

*Autobiography and  
the Cultural Moment:  
A Thematic, Historical, and  
Bibliographical Introduction*

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Writing about autobiography in a context of literary studies involves one immediately, irremediably, and uncomfortably in paradox. Autobiography is both the simplest of literary enterprises and the commonest. Anybody who can write a sentence or even speak into a tape recorder or to a ghostwriter can do it; yet viewed in a certain light it might fairly be seen as a very daring, even foolhardy, undertaking—a bold rush into an area where angels might well fear to tread. Is it not foolish to imagine that one's life can be, or should be, transformed into a piece of writing and offered up to the general public for consumption? Nevertheless, whatever reasons one might find why autobiography should be practised by no one, recent publishing history offers plentiful evidence that it is practised by almost everyone. Perhaps this is so because there are no rules or formal requirements binding the prospective autobiographer—no restraints, no necessary models, no obligatory observances gradually shaped out of a long developing tradition and imposed by that tradition on the individual talent who would translate a life into writing.

But if autobiography is the least complicated of writing performances, it is also the most elusive of literary documents. One never knows where or how to take hold of autobiography: there are simply no general rules available to the critic. Indeed, in many cases,

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having somehow or other taken hold, it is only by an act of faith that one can sustain the claim or the belief that it is autobiography that is being held. In talking about autobiography, one always feels that there is a great and present danger that the subject will slip away altogether, that it will vanish into thinnest air, leaving behind the perception that there is no such creature as autobiography and that there never has been—that there is no way to bring autobiography to heel as a literary genre with its own proper form, terminology, and observances. On the other hand, if autobiography fails to entice the critic into the folly of doubting or denying its very existence, then there arises the opposite temptation (or perhaps it is the same temptation in a different guise) to argue not only that autobiography exists but that it *alone* exists—that all writing that aspires to be literature is autobiography and nothing else.

In addition to being the simplest and commonest of writing propositions, autobiography is also the least “literary” kind of writing, practised by people who would neither imagine nor admit that they were “writers.” But it is also (or can be and often has been) the most rarified and self-conscious of literary performances: the mere mention of Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory* and Roland Barthes’ recent book, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*—where the phrase “by Roland Barthes” is as much a part of the title as is “Roland Barthes”<sup>1</sup>—should suffice to demonstrate this. And I doubt that many people would want to argue that earlier autobiographers such as St. Augustine, Montaigne, or Rousseau were precisely lacking in self-consciousness or were without literary awareness and literary value, even though the tormented, hyperconscious modern self may not have existed in their days. Moreover, although it is widely practised by self-proclaimed nonscribblers, autobiography exercises something very like a fatal attraction for nearly all men and women who would call themselves “writers.” The daring venture of writing their own lives directly as well as indirectly seems to have an overwhelming appeal for all such.

Here all sorts of generic boundaries (and even lines dividing discipline from discipline) are simply wiped away, and we often cannot tell whether we should call something a novel, a poem, a critical dissertation, or an autobiography. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche remarked, “Little by little it has become clear to me that

<sup>1</sup> See Elizabeth Bruss’s reference to these two works in her essay in this volume; cf. also Philippe Lejeune, “Autobiography in the Third Person,” *New Literary History* 9 (1977): 49, notes 27 and 28.

every great philosophy has been the confession of its maker, as it were his involuntary and unconscious autobiography," and much the same could be claimed—indeed has been claimed—about psychology and history, lyric poetry and even literary criticism. Are we to call the last four books of Augustine's *Confessions* (which offer a commentary on the account of the creation in Genesis) philosophy, theology, hermeneutics, exegesis—or autobiography? What about Montaigne's *Essais* or Pascal's *Pensées*? Or consider R. G. Collingwood's *Autobiography*, which he says is "the story of [my] thought," but which sports such typical chapter titles as "The Decay of Realism," "The History of Philosophy," "The Need for a Philosophy of History." What is this—history, philosophy, autobiography? Or again, recall W.E.B. DuBois's *Dusk of Dawn*, which is subtitled "The Autobiography of a Race Concept": Is it sociology or autobiography, science or literature?

I fear that it is all too typical—indeed it seems inevitable—that the subject of autobiography produces more questions than answers, more doubts by far (even of its existence) than certainties. Paul Valéry claimed that *La Jeune Parque*, the longest of his poems and one of the most obscure, was his true autobiography and I, for one, believe him (see my essay in the present collection) just as I believe the argument that I advanced a few years ago that T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* is his spiritual autobiography. Where does this leave us? It leaves us at least with the perception that what is autobiography to one observer is history or philosophy, psychology or lyric poetry, sociology or metaphysics to another. Further on I will argue that literary criticism, too, can be seen as autobiography reluctant to come all the way out of the closet—that the literary critic, like Nietzsche's philosopher, is a closet autobiographer—and that this accounts in part for the very remarkable increase in interest that literary critics have shown in the subject over the past twenty years or so. At the moment, however, I want to consider the history of autobiography and the history of critical/theoretical—that is, "literary"—discussions of autobiography.

The first autobiography was written by a gentleman named W. P. Scargill; it was published in 1834 and was called *The Autobiography of a Dissenting Minister*. Or perhaps the first autobiography was written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 1760s (but he called it his *Confessions*); or by Michel de Montaigne in the latter half of the sixteenth century (but he called it *Essays*); or by St. Augustine at the turn of the fourth-fifth century A.D. (but he called it

his *Confessions*); or by Plato in the fourth century B.C. (but he wrote it as a letter, which we know as the seventh epistle); or . . . and so on. Priority depends on whether we insist upon the word: if we refuse to call a book an autobiography unless its author called it that, Scargill's latter-day entry bears away the honor, for the word was fabricated toward the end of the eighteenth century at which time three Greek elements meaning "self-life-writing" were combined to describe a literature already existing under other names ("memoirs" and "confessions," for example). Or if we are not hypernominalists (and in fact I know of no one who would stick at the word, so that as far as I am aware the present occasion is the first time Scargill's name has been brought forward in this regard) then priority depends on the rigor and twist of definition we give to "autobiography" and to all three parts of the word: "auto-" "bio-" "graphy." What do we mean by the self, or himself (*autos*)? What do we mean by life (*bios*)? What significance do we impute to the act of writing (*graphē*)—what is the significance and the effect of transforming life, or a life, into a text? Those are very large, very difficult questions, and prudence might well urge that we give the Rev. Mr. Scargill the palm and call it a day, for if we go back beyond him and beyond the authority of the word on the title page—saying *this* is an autobiography<sup>2</sup>—we shall find matters not only to

<sup>2</sup> There is a special irony attaching to Scargill's claim to priority—the irony that, although his title page affirms that this is an autobiography and although it is true that the author's genuine identity was that of a dissenting minister, this is not an autobiography but what the DNB calls "a romance." The historical moment that saw publication of Scargill's *Autobiography* also saw a number of earlier works republished under the new title of "autobiography": *Autobiography. A Collection of the most instructive and amusing lives ever published, written by the parties themselves: with . . . compendious sequels carrying on the course of events to the death of each writer.* 34 vols. (London, 1826–1833). The same month (October 1834) in which Scargill's *Autobiography* was published, Jack Ketch's memoirs were republished, edited, and retitled by Charles Whitehead: *Autobiography of a Notorious Legal Functionary* (London, 1834).

Also in 1834 (but in what month I am uncertain: the Preface is dated "Geneva, May 1834") Cochrane and McCrone of London published, in two volumes, *The Autobiography, Times, Opinions, and Contemporaries of Sir Egerton Brydges, Bart. R.J. (Per legem terrae) Baron Chandos of Sudeley, etc.* Brydges' work is a very curious performance, a misshapen, lumpy ragbag of a book, yet thoroughly complacent in its high self-regard. There is certainly a bit of autobiography in it, but also a good bit more of the times, opinions, and contemporaries of the Baronet. Although Sir Egerton's book is undoubtedly an autobiography in part and of sorts, I prefer Scargill's claim because the irony and paradox that the first *Autobiography* should have been something other than autobiography seems to me too nice to abandon. In 1833 a seventeen-page piece entitled "Autobiography of a Scottish Borderer" appeared in

be much more complicated than we had expected but agitated and controversial as well. The presence of controversy is evident in the fact that every one of the writers mentioned (as well as others) has had his champion(s) as the first—or at least the first *true*—autobiographer. This is one of the paradoxes of the subject: everyone knows what autobiography is, but no two observers, no matter how assured they may be, are in agreement. In any case, wherever and on whatever grounds we may wish to assign priority and to whatever books we may be willing to grant the title the practice of autobiography has been with us for a long time, and it is with us in generous supply today.

The same is not true, however, of a theoretical and critical literature about autobiography. That literature began, in effect, in 1956, which is not even yesterday but only about an hour ago as such matters must be judged. It is as if autobiography were a normal and natural human activity—and lately even a necessary human activity—while criticism of it is a moral perversion (I have heard it so described) and a simple nuisance. But if critical and theoretical writing about autobiography really is a perversion, it is well on its way to becoming a naturalized and normalized perversion and well on its way to becoming acceptable in polite scholarly society by the mere number of people—and respectable people too—engaged in it. Literary journals nowadays devote special numbers to the question of autobiography—*Sewanee Review*, *New Literary History*, *Genre*, *Modern Language Notes*, and *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, to mention only the first that come to mind; so many sessions of the annual MLA meeting concern themselves with autobiography that it is impossible to attend them all, and a recent American Studies Association meeting brought together twenty-five or thirty people, all in one way or another “authorities” on the subject; books on autobiography appear regularly from university presses, dissertations are even more regularly announced in the MLA bibliography, and recently it has seemed to me that hardly a day has gone by that an essay treating of the subject has not come across my desk. Of course, there are some particular reasons (the present volume being one) why these essays, once produced,

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*Fraser's Magazine* signed simply “H.” A certain aura of romance seems to hover about the piece (it may be more than mere coincidence that Brydges wrote for *Fraser's* also), and the seventeen-page length that requires it to settle for inverted commas removes the piece from serious contention for the italic-type authority of *Autobiography*.

should appear on my desk just now—but these reasons do not explain why the essays (and so many of them) should have been produced in the first place, or at just this moment in time. Why was it not proper to produce literary studies of autobiography twenty-five years ago? Why is nothing else as proper, as vital today? These are the questions I want to consider in the remainder of this essay, but before examining them we might get some insight into the questions themselves if we survey the kinds of critical attention devoted to autobiography, the recurrent themes of that criticism, and the varieties of approach offered to the subject over the past twenty years or so.

In the beginning, then, was Georges Gusdorf. True, Gusdorf is a massively learned man and he had by way of background the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, in whose historiography and hermeneutics (or in what he called, more generally, the “human studies”) autobiography occupied a central place as *the* key to understanding the curve of history, every sort of cultural manifestation, and the very shape and essence of human culture itself. And Gusdorf also had as background the work of Georg Misch, disciple, literary executor, and son-in-law of Dilthey, who produced a *History of Autobiography*, which was a true life’s work—three volumes, each divided into two huge parts, thus forming six massive tomes, 2,868 pages long, yet coming no closer to the present than the Renaissance, and terminated only by Misch’s death.<sup>3</sup> True also that two years before Gusdorf’s “Conditions et limites de l’autobiographie,” Wayne Shumaker published *English Autobiography: Its Emergence, Materials, and Forms* and that as long ago as 1909 Anna Robeson Burr published *The Autobiography: A Critical and Comparative Study*. But the latter has no real significance apart from its early date—a harbinger of a false dawn (there are good reasons in the book itself, I believe, why the dawn was a false one)—and Shumaker’s book, while an intelligent and penetrating work in its own right, is at one and the same time restricted in its theoretical scope and rather diffuse in its

<sup>3</sup> Misch’s work, as Gusdorf says with more regret than some might be able to muster, was “malheureusement inachevé”; but students and disciples of Misch carried his work on after his death, producing one more volume, two more tomes, another 1,000 pages, and bringing the *Geschichte der Autobiographie* up to the nineteenth century. The *History*, all of which was published under Misch’s name, thus occupies four volumes, eight tomes, and nearly 4,000 pages, and it traces the subject from prehistoric Babylonia and Assyria to the late nineteenth century.

treatment. Between Anna Robeson Burr and Wayne Shumaker, J. Lionel Tayler (in 1926) and A. M. Clark (in 1935) made brief excursions into the territory of autobiography and produced a pair of genial and pleasant exercises but hardly anything more profound than that characterization would suggest. Thus, it is only with Gusdorf's essay (one of a dozen or so on related topics forming a Festschrift in honor of Fritz Neubert) that all the questions and concerns—philosophical, psychological, literary, and more generally humanistic—that have preoccupied students of autobiography from 1956 to 1978 were first fully and clearly laid out and given comprehensive and brilliant, if necessarily brief, consideration.

When I say that it all begins with Gusdorf's essay, however, I would not be understood to mean that subsequent critics stumbled across "Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie" or came upon Dilthey or Misch and suddenly realized that here was a real subject that had previously been unrecognized or neglected. What happened was quite different and very much more interesting. As a case in point perhaps I may be permitted to offer a small part of my own autobiography, which I believe will serve to demonstrate the falsity of a simplistic, cause-effect understanding of literary history.

My interest in autobiography was not at first specifically literary but was an ad hoc response to a course called "Concepts of Man," in which I read, with a group of honors students, a number of autobiographies. At the same time I was deeply engaged in reading and discussing four modern writers: Joyce, Lawrence, Yeats, and Eliot. What I came to feel was frequently the case was that works in the one group were works of art that presented themselves as autobiographies (Montaigne's *Essays*, Newman's *Apologia*), while works in the other group were autobiographies that presented themselves as works of art (Joyce and Lawrence in all their works, Yeats in the *Collected Poems*, Eliot in *Four Quartets*). Now this was no great perception; it had certainly been brought forward often enough in the cases of Joyce, Lawrence, and Yeats. What was somewhat more interesting was a case such as Tolstoy where *A Confession* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* present themselves as virtually the same work—metaphoric representations of one and the same experience and consequent vision—while bearing titles that would identify the one as an autobiography, the other as a piece of fiction and a work of art; or the case of Newman where the *Gram-*

*mar of Assent* and virtually everything Newman wrote—whether novel, poem, polemical essay, or saint's life—has a strong odor of autobiography about it.

When I began (in about 1966) to write what eventually became *Metaphors of Self* it never occurred to me to look for critical works on autobiography for the simple reason that I did not think of what I was doing as a study of autobiography; I thought of it as a study of the way experience is transformed into literature (which I suppose could be another way of describing autobiography)—as a study of the creative process, a humanistic study of the ways of men and the forms taken by human consciousness. In West Africa (where I spent the years 1967 to 1969 and where I wrote a large part of the book in first draft) my conception of the subject no doubt began to clarify and focus itself around autobiography and its status as literature, but the book situation being what it was, there was no way, no matter how much I might have desired it, that I could lose my innocence with regard to critical works on autobiography. In England, where I spent the last four months of 1969 revising and rewriting my manuscript, I finally lost my critical virginity, but I still did not come across Gusdorf's essay (it has never been easily available). It was only when the manuscript was submitted to Princeton University Press in early 1971 that a reader remarked that I should be aware of Gusdorf; I read his essay, found it obviously brilliant, and made some revisions and additions to about five or six pages of manuscript.

In translating "Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie" into English for the present volume, I have been repeatedly astonished at the overwhelming similarities between that essay and my book, and after reading the translation, Professor Gusdorf responded in kind: "I have the impression that the translation is all the better for the reason that the thought is not at all foreign to you. These ideas are yours also. The thesis of *Metaphors of Self* even turns up, toward the end of the essay, in regard to . . . a critical school that worked out an interpretation of literature by attempting to draw out significant complexes characteristic both of a life and a work. These 'complexes' are also keys to the autobiography—'metaphors.'" It is my assumption that many critics of the autobiographical mode have had experiences very much like my own—that is to say, they worked out ideas about autobiography and then found themselves both anticipated and confirmed in Gusdorf (or Misch or Dilthey), but there is one more, later detail in this complex of anticipation,



confirmation, and interrelationship that I would like to mention. In 1975 Gusdorf published a second, long essay (“De l’autobiographie initiatique à l’autobiographie genre littéraire”) in which not only the ideas and the general argument but even specific details, examples, and turns of phrase are identical to those that I deployed in *Metaphors of Self*, but I know for a certainty that Professor Gusdorf was entirely unaware of my book in 1975—as unaware as I was of his essay in 1969.

Now this excursion into my autobiography can come to an end, but what I wish to say through this brief personal narrative is that within a few years of one another (and I believe quite independently) a number of people turned their critical attention to autobiography, found the same, new kind of interest in it and read it in the same, new sort of way, and that this number of people who share something of a common interest and understanding is increasing—has in the past few years increased—very rapidly. Which brings me back to the questions, Why? Why now? Why not earlier? In light of the experience I have just narrated, we cannot reply that it is a matter of simple cause and effect or of influence and imitation—that the work of Dilthey, Misch, or Gusdorf is the cause and the work of subsequent writers the effect. I am convinced that it was something more deeply embedded in the times and in the contemporary psyche, something more pervasive in the intellectual and spiritual atmosphere that caused and continues to cause a great number of investigators, thinkers, and critics to turn their attention to the subject of autobiography. Let us, however, again take up the thread of the history of critical thought on the subject.

In the same year that “Conditions et limites de l’autobiographie” appeared, H. N. Wethered published a little book called *The Curious Art of Autobiography*, which is interesting mostly for its title and the coincidence of date with Gusdorf’s essay. A much more important book was Roy Pascal’s *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960), which asks whether in discovering or imposing a design the autobiographer is not playing fast and loose with truth: Is there such a thing as design in one’s experience that is not an unjustifiable imposition after the fact? Or is it not perhaps more relevant to say that the autobiographer half discovers, half creates a deeper design and truth than adherence to historical and factual truth could ever make claim to? This is obviously an interesting and important question (which Gusdorf treats with customary acuity) and one that orients Pascal’s book toward a view of autobiography as a creative

act—a guest, albeit still a rather shadowy one and probably unin-  
vited, at the literary feast. However, Pascal shows a somewhat un-  
fortunate tendency to receive books into the canon or to cast them  
into outer darkness according to an uncomfortably narrow defini-  
tion that leads him to approve some as “real” or “true” autobiog-  
raphies while rejecting others as not “real” or not “true.” Never-  
theless, his book remains an important event in the history I am  
tracing. Interestingly, at the beginning of the book Pascal records  
something of an autobiographical impetus behind his work, which  
is significant because in this particular instance at least autobiog-  
raphy and criticism of autobiography are drawn into much the  
same orbit.

Early on in this history in progress, a number of writers at-  
tempted to establish the moment when a modern autobiographical  
consciousness and self-consciousness began to insinuate itself into  
culture and the creative act and began to make its presence felt in  
literature. I have already mentioned one of these works, *English Au-  
tobiography: Its Emergence, Materials, and Forms* (1954), and in the  
twenty or so years following the appearance of Shumaker’s book  
there were six or eight more books and a number of articles that  
focused their attention on this same historical moment (the  
seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) and philosophical/psycholog-  
ical/literary phenomenon: *Every Man a Phoenix: Studies in Seven-  
teenth-Century Autobiography*, by Margaret Bottrall (1958); *The Be-  
ginnings of Autobiography in England*, by James M. Osborn (1959);  
*Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography*, by George A. Starr (1965); *Ver-  
sions of the Self: Studies in English Autobiography from John Bunyan to  
John Stuart Mill*, by John N. Morris (1966); *The Eloquent “I”: Style  
and Self in Seventeenth-Century Prose*, by Joan Webber (1968); *British  
Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century*, by Paul Delany (1969);  
*L’autobiographie en France*, by Philippe Lejeune (1971); and, to a cer-  
tain extent, two recent books, *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and  
Novel in Eighteenth-Century England*, by Patricia Meyer Spacks  
(1976); and *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Liter-  
ary Genre*, by Elizabeth W. Bruss (1976). Articles by (among  
others) Barrett J. Mandel, Roger J. Porter, Jacques Voisine, Karl J.  
Weintraub, Philippe Lejeune, and Robert Bell<sup>4</sup> concern themselves

<sup>4</sup> For all these, see the Bibliography. Karl J. Weintraub has now (1978) extended  
his important article, “Autobiography and Historical Consciousness,” into an  
equally important book, *The Value of the Individual. Self and Circumstance in Autobiog-  
raphy*, a work that performs in English (and in 400 pages as against 4,000) much the

with the dawning self-consciousness of Western man that found literary expression in the early moments of modern autobiography—those moments when secular autobiography was slowly developing out of spiritual autobiography and when autobiography as a literary mode was emerging out of autobiography as a confessional act. All the foregoing books and articles (and there are a good many more than those I have mentioned) look to the historical, psychological, and social origins of a literary act that has been extended, altered, and redesigned in subsequent centuries but that for all its inward and outward transformations has still retained some sort of constant essence: it remains, in some way that we may agree to recognize, the act of autobiography.

In the hands of other critics, autobiography has become the focalizing literature for various “studies” that otherwise have little by way of a defining, organizing center to them. I have in mind such “studies” as American Studies, Black Studies, Women’s Studies, and African Studies. According to the argument of these critics (who are becoming more numerous every day), autobiography—the story of a distinctive culture written in individual characters and from within—offers a privileged access to an experience (the American experience, the black experience, the female experience, the African experience) that no other variety of writing can offer. I am anticipating myself somewhat now, but I would suggest that this special quality of autobiography—that is, that autobiography renders in a peculiarly direct and faithful way the experience and the vision of a people, which is the same experience and the same vision lying behind and informing all the literature of that people—is one of the reasons why autobiography has lately become such a popular, even fashionable, study in the academic world where traditional ways of organizing literature by period or school have tended to give way to a different sort of organization (or disorganization). This new academic dispensation brings together a literature that is very rich and highly various, heterogeneous in its composition—a literature so diverse that it cries out for

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same service as Misch’s monumental work in German. *The Value of the Individual* offers a lucid and comprehensive history of the emergence of the elements and types of autobiography, at the same time analyzing the historical and cultural conditions under which that emergence became possible, perhaps even inevitable. For the moment, and I should think for the foreseeable future, this book is the definitive English-language treatment of autobiography as an epiphenomenon and mirror of cultural history.

some defining center; such a center autobiography has been felt to provide. To understand the American mind in all its complexity—so goes the argument—read a variety of American autobiographies; moreover, since many of the autobiographies were written by the same people who produced the fiction, drama, and poetry of the nation, the student who sees autobiography as the central document possesses something very like a key to all the other literature as well. James M. Cox pushes the argument one step further with the claim that in writing the autobiography of the American nation (the Declaration of Independence), Thomas Jefferson also wrote the script of its subsequent history.

Whether or not the foregoing is the explanation for academic interest in autobiography (in fact, I do not think it is anything approaching a complete explanation), it cannot be disputed that the interest exists, that it is very intense, and that it has been especially apparent in all the “studies” mentioned earlier. Robert F. Sayre, who wrote one of the earliest and most intelligent books on American autobiography in a literary context—*The Examined Self: Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams, Henry James* (1964)—has also produced the definitive bibliographical article on the uses of autobiography for those trying to sort through that mixed bag that goes under the name of American Studies, “The Proper Study—Autobiographies in American Studies” (1977). In “Autobiography and the Making of America” Sayre goes on to make clear the analogical significance of autobiography in the building of a nation and in the building of character. Daniel Shea’s *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America* (1968) is a fine and thorough study of the most characteristic orientation toward their experience adopted by American autobiographers before Franklin (Shea also considers Franklin and some writers after him). Franklin himself, as something approaching an archetypal American autobiographer, has been the subject of numerous essays and chapters of books including “Autobiography and the American Myth,” by William C. Spengemann and L. R. Lundquist (1965); “Autobiography and America,” by James M. Cox (1971); “Form and Moral Balance in Franklin’s Autobiography,” by Morton L. Ross (1976); and “Three Masters of Impression Management: Benjamin Franklin, Booker T. Washington, and Malcolm X as Autobiographers,” by Stephen J. Whitfield (1978). Post-Franklin American autobiography has recently received insightful treatment from Thomas Cooley in *Educated Lives: The Rise of Modern Autobiography in America* (1976) and from Mutlu Konuk

Blasing in *The Art of Life: Studies in American Autobiographical Literature* (1977). One hears, furthermore, that a number of books on American autobiography are in the making—in particular a much anticipated book by Albert E. Stone, who has already given us both a very useful bibliographical article, “Autobiography and American Culture” (1972), and a wide-ranging essay on varieties of violence in American life and American autobiography, “Cato’s Mirror: The Face of Violence in American Autobiography” (1977).

Even more than American Studies, Black Studies courses and programs have been organized around autobiography—in part, no doubt, because (as John Blassingame has pointed out) black history was preserved in autobiographies rather than in standard histories and because black writers entered into the house of literature through the door of autobiography. From Frederick Douglass to Malcolm X, from Olaudah Equiano to Maya Angelou, the mode specific to the black experience has been autobiography; and of recent times the critical literature has more than kept pace with the primary literature. In black autobiography and criticism of it, we have something akin to a paradigm of the situation of autobiography in general. It is very doubtful that Equiano, Douglass, and Malcolm X saw their works as texts that might be studied in literature courses, yet the past few years have seen literary analyses devoted to all three; and Douglass and Malcolm X are firmly established authors in courses that find themselves, comfortably or not, within departments of English as opposed to departments of History or Social Science.

If black autobiography is a paradigm, the history of Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a paradigm of a paradigm. Until fairly recently, black writing in general was barely mentioned as literature—if mentioned at all it was usually in some other context—and until very recently, autobiography received much the same treatment. Moreover, women writers have not always been given due consideration as makers of literature. But here we have an autobiography by a black woman, published in the present decade (1970), that already has its own critical literature. Is this to be attributed solely to the undoubted quality of Maya Angelou’s book? Surely not. And here is a most striking sign of the critical/cultural times: *her autobiography was Maya Angelou’s first book*. It is not so astonishing that fifty years after their publication Henry James’s autobiographical volumes should come in for critical discussion as works of literature in their own right; there was, after all,

a whole shelf of novels that preceded *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and Brother*, and James acknowledged that he had much the same ultimate design in his fiction and his autobiography: the tracing of the evolution of individual consciousness. But the case is quite different with Maya Angelou, and we can only conclude that something like full literary enfranchisement has been won by black writers, women writers, and autobiography itself when we contemplate the fact that already in 1973 Sidonie Smith was publishing "The Song of a Caged Bird: Maya Angelou's Quest after Self-Acceptance," two years later George Kent was offering "Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Black Autobiographical Tradition," and a year after that Liliane Arensberg was talking to us about "Death as Metaphor of Self in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*." This is a striking phenomenon and one that should give pause to students of literary history and cultural forms.

Black autobiography in general has been well served of late by two books—Sidonie Smith's *Where I'm Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography* (1974) and Stephen Butterfield's *Black Autobiography in America* (1974)—as well as by numerous articles including Warner Berthoff's "Witness and Testament" (1971), Michael G. Cooke's "Modern Black Autobiography in the Tradition" (1973), John W. Blassingame's "Black Autobiographies as Histories and Literature" (1973-1974), Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s "The Problem of Being: Some Reflections on Black Autobiography" (1975), Elizabeth Schultz's "To be Black and Blue: The Blues Genre in Black American Autobiography" (1975), Paul John Eakin's "Malcolm X and the Limits of Autobiography" (1976), Roger Rosenblatt's "Black Autobiography: Life as the Death Weapon" (1976), James M. Cox's "Autobiography and Washington" (1977), and Albert E. Stone's survey of recent developments in Afro-American autobiography, "After *Black Boy* and *Dusk of Dawn*: Patterns in Recent Black Autobiography" (1978). This dry list of titles that appear in such places as *New Literary History*, *Yale Review*, *Criticism*, *Sewanee Review*, and in an anthology of critical pieces on Romanticism published by Cornell University Press may serve to indicate the literary respectability that discussion of black autobiography has attained.

As several recent bibliographical publications attest, Women's Studies courses have a sizeable autobiographical literature to draw on, but theoretical and critical writing is for the most part yet to come. Patricia Meyer Spacks has published the most notable and

enlightening work on women autobiographers both in essays—"Reflecting Women" (1973) and "Women's Stories, Women's Selves" (1977)—and in books—*The Female Imagination* (1975) and *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* (1976). That women's autobiographies display quite a different orientation toward the self and others from the typical orientation to be found in autobiographies by men is established in Mary G. Mason's "The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers." Women who write out their inner life in autobiographies, Patricia Meyer Spacks says, "define, for themselves and for their readers, woman as she is and as she dreams," which is a fine way of pointing up the importance of those autobiographies for the somewhat undefined field of Women's Studies. In African Studies as in Women's Studies extensive critical discussion is yet to be given to the considerable volume of autobiographies available. One book exists—James Olney's *Tell Me Africa: An Approach to African Literature* (1973)—and a handful of essays mostly on individual autobiographies such as Camara Laye's *L'enfant noir*, Peter Abrahams' *Tell Freedom*, and Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue*.

In addition to providing the subject for philosophical and historical studies and besides the uses to which American Studies, Black Studies, Women's Studies, and African Studies have put it, autobiography has also been subjected to a certain amount of generic criticism: various writers have attempted to draw generic boundaries around autobiography, defining it as a specifically *literary* genre, telling what autobiography is and what it is not, which works are autobiographies and which are something else, what we can expect from an autobiography and what an autobiography can expect from us. Elizabeth W. Bruss's *Autobiographical Acts* (1976) is undoubtedly the most distinguished book of genre criticism in English, and Philippe Lejeune's *Le pacte autobiographique* (1975), the most distinguished book in French.<sup>5</sup> Like critics who adopt a generic approach to other literary modes, genre critics of autobiography frequently attempt to contain their subject with an array of graphs, tables, arrows, pointers, and other schematic devices (Lejeune's text is strewn with them at the outset), and they tend toward a quasi-legalistic language of contracts, rights, obligations,

<sup>5</sup> Lejeune published the first chapter of his book under the title "Le pacte autobiographique" in *Poétique* in 1973 and the last chapter, originally presented as a paper at a Sorbonne colloquium on autobiography, under the title "Autobiographie et histoire littéraire" in *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* in 1975.

promises, expectations, and pacts. (At the Sorbonne colloquium to which he presented his second paper on autobiography, Georges Gusdorf complained bitterly of Lejeune's murdering to dissect, for Gusdorf viewed it as an act of critical *hubris*, an act of violence and arrogance, committed against the distinctive essence of autobiography—its *humanness*.) Lejeune's definition of autobiography is: "A retrospective account in prose that a real person makes of his own existence stressing his individual life and especially the history of his personality" (*Le pacte autobiographique*, p. 14). With such a definition as this and with the tools of graphs and tables in hand, the critic can readily determine what is and what is not an autobiography and can analyze at great length the work certified as generically genuine. In his final chapter Lejeune escapes somewhat from the self-imposed rigidities of generic definition when he makes the intelligent point that one should not think of a specific genre as an isolated or isolable thing but should think in terms of an organic system of genres within which transformations and interpenetrations are forever occurring.

Other critics who would like to draw some sketchy lines that would indicate something of the peculiar nature of autobiography have been reluctant to define or to impose rigid schemata and so have resorted to descriptive accounts and to generally rather loose classifications and categories. Jean Starobinski's "The Style of Autobiography" (1971) commences as a genre study but concludes with something quite different: a consideration of style as a metaphorical representation of the present writing self and, at the same time, of the past written self. Stephen Spender's common-sense view in "Confessions and Autobiographies" (1955)—the view of a poet who has also produced an autobiography—distinguishes autobiography from biography, which is a distinction that I imagine every writer on autobiography would feel it necessary to maintain. In a relatively early essay, "The Dark Continent of Literature: Autobiography" (1965), Stephen A. Shapiro argues that in theme, structure, and intention autobiography is frequently indistinguishable from other varieties of literary art. Similarly, in "Some Principles of Autobiography" (1974), William Howarth demonstrates the variousness of the art, offers loose groupings of several different kinds of autobiography, and suggests that the reader should be prepared to be flexible in response to this mode because of the mode's own flexibility. This is something of the same demonstration and lesson provided by Francis R. Hart in "Notes for an Anatomy of



Modern Autobiography" (1970), a study that examines a considerable number of modern autobiographies in an attempt to discover what the characteristics of the modern mode are and what different varieties there might be. Roger J. Porter's sensitive "Edwin Muir and Autobiography: Archetype of a Redemptive Memory" (1978) explores the shadowy area where psychology, literature, and myth intersect, and at the same time he provides a responsive, delicate reading of Muir's profoundly moving *Autobiography*.

Erik H. Erikson, working at the cutting edge of psychology and history in "Gandhi's Autobiography: The Leader as a Child" (1966; included in *Life History and the Historical Moment*), has some very useful and penetrating things to say about the stages of life and psycho-history, and he shows how as students of autobiography we should fix autobiographical events in the moment of writing and in the history of the writer and his time. As Erikson makes brilliantly clear and as I have also tried to demonstrate in this volume, it is memory that reaches tentacles out into each of these three different "times"—the time now, the time then, and the time of an individual's historical context. (The title of the final version of Frederick Douglass's autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, demonstrates precisely these three points of reference.) Now that I have briefly sketched the history and themes of theoretical and critical writing on autobiography, I want to turn back to the central questions, Why? Why now? Why not earlier?

Much of the early criticism of the autobiographical mode was directed to the question of *autos*—how the act of autobiography is at once a discovery, a creation, and an imitation of the self (it was on this issue that Gusdorf's two essays and my own book crossed paths so frequently). Here I think we come at one of the most important explanations for the critical turn toward autobiography as literature, for those critics who took *autos* for their primary focus tended to be very free in their understanding of *bios*, seeing it as the entire life of the individual up to the time of writing, the psychic configuration of the individual at the moment of writing, the whole history of a people living in this individual autobiographer, or any combination of these and various other possible senses of *bios*. This shift of attention from *bios* to *autos*—from the life to the self—was, I believe, largely responsible for opening things up and turning them in a philosophical, psychological, and literary direction.

It is a curious fact that biography has been an admissible subject

in literary studies for quite a lot longer than autobiography, but is it not an astonishing proposition and a fearful paradox to say that someone writes someone else's life? F.S.L. Lyons is writing the authorized life of W. B. Yeats; Richard Ellmann wrote the life of James Joyce: or, more astonishing and fearful still, Edgar Johnson has written the "definitive" life of Charles Dickens. Can this be? Can a life be written? The question is neither idle nor meaningless. The tradition that a life can be written goes back a long way, of course. In his "Life of Theseus," Plutarch says in passing, οὕτως ἔμοι περι τὴν τῶν βίων τῶν παραλλήλων γραφήν ("so in the writing of my Parallel Lives"), but the antiquity of the tradition in no way lessens its fearfulness, for in his use of the dative of possession Plutarch appropriates the lives to himself: "my Parallel Lives." *Emoi* (to me, for me, therefore mine) replaces *autou* (of him, his), and Theseus is nowhere in the picture. Can Edgar Johnson similarly refer to "my life" (incidentally lived by Dickens, but "mine" now by the act of writing)? These questions that trouble the art of biography do not disappear when the individual who lived the life undertakes to write it—on the contrary, they become rather more complex and demanding.

Prior to the refocusing from *bios* to *autos* there had been a rather naive threefold assumption about the writing of an autobiography: first, that the *bios* of autobiography could only signify "the course of a lifetime" or at least a significant portion of a lifetime; second, that the autobiographer could narrate his life in a manner at least approaching an objective historical account and make of that internal subject a text existing in the external world; and third, that there was nothing problematical about the *autos*, no agonizing questions of identity, self-definition, self-existence, or self-deception—at least none the reader need attend to—and therefore the fact that the individual was himself narrating the story of himself had no troubling philosophical, psychological, literary, or historical implications. In other words, the *autos* was taken to be perfectly neutral and adding it to "biography" changed nothing (which is why librarians and bibliographers, being good, simple souls and devoted to systems of classification that go back far beyond the time when the study of autobiography came into vogue, like to view autobiography as nothing other than a subdivision of biography—which is itself classified as a variety of history).

One consequence of this assumption was that the only terms that could be brought to bear in a critical discussion of autobiography

would reflect no more than the critic's view of the content narrated—"charming," "scandalous," "touching"—a direct response to the recollected life as transmitted through the unclouded, neutral glass of the *autos*. Thus in 1909 W. D. Howells called autobiography "that most delightful of all reading," and as late as 1964 Bonamy Dobrée was saying that "autobiographies are the most entrancing of books." Or if a more critical judgment were to be brought in, it could only be in terms of the author's truthfulness: Did he, for whatever reason, deliberately and consciously alter details in that body of historical facts that lay there in a clear and objective light to be recovered accurately by the author's memory and to be transmitted faithfully to the reader as the *bios* of this autobiography? What Gusdorf and others argued, however, was that the *autos* has its reasons and its truth (which, in terms of historical fact, may well be false) that neither reason nor a simple historical view of *bios* can ever know. It is revealing that Gusdorf's first book was entitled *La découverte de soi*, for in that book, in his two essays on autobiography, and in all of his writing in what he terms "les sciences humaines" he has been concerned with what he calls "le problème de la connaissance de soi"—consciousness of self, or self-knowledge. "La question," he has written to me privately, "me préoccupe depuis toujours," and it is that same preoccupation, I believe, that has led so many critics, at much the same cultural moment, to autobiography as a subject of the most vital interest for philosophers, psychologists, and theorists and historians of literature.

It was this turning to *autos*—the "I" that coming awake to its own being shapes and determines the nature of the autobiography and in so doing half discovers, half creates itself—that opened up the subject of autobiography specifically for literary discussion, for behind every work of literature there is an "I" informing the whole and making its presence felt at every critical point, and without this "I," stated or implied, the work would collapse into mere insignificance. In a certain paradoxical way, this is what I understand James M. Cox to mean by his "recovering literature's lost ground through autobiography" (I use the term "paradoxical" because the way he recovers lost ground from, for example, history is to secure the self and its reality by attaching it irrevocably to history—its own history and the making of history). The encroachments of history on literature will only end, he implies, when we succeed in fastening the *autos* down—in history, in public and visible acts,

with all the subsequent history that follows upon those acts. It is my understanding that Cox is as determined as Gusdorf or anyone else to secure the self and thereby to secure added territory for literature.

The *bios* of an autobiography, we may say, is what the "I" makes of it; yet as recent critics have observed, so far as the finished work is concerned, neither the *autos* nor the *bios* is there in the beginning, a completed entity, a defined, known self or a history to be had for the taking. Here is where the act of writing—the third element of autobiography—assumes its true importance: it is through that act that the self and the life, complexly intertwined and entangled, take on a certain form, assume a particular shape and image, and endlessly reflect that image back and forth between themselves as between two mirrors. But at this point, as French critics tell us (for example, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and American adherents like Jeffrey Mehlman and Michael Ryan who have been quick to learn the lesson), the text takes on a life of its own, and the self that was not really in existence in the beginning is in the end merely a matter of text and has nothing whatever to do with an authorizing author. The self, then, is a fiction and so is the life, and behind the text of an autobiography lies the text of an "autobiography": all that is left are characters on a page, and they too can be "deconstructed" to demonstrate the shadowiness of even their existence. Having dissolved the self into a text and then out of the text into thin air, several critics (with the *hubris* peculiar to modern criticism?) have announced the end of autobiography. A few years ago it was the demise of the novel; now it is autobiography's turn. Has criticism of autobiography thus come full circle? Did it will itself and its subject into existence twenty-odd years ago through a belief in the reality of the self, and has it now willed itself and its subject out of existence again upon discerning that there is no more there than, as Michael Sprinker puts it, "fictions of the self"?

In her intriguing "Eye for I," Elizabeth W. Bruss adopts rather a different tactic from Sprinker's: she *assumes* that which he argues—that is, she takes it for granted that autobiography as we know it is at an end, and with this presumed agreement in hand she turns her attention to autobiography as we do not know it. As to the *autos*, what she says is not that the self is altogether a fiction or a delusion and every emanation of it a deconstructible text but that its ability to say "I" in a written text and to have any authority for that asser-

tion has been of late so thoroughly compromised philosophically and linguistically and so thoroughly complicated literarily that the very basis on which a traditional autobiography might be commenced has simply been worn away. It is something revealing that Elizabeth Bruss speaks in the past tense of how “we were apt to regard autobiography,” our regarding it thus being a matter of yesterday and last year. Louis A. Renza, on the other hand, has nothing to say about the transformations or conclusions of a literary genre. He would have it that autobiography as an act producing a text accessible to appropriation by readers has never been possible, neither in the past nor now, though of course many people have been sufficiently deluded that they thought it possible and so have commenced texts destined sooner or later to break down into a sort of perpetual beginning and a fragmented, stuttering incoherence. Is it all past tense, then, both with autobiography and criticism of it—the former a mere stuttering and the latter no more than a babbling about stuttering?

I do not believe so, but I do think that the direction taken in the performances of structuralist, poststructuralist, and deconstructionist critics is a revealing one, for, however much they talk about genre or linguistics or deep-lying structures, what they are still troubling about is the self and consciousness or knowledge of it, even though in a kind of bravura way some of them may be denying rather than affirming its reality or its possibility. And this is the crux of the matter, the heart of the explanation for the special appeal of autobiography to students of literature in recent times: it is a fascination with the self and its profound, its endless mysteries and, accompanying that fascination, an anxiety about the self, an anxiety about the dimness and vulnerability of that entity that no one has ever seen or touched or tasted (unless perhaps G. M. Hopkins, who was modern but not postmodern: “that taste of myself, of *I* and *me* above and in all things, which is more distinctive than the taste of ale or alum, more distinctive than the smell of walnutleaf or camphor”).

If this is indeed the case—that it is the lure of the self quite immediately and doubly revealed that has drawn students of literature to autobiography—then critics of the autobiographical mode have felt much the same pressure as contemporary thinkers in other areas, and they have reacted to it in much the same way. Historiographers have come to recognize and to insist that the *autos* of the historian is and must be present in the writing of history; phenomenologists

and existentialists have joined hands with depth psychologists in stressing an idea of a self that defines itself from moment to moment amid the buzz and confusion of the external world and as a security against that outside whirl. The study of how autobiographers have done this—how they discovered, asserted, created a self in the process of writing it out—requires the reader or the student of autobiography to participate fully in the process, so that the created self becomes, at one remove, almost as much the reader's as the author's. (Consider what happens in John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography*. It was in reading Marmontel's *Mémoires* and giving his full participation and assent to the process of self-creation occurring in that autobiography that he discovered new possibilities in himself, shed tears, and began to emerge from the depression previously crushing him.) This is the double thrust of Barrett J. Mandel's "Full of Life Now," an article that I take to be a highly original treatment of the phenomenology of reading, which is a subject of great current interest (Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish, in their different ways, have contributed much) and of vast importance.

There are various reasons why literary critics did not appropriate the autobiographical mode earlier than they did. First, there is the dual, paradoxical fact that autobiography is often something considerably less than literature and that it is always something rather more than literature. In some tangled, obscure, shifting, and ungraspable way it is, or stands in for, or memorializes, or replaces, or makes something else of someone's life. If part of the function of criticism is to judge (and surely it is), then it is not just a joke to say that judging an autobiography to be "bad" is very nearly the same as judging a life to be "bad." We all know that we are saying something about the character of Malcolm X, for example, when we judge his *Autobiography*; and this case reveals the real situation in a particularly acute way since we cannot argue that it is only or primarily a literary text that we are tying so intimately to Malcolm X's life, for he did not, of course, stand as sole or ultimate authority for that literary text. Yet the question and its obvious answer remain: Which of us does not *know* that he or she is offering judgment of Malcolm X's moral character in offering a presumably literary judgment of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Alex Haley? The writer of an autobiography is doing something other, something both less and more than creating an artifact accessible to objective, critical analysis and evaluation when he chooses to write directly about himself and his life. Autobiography, like the life it mirrors,

refuses to stay still long enough for the genre critic to fit it out with the necessary rules, laws, contracts, and pacts; it refuses, simply, to be a literary genre like any other.

A second, related reason for the neglect of autobiography as a subject of literary study is that critics of twenty-five years ago insisted that for satisfying aesthetic apprehension a work must display (in Stephen Dedalus's phrase) "wholeness, harmony, and radiance." Now some autobiographies may display a certain radiance and a few may strive for and achieve some sort of harmony, but no autobiography as conceived in a traditional, common-sense way can possess wholeness because by definition the end of the story cannot be told, the *bios* must remain incomplete. In effect, the narrative is never finished, nor ever can be, within the covers of a book. (This might be qualified by remarking that in a sense, conversion narratives achieve a kind of completeness by recording the death of the old individual—as it were, the Old Adam—and laying that individual to rest within the confines of the conversion narrative.) Furthermore, by its very nature, the self is (like the autobiography that records and creates it) open-ended and incomplete: it is always in process or, more precisely, is itself a process.

A third reason why a body of critical literature did not grow up alongside autobiography is that autobiography is a self-reflexive, a self-critical act, and consequently the criticism of autobiography exists *within* the literature instead of alongside it. The autobiographer can discuss and analyze the autobiographical act as he performs it: St. Augustine, Montaigne, Rousseau, Henry James are forever talking about what they are doing even as they do it. This is markedly different from the constraints of fictional verisimilitude under which the novelist operates. Certainly the novelist can comment on, theorize about, analyze and criticize his fiction if he so desires—but he must go outside the work to do it and thereby surrender a large part of his privileged status as the creative consciousness in which this fiction comes into being. In order to talk about his fictions, Henry James had to write the "prefaces" to the New York edition, but in *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and Brother* it is as if the critical, theoretical prefaces had found their way into the text of the narrative, allowing the author (who is also the hero and enfolding consciousness) to comment in his own voice on the origins of the tale, the problems it presented in conception and composition, and the means discovered to overcome those problems. Until very recently it would have been impossible to compile

a collection of theoretical and critical essays such as the present one, but from St. Augustine on a compiler could have put together a vast collection of critical, theoretical pieces drawn from and reflecting on autobiographies and the creative process that has brought them into being.

I remarked earlier that the student and reader of autobiographies—the literary critic who has taken them up so avidly in the past twenty years—is a vicarious or a closet autobiographer, and it is precisely because he is able to participate fully if vicariously in the self-creation going on in autobiography that the reasons outlined above for the previous neglect of autobiography have more recently been turned on their heads to become positive reasons for making autobiography a central concern in literary studies. Two contributors to the present volume have remarked to me, quite independently of one another, that they would never consider writing their autobiographies—but if I am right in my conception of the acts of reading and criticism, then of course they do not need to: their autobiographies have already half emerged in the act of living and writing about the autobiographies of others. It is my thorough persuasion that there is a large element of autobiographical determination in each of these views of what constitutes autobiography, what its present state is, and whether or not it is possible at all. I suggest that a reading of Elizabeth Bruss or Michael Sprinker, of Germaine Brée or James Cox, of Barrett Mandel or Louis Renza—with due attention to style as Jean Starobinski describes it—will reveal a half-observed, half-emergent autobiography that has been profoundly implicated in determining the particular critical or theoretical attitude being expressed.

As I pointed out earlier, criticism has always found its place within the creative act of autobiography, and now writers on autobiography have reversed that proposition to bring the creative act of autobiography, clandestinely perhaps, into their criticism. The open-endedness of autobiography that requires readers to continue the experience into their own lives thus becomes a virtue for recent critics rather than the defect that the New Critics would have felt it to be. As Germaine Brée demonstrates so persuasively, this is one reason why Michel Leiris has recently and rapidly been elevated into a modern classic: his autobiographic quest, far from concluding or being closed, remains open-ended, turns back on itself, and in its circularity, becomes endless. Just as Leiris “fears and loathes the fact and idea of death,” so his quest fears and loathes conclusion



and so also his readers fear and loathe conclusion. Germaine Brée, John Sturrock, Henri Peyre, Jeffrey Mehlman, and Philippe Lejeune (in both *Lire Leiris* and *Le pacte autobiographique*) have all given shrewd readings to Leiris as *the* modern autobiographer. As Rousseau was the classic autobiographer of his time, so Leiris seems well on the way to becoming that for our time (if one can speak of a classic in the contemporary world and if one can apply the word to an art that is, as Germaine Brée says, “antiautobiographic”). It may well define the mood of our time and our temperament that we should take an endless, open-ended, labyrinthine antiautobiography for our classic autobiography. If the student of autobiography is, as I believe, a vicarious autobiographer, he does not want, indeed cannot allow, the work to be whole, complete, finished, and closed. Not until he abandons *his* autobiography—giving up his *autos*, his *bios*, and the *graphē* (which is in the reading as well as the writing) that unites and brings the *autos* and the *bios* to being—can he ever assent to that eventuality.

This, then, is my answer—and the essays in the present volume I offer as widely various evidence in support of that answer—to the questions “Why?” “Why now?” “Why not earlier?”