alternation of biographical and autobiographical

perspectives, which I have noted before, continues here, for no sooner does Hellman begin with Cameron than she shifts to an account of her last visit with her dying Aunt Hannah in New Orleans. Hellman's relationship with Cameron ends when he tries, unsuccessfully, to communicate his own version of Sarah's story. Then, as with the two preceding phases of Hellman's *Maybe*, disconfirmation takes over, more ruthlessly and definitively this time, for the case of Sarah, of Hellman, of *Maybe*, is surely terminal, beyond any hope of narrative cure. Soon after Sarah's son Som, a wasted drug addict, assaults Hellman with the grisly details of his mother's death and burial in a pauper's grave in Florence, Cameron tells Hellman that Sarah is not dead, that her death was faked to force an insurance company to pay a huge sum of money to their dissolute son. Interestingly, and given the narrative design, *not* coincidentally, in this last meeting with Cameron, Hellman suffers a kind of stroke, a darkening of her vision: she tells Cameron that she "can't see the other side of the room" (94).

A few months later, during a nighttime swim at Martha's Vineyard, this failure of vision is repeated ("I couldn't see the shore") and Hellman recognizes that she "was collapsing in a way that had never happened before" (100). In the aftermath of this disintegration of her physical being and the dissolution of self that it foreshadows, Hellman gives way to an outburst of existential anger, "the kind of temper that has no name because it is not temper but was some monumental despair," and she fires off a telegram to Cameron that reads as follows:

THERE ARE MISSING PIECES EVERYPLACE AND EVERYWHERE AND THEY ARE NOT MY BUSINESS UNLESS THEY TOUCH ME. BUT WHEN THEY TOUCH ME, I DO NOT WISH THEM TO BE BLACK. MY INSTINCT REPEAT INSTINCT REPEAT INSTINCT REPEAT INSTINCT IS THAT YOURS ARE BLACK. LILLIAN. (101)

This desperate, final SOS is a fitting emblem of Hellman's struggle in *Maybe*, expressing her visceral resistance to being swallowed up in the black hole of nothingness at the heart of experience. Hellman's plea for confirmation remains unanswered, for the telegraph company fails to locate the Carter Cameron to whom the telegram is addressed. This last failure of communication brings *Maybe* to an end.

Maybe is a story about the unreliability of both the self and others, and we witness time and again the collapse of biographical and autobiographical truth as the aging Hellman loses her way in the jungle of time and memory, a wilderness peopled by drinkers, addicts, liars, and the just plain self-deceived. At the same time, taking due note that so many of the

scenes reconstructed in the narrative are themselves devoted to the reconstruction of the past, we can say that *Maybe* is also the story of story, the collapse of narrative as a structure of understanding. Peter Brooks believes that “the authority of narrative derives from its capacity to speak of origins in relation to endpoints” (77), and others, as we have seen, have argued for the narrativity of experience. What Hellman uncovers in the story of Sarah Cameron, however, is the fundamental uncertainty surrounding the realities of identity, the difficulty of establishing certain knowledge of its beginnings and endings, the impossibility of authenticating the events of its story and organizing them in coherent narrative sequence. With the failure of narrative, life and lives become intractable “*piles and bundles and ribbons and rags*” (42), a “*stew*,” an insolvable, inherently defective “*puzzle*,” and the concomitant extinction of the self is waiting in the wings.

There is something premonitory and final about this antinarrative narrative, which Hellman was, in fact, not long to survive. If I have seemed to make much of what is, after all, a very slender text, it is because I am convinced that Hellman’s frightened sense that “*near an edge is nothing*” is often central to the performance of autobiography. To be sure, *Maybe* is an extreme case, unlike most autobiographical narratives in its obsession with weakness and limitation. Here there is a darkness and dispersion beneath the surface of referential fact that recalls Henry Adams’s gloomy vision of history as entropy. As Yeats put it, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” Yet if the possibilities of autobiography as a referential art seem to founder in Hellman’s *Maybe*, we do well to remember that narrative is, after all, even here the medium of knowledge about the epistemological instability of reference in its narrative manifestations.

VI. DAVID MALOUF’S “12 EDMONDSTONE STREET”: “THE DOOR WAS IN US”

It is ironic that of all the referents of autobiography the self should be the most elusive, for it is closest to home. The life of the self and the life of the body are intimately and indissolubly linked, as we have seen—what touches one touches the other. This knowledge is so near that we are wholly identified with it—we live it—yet it usually remains at the edge of consciousness until circumstances jolt us into awareness. Sometimes we have to be afflicted by illness (Updike) or injury (Sacks) or the infirmities

of age (Hellman) to be reminded of this linkage, and sometimes this knowledge is brought home by the very act of writing an autobiography, as in the case of the Australian writer David Malouf.

Malouf's program for his brief reminiscence of his boyhood home in South Brisbane, "12 Edmondstone Street"—the address gives its name both to the story and to the book in which it was published—is simple and absolutely conventional:

It is this whole house I want to go back to and explore, rediscovering, room by room, what it was that I first learned there about how high, how wide the world is, how one space opens into another, and from the objects those rooms contained, and the habits and uses they were caught up in (including the forbidden ones), what kind of reality I had been born into, that body of myths, beliefs, loyalties, anxieties, affections that shapes a life, and whose outline we enter and outgrow. (12)

His assumption about memory governing this act of retrospect is equally conventional: even though "the house I lived in as a child is no longer there" (3), memory preserves the house of the past intact. Although his father altered the original house extensively "towards the end of the war" (4), through a curious "trick of memory" Malouf cannot recall the new door of the remodeled bathroom: "I still enter by the earlier door." Through this "failure of memory" (11), the autobiographer writes, "I can keep our first house undivided, as it was in my earliest experience of it" (12). The structure of the house provides the structure of the sketch, and starting from the front veranda Malouf works his way inward, room by room: the parents' bedroom, the piano room, the front room, and finally, by way of the kitchen, the bathroom. For the child the house is a microcosm of the world, complete with topography, language, and history.

Gradually and inevitably the "one-storeyed weatherboard" house "on low stilts at the front, high stilts at the back" (4) becomes a metaphor for the expanding consciousness of the child. When he crawls under the house he enters a place of darkness where there is no time, "not even language," a "dream space" that mirrors "the dark" within him "in bed at night, at the very edge of sleep" (47). Following this evocation of the unconscious midway on, the autobiographer returns to the front room, hitherto "displaced" "in the otherwise orderly progress of [his] description" (48), and after describing it he turns back to it yet again, for he now recalls that he has "omitted something . . . that was the real reason for going back to it": the revisiting autobiographer detects "a familiar, not unpleas-

ant odour that cuts clean through the metal and cloth and wood-smells, and brings to this overfurnished garden the authentic odour of shit.” As with Updike and Hellman, smell marks the transition to the somatic register of identity, and Malouf recalls his habit of marking “certain places in the house that are my particular concern” (52) with “this evidence of myself.” This is the child’s “signature,” his “body talk”: “I am speaking with what is, for the time being, my body’s only expressive mouth” (53).

With the recovery of this displaced speech Malouf’s journey into the past arrives at its true destination: “the body—that small hot engine at the centre of all these records and recollections” (53), and the room of the body, “the last and most private room of all” (54). Here the child, anticipating the specular art of the autobiographer he will become, strips himself bare: “I . . . climb onto the chair and stand staring at my small naked body in the glass. It is the first time I have ever really looked at myself. There is no sign of hair” (61).

The moment of self-revelation, however, is perpetually deferred, for neither the child (as he was then) nor the autobiographer can wholly see the figure in the glass. Displacing and foreclosing the possibility of any direct vision of the naked child is the beholder’s mediating gaze, “for our bodies are inventions; we shape them to our views.” The autobiographer is doubly removed from this seemingly intimate, unguarded, innocent display of his earlier self, first by the mediation of culture and then, compounding distance, by the passage of time, for “it is a distinguishably different body . . . that goes up that one step into the old-fashioned bathroom and strips itself to view, a body fed with different notions of itself as well as different food.” Malouf’s recognition of the body’s cultural construction—the difference between “the contemporary body” and “the body of forty years ago” (56)—propels him to a startling conclusion that overturns the comfortably enabling assumption about memory with which he began: memory does not preserve the past; instead, it interferes with its recovery. Because the paradox is central I quote the passage at some length:

Here we come to a limit [,] . . . a threshold we cannot cross, since even if we could find the door to that room, we cannot now find in ourselves the body, the experiencing mind-in-the-body, to go through. That body is out of reach. And it isn’t simply a matter of its being forgotten in us—of a failure of memory or imagination to summon it up, but of a change in perceiving itself. What moving back into it would demand is an act of *un*-remembering, a dismantling of the body’s experience that would be a

kind of dying, a casting off, one by one, of all the tissues of perception, conscious and not, through which our very notion of body has been remade. (64)

Here the sustaining center of subjective life, the notion of continuous identity—without which there is no identity at all but only drift—is revealed as a necessary fiction: “Even if we could find the door . . . , we cannot now find in ourselves . . . the experiencing mind-in-the-body to go through.” Updike was right, after all, when he spoke, looking back, of “this litter of dead, unrecoverable selves.” To say with McConkey that “we are what we were” is to affirm the continuity over the long term of the shaping affective structures and experiences in our lives, but in another sense, equally profound, we are *not* what we were. Malouf brings us to contemplate the impossibility of the recovery of the past and hence of autobiography itself. The world of reference beyond the text is lost beyond recall. To reenter the house of origins would require the death of memory; we would have to give up all that we have become, the very life that it is autobiography’s project to reconstruct.

Writing autobiography, however, is a way of dealing with the irrecoverable pastness of the past, and in Malouf’s case it leads to a surprisingly redemptive vision of this hard truth, for “memory, in leading us back, has turned us about.” Abandoning any notion of autobiography in the absolute as an impossible and—worse—life-denying quest, Malouf in this moment of conversion at the last is restored to the present and endowed with a future:

[Memory] has drawn us through room after room towards a past body, an experience of the world that cannot be entered, only to confront us with a future body that can. Memory is deeper than we are and has longer views. When it pricked and set us on, it was the future it had in mind, and the door our fingertips were seeking was not there because we were looking in the wrong place; it was not that door we were meant to go through. The door was in us. Our actual body is the wall our fingertips come to. We have only to dare one last little blaze of magic to pass through. (65–66)

The art of memory recalls us not to the life we have lost but to the life we have yet to live.

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