
INTRODUCTION

All biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one story in place of another.

(Helene Cixous, *rootprints*, p.177)

It is my **political** right to be a subject which I must protect.

(Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.15)

AUTHORS AND SUBJECTS

‘Autobiography is indeed everywhere one cares to find it’, Candace Lang wrote in 1982, thus acknowledging a major problem for anyone who studies this topic: if the writer is always, in the broadest sense, implicated in the work, any writing may be judged to be autobiographical, depending on how one reads it (Lang 1982: 6). However, autobiography has also been recognized since the late eighteenth century as a distinct literary genre and, as such, an important testing ground for critical controversies about a range of

ideas including authorship, selfhood, representation and the division between fact and fiction. The very pervasiveness and slipperiness of autobiography has made the need to contain and control it within disciplinary boundaries all the more urgent, and many literary critics have turned to definitions as a way of stamping their academic authority on an unruly and even slightly disreputable field. Philippe Lejeune considered the problems, and in 1982 produced the following judicious and widely quoted definition:

A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality.

(Lejeune 1982: 193)

However, Lejeune himself remained dissatisfied with this since it did not seem to provide a sufficient boundary between autobiography and the adjacent genres of biography and fiction. A certain 'latitude' in classifying particular cases might be admitted but one condition for autobiography was absolute: there must be 'identity between the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist*' (Lejeune 1982: 193). However, the difficulty is how to apply this condition since the 'identity' Lejeune speaks of can never really be established except as a matter of *intention* on the part of the author.

As a recent critic of autobiography, Laura Marcus, has noted, the concept of 'intention' has persistently threaded its way through discussions of autobiography (Marcus 1994: 3). Attacked by the New Critics of the 1930s and 1940s as a fallacy, 'intentionality' signals the belief that the author is behind the text, controlling its meaning; the author becomes the guarantor of the 'intentional' meaning or truth of the text, and reading a text therefore leads back to the author as origin. Within critical discussions of autobiography, 'intention' has had a necessary and often unquestioned role in providing the crucial link between author, narrator and protagonist. Intention, however, is further defined as a particular kind of 'honest'

intention which then guarantees the 'truth' of the writing. Trust the author, this rather circular argument goes, if s/he seems to be trustworthy. Hence for Roy Pascal, an early critic of the genre, autobiography depends on 'the seriousness of the author, the seriousness of his personality and his intention in writing' (Pascal 1960: 60). For Karl Weintraub, an autobiography can only be understood if the 'place' the authors themselves occupy in relation to their lives can be reconstructed by the reader. Reading an autobiography 'properly' means reading with an already existing knowledge of the text's meaning: 'This moment, this point of view, needs to be recaptured for a proper understanding of the autobiographic effort; so must the motivation and intention of the author for writing autobiography at all' (Weintraub 1978: xviii). For these critics, autobiographies are seen as providing proof of the validity and importance of a certain conception of authorship: authors who have authority over their own texts and whose writings can be read as forms of direct access to themselves (Olney 1972: 332). Even Philippe Lejeune, with whom we started, and for whom the concept of the author is more difficult to define, requiring him to resort to 'authoritative' legal terminology, proposes an 'autobiographical pact' or 'contract' based on 'an intention to honour the signature'. According to Lejeune, the author of an autobiography implicitly declares that he is the person he says he is and that the author and the protagonist are the same (Lejeune 1982: 202); but have we necessarily believed all subjects in the same way? Have all signatures had the same legal status? Does not sincerity itself, as Nancy Miller suggests, already imply a masculine subject, since women are less likely to be believed simply on account of who they are (Miller 1988: 51)?

Miller's argument demonstrates the extent to which the genre of autobiography has been implicitly bound up with gender. Insofar as autobiography has been seen as promoting a view of the subject as universal, it has also underpinned the centrality of masculine – and, we may add, Western and middle-class – modes of subjectivity.

As we shall see, by focusing on a particular historical canon of texts which celebrated the extraordinary lives of 'great men', an important group of modern critics writing in the 1960s and 1970s deduced abstract critical principles for autobiography based on the ideals of autonomy, self-realization, authenticity and transcendence which reflected their own cultural values. For James Olney, for instance, autobiography engages with a profound human impulse to become both separate and complete:

What is . . . of particular interest to us in a consideration of the creative achievements of individual men and the relationship of those achievements to a life lived, on the one hand, and an autobiography of that life on the other is . . . the isolate uniqueness that nearly everyone agrees to be the primary quality and condition of the individual and his experience.

(Olney 1972: 20–1)

By gesturing towards a shared truth which 'everyone' can endorse, Olney establishes a particular view of the individual as transcending both social and historical difference. An appeal to the mysteries of the self can also function in much the same way as a mystificatory rhetoric obscuring the ideological underpinnings of its particular version of 'selfhood'. According to Karl Weintraub, man's task is, like autobiography's, to arrive at some form of self-realization: 'We are captivated by an uncanny sense that each one of us constitutes one irreplaceable human form, and we perceive a noble life task in the cultivation of our individuality, our ineffable self' (Weintraub 1978: xiii). As individuals, 'we', as Weintraub says, assuming that 'we' represents everyone, are above society and beyond understanding; by implication, therefore, 'we' are also beyond the reach of any theoretical critique.

It seems that there is little apparent difference for these critics between realizing the self and representing the self, and autobiography gets drawn seamlessly into supporting the beliefs and

values of an essentialist or Romantic notion of selfhood. According to this view, generated at the end of the eighteenth century but still powerfully present in the middle of the twentieth, each individual possesses a unified, unique selfhood which is also the expression of a universal human nature. For Olney, for instance: 'the explanation for the special appeal of autobiography . . . is a fascination with the self and its profound, its endless mysteries' (Olney 1980: 23). At the same time, however, autobiography, understood in terms of a similarly transcendent or Romantic view of art, is turned to in the first place because it offers an unmediated and yet stabilizing wholeness for the self. Autobiography exemplifies 'the vital impulse to order' which has always underlain creativity (Olney 1972: 3). Or it offers the possibility of alleviating the dangers and anxieties of fragmentation: 'Autobiography . . . requires a man to take a distance with regard to himself in order to constitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity across time' (Gusdorf, in Olney 1980: 35). Autobiography, as we shall see, has sometimes been viewed as aiding the diversification of culture and subjects through its appeal to different communities, its formal multiplicity and its excessive productivity. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, it was reinscribed by literary critics as itself offering a solution to the same threat it had posed by being restricted to the literary values of the 'few' and made to take on a unifying and conservative function.

Returning for a moment to definitions, we can see a revealing paradox at work in this formative criticism of the 1960s and 1970s. On the one hand, autobiography is perceived to be as ineffable and irreducible as the self it figures: 'Definition of autobiography as a literary genre seems to me virtually impossible', writes James Olney (1972: 38). On the other hand, critics like Lejeune and Gusdorf believed that the form must provide both 'conditions and limits' if it is to be containable and identifiable as an authoritative form of 'truth-telling' which is clearly distinguishable from fiction (Gusdorf, in Olney 1980). On the one hand, autobiography, through its relation to individualism and humanistic values, is seen to be

available to non-technical, common-sense readings: according to Barrett Mandel, 'Every reader knows that autobiographies and novels are finally totally distinct' (Mandel 1980: 54). On the other hand, autobiography produces an unease that it could spread endlessly and get everywhere, undermining even the objective stance of the critic if it is not held at bay or constrained by classification.

Candace Lang has argued that criticism and autobiography are difficult to separate, since they are both self-conscious discourses "about" language' and thus engaged in the same task (Lang 1982: 11). Robert Smith makes a similar point when he sees autobiography as 'a good way of taking the theoretical temperature . . . of academics in the field' (Smith 1995: 59). For the group of critics we are discussing here, the apparent neutrality or 'liberalism' of their approach to the subject both disguised and supported their critical authority. Autobiography was important to them because it helped to shore up an approach to the meaning of literary works through the author. The critic could have 'objective' knowledge of the work, thus ratifying their own place and authority, precisely because autobiography could be seen to supply a subjecthood which was both ineffable and discrete. The author stood behind the work guaranteeing its unity, while the critic interpreted what the author really meant to say, reducing the different elements of a work to a central message. What happens to autobiography afterwards, after the theoretical temperature hots up, forms the main substance of this book. Autobiography has been at the centre of the debates, which, drawing on mainly French theories of psychoanalysis, post-structuralism and feminism, have interrogated the self-evident nature of the subject and knowledge. Poststructuralism, in particular, by positing language or discourse as both preceding and exceeding the subject, deposed the author from his or her central place as the source of meaning and undermined the unified subject of autobiography. For the moment, however, before engaging more fully with these ideas and their relation to autobiography, I want to pose the problem of genre in more historical terms.

THE LAW OF GENRE

The term 'autobiography' is commonly thought to have been coined by the nineteenth-century poet Robert Southey in 1809 when he was describing the work of a Portuguese poet, Francisco Vieira; however, there is evidence of slightly earlier usage, at the end of the eighteenth century, in a review attributed to William Taylor of Isaac D'Israeli's *Miscellanies*, where he ponders whether 'autobiography', though 'pedantic', might not have been a better term than the 'hybrid' word 'self-biography' employed by D'Israeli (Nussbaum 1989: 1; Marcus 1994: 12). Felicity Nussbaum argues that by the 1830s the word had become a matter of established usage, though definitions of what it might mean were by no means stable. From her perspective, focusing on a range of eighteenth-century autobiographical writing, the pressure to read these texts in conformity with 'dominant notions of a unified self' comes later, indeed can be dated to the more prescriptive approach to autobiography adopted by those modern critics we have already discussed and who derived their models from a few 'classic' texts (Nussbaum 1989: 4–5). According to Laura Marcus, the nineteenth century saw a gradual alignment of autobiography with the value accorded to authorship. If one of the anxieties around early discussions was the public exposure of the private self, it is also the case that autobiography gradually comes to be the site where genius, and in particular literary genius, could be established as 'internally' valuable, without reference to other 'outside' judgements. The writer had a vocation which was not to be determined or valued in terms of the marketplace, but only with reference to the self. Taking Wordsworth and Carlyle as her two exemplars of nineteenth-century autobiography, Mary Jean Corbett sees how for them, 'writing autobiography becomes a way of attaining both literary legitimacy and a desired subjectivity' (Corbett 1992: 11). Autobiography resituates the writer *in* his work, thus mitigating the dangers of the anonymity and the alienation of modern authorship: 'The presence of his signature,

the narrative unfolding of his history, inscribes the text as belonging to Wordsworth, who becomes “knowable” to his readers and inseparable from this text as a function of that self-representation’ (p.40).

Vocation would seem to be the key to authorship and it is also the way in which ‘serious’ autobiography, that written by the few who are capable of sustained self-reflection, is to be distinguished from its popular counterpart. It is still the case today that popular, ‘commerical’ autobiographies by, for instance, pop stars are often seen as lacking ‘integrity’, as debasing the self by commodifying it. For nineteenth-century critics, such populism could be seen to threaten the respectability of the form. For one reviewer, writing in 1829 in *Blackwoods Magazine*, there was, quite explicitly, ‘a legitimate autobiographical class’ which excluded the ‘vulgar’ who try to ‘excite prurient curiosity that may command a sale’. Autobiography should rather belong to people of ‘lofty reputation’ or people who have something of ‘historical importance’ to say (Marcus 1994: 31–2). Social distinctions were thus carried across into literary distinctions, and autobiography was legitimized as a form by attempting to restrict its use. By the nineteenth century there was a definite hierarchy of values in relation to self-representation with memoirs occupying a lower order since they involved a lesser degree of ‘seriousness’ than autobiography. As Laura Marcus puts it: ‘The autobiography / memoirs distinction – ostensibly formal and generic – is bound up with a typological distinction between those human beings who are capable of self-reflection and those who are not’ (p.21). Similarly, autobiography came to be equated with a developmental narrative which orders both time and the personality according to a purpose or goal; thus the looser, more chronological structure of the journal or diary could no longer fulfil this ‘higher’ function of autobiography. According to Clifford Siskin, ‘development’ in the nineteenth century becomes ‘an all-encompassing formal strategy underpinning middle-class culture: its characteristic way of representing and evaluating the individual as something that grows’ (Siskin 1988: 12). However, to return to Felicity Nussbaum’s

point, such a view comes later, and it would be wrong to see earlier eighteenth-century writers of journals and diaries as 'failing' to write developmental narratives. Instead, what they found 'most "natural" was . . . something that recounted public and private events in their incoherence, lack of integrity, scantiness and inconclusiveness' (Nussbaum 1989: 16). The writing and rewriting of the self over a period of time, through constant revisions or serial modes, which was common across a range of autobiographical forms and writers before the nineteenth century, confounds the notion that there is one definitive or fixed version. What we must take account of, therefore, is the way a developmental version of the self, which is also socially and historically specific, has come to provide a way of interpreting the history of the genre: all autobiography, according to this universalizing and prescriptive view, is tending towards a goal, the fulfilment of this one achieved version of itself.

The question that is posed by the above discussion is not simply what kind of genre is autobiography; it is rather how does the 'law of genre', to take the title of Jacques Derrida's famous essay, work to legitimize certain autobiographical writings and not others? According to Derrida, it is in the very notion of a genre to constitute itself in terms of 'norms and interdictions': 'Thus, as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity' (Derrida 1980: 203–4). However, it is also part of Derrida's argument that every time a text designates itself as belonging to a genre – calls itself an autobiography, for instance – it does so through a statement which is not itself autobiographical. Hence a title which refers to a text as an 'autobiography' does not itself belong to the genre of autobiography. This may seem like a rather pedantic point, but it leads Derrida to conclude that there is always 'an inclusion and exclusion with regard to genre in general' (p.212) and that no text can actually fulfil its own generic designation. What is at stake here for Derrida is not the power of individual texts to transgress the law of genre but rather the way the law of genre can only operate by

opening itself to transgression. As we shall see, Derrida's point is also part of his larger questioning of the borders of the text, of what belongs to the 'inside' and the 'outside'. His writing engages again and again with the impossibility of stabilizing texts from the outside, since all markers of the 'outside', such as the title and signature, will get drawn into the process of the text's engendering. In attempting to posit a higher level of generality, genre is necessarily too general, but it is also never general enough.

Fredric Jameson has also questioned the ability of a genre to operate as a 'law'; instead he sees genre as unable to detach itself from what it is meant to define: 'Genres are so clearly implicated in the literary history and formal production they were traditionally supposed to classify and neutrally to describe' (Jameson 1981: 107). For Celeste Schenk, Jameson's argument has suggested the way genres are always 'cultural constructions themselves' and operate not as 'ideal types' but as 'overdetermined loci of contention and conflict' (Schenk, in Brodski and Schenk 1988: 282). However, it is also the case that for Jameson genre has a more pragmatic function in that it will be one of the ways writers will use to try to ensure that their text is received and read appropriately: 'No small part of the art of writing, indeed, is absorbed by this (impossible) attempt to devise a foolproof mechanism for the automatic exclusion of undesirable responses to a given literary utterance' (Jameson 1981: 106–7). The markers of genre can thus be used to insist on a resemblance to what is already known, and to organize and regulate the meanings of a text for the reader.

Genre could thus be seen as a way of creating a dynastic relation between texts, encoding tradition in formal features which operate like 'family characteristics'. According to Alastair Fowler's more positive view of genre, genre works beneficially by building a tradition of similar texts through a kind of genealogical imperative. Each work, according to Fowler, 'is the child . . . of an earlier representative of the genre and may yet be the mother of a subsequent representative' (Fowler 1982: 32). If we go back to Derrida's essay,

we can see that Derrida had also perceived how genre has a 'controlling influence' on 'that which draws the genre into engendering, generations, genealogy, and degenerescence'. However, according to Derrida, this also reveals how the question of genre can never be posed simply as a formal one:

It covers the motif of the law in general, of generation in the natural and symbolic senses . . . of the generation difference, sexual difference between the feminine and masculine genre/gender . . . of a relationless relation between the two, of an identity and difference between the feminine and the masculine.
(Derrida 1980: 221)

He also points out that in French there is a different range of meaning for the term, that 'the semantic scale of genre is much larger' and 'always includes within its reach the gender' (*ibid.*). In other words, genre cannot avoid calling up gender through semantic proximity; indeed as Alastair Fowler unwittingly demonstrates, in the lexical and metaphorical passage of genre through generations, sexual difference is inevitably installed at its heart: families descend through mothers as well as fathers, though it may be only the father's line that can claim to be legitimate. Mary Jacobus argues, with reference to Alastair Fowler's notion of a generic 'family', that 'genre is always impure, always "mothered" as well as fathered' (Jacobus 1989: 204). Citing Derrida, she invokes his paradoxical idea of the law of genre as 'a principle of contamination, a law of impurity' (Derrida 1980: 206). As we shall see, feminist critics have perceived the politics of genre at work in its turn towards a patriarchal law which delegitimizes women's writing. However, the writing of women, or perhaps of any subject who is deemed to be different, allows us to read back into genre the heterogeneity or transgressiveness it tries to exclude. Genre, according to Derrida, assigns us 'places and limits': 'I have let myself be commanded by . . . the law of genre', he writes (p.227). Autobiography, we could say, turns itself

into a genre in order to 'place' the subject, the 'I', only to be undone by the instability and difference already instated within the law.

POSTSTRUCTURALIST INTERVENTIONS

In 1979, Paul de Man published a radical essay on autobiography entitled 'Autobiography as De-Facement', in which he signalled the end of autobiography. Autobiography, de Man argued, was 'plagued' by a series of unanswerable questions, which arose from the fundamental attempt to conceive of autobiography as a separate genre at all. According to de Man, autobiography 'always looks slightly disreputable and self-indulgent' in the company of the major genres – the novel, poetry and drama – never quite attaining aesthetic dignity nor even providing an empirically useful way of understanding texts since 'each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm' (de Man 1979b: 919).

Most important of all for de Man, however, is the problem that is encountered as soon as one attempts to make a distinction between fiction and autobiography, and finds oneself taken up in the whirligig of 'undecidability', inhabiting a threshold between contradictory ideas. This experience, in de Man's words, is like being 'caught in a revolving door': you never get out of the dilemma but merely suffer from the increasing effects of vertigo (de Man 1979b: 921). As his own alternative point of departure, de Man proposes that autobiography is not a genre at all but 'a figure of reading or understanding' that is in operation not only within autobiography but also across a range of texts. He identifies autobiography with a linguistic dilemma which is liable to be repeated every time an author makes himself the subject of his own understanding. The author reads himself in the text, but what he is seeing in this self-reflexive or specular moment is a figure or a face called into being by the substitutive trope of *prosopopoeia*, literally, the giving of a face, or personification. The interest of autobiography, according to de Man, is that it reveals something which is in fact much more

generally the case: that all knowledge, including self-knowledge, depends on figurative language or tropes. Autobiographies thus produce fictions or figures in place of the self-knowledge they seek. What the author of an autobiography does is to try to endow his inscription within the text with all the attributes of a face in order to mask or conceal his own fictionalization or displacement by writing. Paradoxically, therefore, the giving of a face, *prosopopoeia*, also names the disfigurement or defacement of the autobiographical subject through tropes. In the end there is only writing.

De Man illustrates his thesis with reference to Wordsworth's *Essays Upon Epitaphs* (1810); not surprisingly, since it is part of his point that autobiography always contains the epitaphic, that it posits a face and a voice that speaks to us, as it were, beyond the grave. For de Man, the 'trope' that allows autobiography to speak also carries contradictory signs of death:

'Doth make us marble,' in the *Essays upon Epitaphs*, cannot fail to evoke the latent threat that inhabits *prosopopoeia*, namely that by making the death speak, the symmetrical structure of the trope implies, by the same token, that the living are struck dumb, frozen in their own death.

(De Man 1979b: 928)

Language both gives a voice and takes it away. In an earlier, companion essay to this one, 'Time and History in Wordsworth', de Man had commented that *The Prelude* was an 'epitaph written by the poet for himself', even if it was difficult 'to imagine a tombstone large enough to hold the entire *Prelude*' (de Man, in Chase 1993: 63). In this long autobiographical poem, who speaks to us is a dead man, addressing us, as it were, from his own tombstone. In *Essays Upon Epitaphs*, the deaf Dalesman is seen by de Man as Wordsworth's evocative figure for the plight of language: 'Language, as trope, is always privative. . . . To the extent that, in writing, we are dependent on this language we all are, like the Dalesman in the *Excursion*, deaf

and mute' (de Man 1979b: 930). The Dalesman, called up by language to conceal its own silence – the silence ultimately of the grave – also carries the repressed sign of that silence. The human figure is after all also figured by the silent text. This is the dilemma of autobiography for de Man: to call up a figure for the self which is by the same token a 'disfiguring', to depend for its 'life' on the same textual figure that contains the sign of its death: 'Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause' (ibid.).

De Man's essay constitutes a supremely deconstructive moment for Romantic selfhood, quite literally turning its assumptions on their head: instead of a subject who is unique, unified and transcendent, the Romantic self – post-de Man – is fatally divided, threatened by representation, forced to summon up rhetorically the ghosts of a self they can never hope to be. As Robert Smith writes, remarking on this significant turning point in autobiographical theory: 'As soon as language becomes an issue . . . any last footing "the autobiographical subject" may have had gives way' (Smith 1995: 58). The subject is undermined by metaphor, dissolved into words. The 'I', on which both the subject's and autobiography's identity had depended, is now seen as referring not to a subject but to its own placing as a signifier within language or in a chain of signifiers. 'The death of the author' which Roland Barthes had announced in 1968, and which signalled his attack on the concept of the author as origin or source of meaning, also had implications for autobiography. Just as Barthes saw the author as 'linguistically . . . never more than the instance writing', so he sees the 'I' as 'nothing more than the instance saying I' (Barthes, in Rice and Waugh 1989: 116). The pre-existing subject of autobiographical theory and its stabilization within a genre that could, like the self, be identified and recognized, was presented as an illusion, unmasked. Were we also then witnessing the death of autobiography?

The problem with death when it is invoked rhetorically, as it frequently is within poststructuralist theory, is that it is never quite the end, and leaves space for all kinds of ghostly returns. To go back

to de Man for a moment, the notorious discovery in 1987, after his death, of his wartime journalism in a Belgian collaborationist newspaper, including an anti-Semitic article entitled 'The Jews in Contemporary Literature', dramatically changed how de Man was read. As Geoffrey Galt Harpham writes: 'De Man's work suddenly switched genres, being read now not as literary criticism but as a coded testimony' (Harpham 1995: 390). Some critics tried to interpret de Man's work as a complicated, lingering act of expiation through which he was producing the analytic tools that would have enabled him to cut through the subjective mystification he had succumbed to in his youth. Others saw de Man's undermining of authorial responsibility and voiding of autobiographical selfhood as driven by personal necessity: his own need to repress his past. Paradoxically, his very departure from autobiography in his writing is what causes it also to return. In retrospect, too, the obsessive figures of falling, mutilation and drowning, which pervade his criticism, and which he offers as figures for the defacement of writing by tropes, could also be read as more darkly personal images of anxiety and guilt, concealing another reference point in his own life.

The violent irruption of autobiography into theory which this disclosure of de Man's past has seemed to represent to many critics may cause us to question a purely textual model of reading such as de Man proposed. However, as Shoshana Felman warns us, there is no easy way to locate the historical referentiality of writing. Whereas de Man thought that, at the time, his wartime journalism was simply 'factual', a form of historical witnessing, it is later shown, through historical hindsight, to have been involved with the 'ideological fiction' of fascism. However, fiction can also have 'real consequences': 'That history subverts its witnessing and turns out to be linguistically involved with fiction does not prevent the fiction, however, from functioning historically and from having deadly factual and material consequences' (Felman 1993: 147). In other words, history is never safely 'out there', to be defined in opposition

to fiction, but instead can, at any time in the future, disrupt our understanding; nor is fiction free as Felman says 'from real effects' which can work independently of their intent (p.148). Ultimately, for Felman, de Man's silence about his past tells us about the impossibility of simply remembering or representing trauma: his silence is also a testimony; it *addresses* us by reminding us of our own collusion in this silence, the repression of the past (p.164).

So far as autobiography is concerned, the usefulness of post-structuralist theory for our understanding of it continues to be debated. The argument that texts can have political or historical effect revives the question of referentiality or truth, without necessarily returning us to the same place. Indeed the notion of multiple locations, both as contexts of reading and positionings for the subject, becomes one of the ways autobiography has offered itself as a site for new theoretical and critical insights. Robert Smith suggests that 'as a field of interpretation, autobiographical criticism and theory is . . . conflictual and miscellaneous' (Smith 1995: 58). One could also say that it is both productive and diverse.

This book looks at some of the debates surrounding autobiography as well as taking account of the complex relationship between the theory and practice of autobiography. In Chapter 1, I write about some of the texts which have made up the 'great tradition' of autobiographical writing: Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, Rousseau's *Confessions* and Wordsworth's *Prelude*. What is at issue is both the development of a narrative for the self which has been constructed partly by later readings and which stresses the similarities between texts, and the more discontinuous history which emerges when autobiography is seen as a site for negotiating and challenging the different ways meaning is given to the self. This chapter already introduces poststructuralist theory as it is; arguably, only when this lens becomes available can we denaturalize the unitary or Romantic subject and see it as a historical instance, involved in its own ideological strategies. In Chapter 2, I focus on poststructuralist theory and in particular the work of Sigmund

Freud, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, all of whom in different ways undermined the assumptions of humanism and posited instead a divided subject, debarred from self-knowledge by the unconscious or by language. All four also move between theoretical writing and autobiography as if what causes knowledge of the subject to disperse also brings about the dispersal of the subject into knowledge. The subject and object of knowledge are no longer divisible, able to be thought of separately. In Chapter 3, I look at autobiographical writing, in particular by female and postcolonial subjects, which has interrogated the ideological underpinning of autobiographical tradition and explored the possibility of difference as excessive and uncontainable, not able to be recuperated to any notion of a 'norm'. This chapter also asks how autobiography can be used or read as a mode of political questioning at the very juncture of contradictory and dissonant discourses. Finally, in Chapter 4, I return to some of the issues raised by this Introduction; in particular, the relationship between autobiography and criticism and the ethical value of autobiography as a form of witnessing or testimony, which, however, can never overcome the problem of where to locate the past.