

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY – 20th Century

Early 20th Century : Lives in Progress (1900-1935)

In February, 1904, William Dean Howells devoted his popular "Editor's Easy Chair" column in *Harper's Monthly Magazine* to an essay on autobiography, a kind of writing which he thought had been appearing very frequently just then. In October, 1909, and April, 1911, he wrote two more columns on it, each time reflecting more deeply on what it was and what he liked in it. It was, he said, one of the most entertaining kinds of literature-of universal interest and the least likely to be boring. It was the "most democratic province in the republic of letters," because it was open to everyone and a great story was potentially present in everyone's life. It was also a very modern form and, he wrote, "supremely the Christian contribution to the forms of literature," and he mentioned, in particular, Jonathan Edwards' "Personal Narrative" and Franklin's *Autobiography* as the first important American examples. He added, however, that, "Autobiography is a strange world, and there are many sorts of people in it whom the socially or morally sensitive would not like to consort with if they were to meet them in the flesh," (1) thus simultaneously recognizing its diversity and begrudging it a certain freedom from genteel morality. Howells liked autobiographies best when their authors concentrated on their own lives, instead of merely writing memoirs, and when they wrote most sincerely.

That autobiography should have received such attention from the most influential and most respected man of letters in American was a clear sign that it was now a fully recognized literary genre. Howells also wrote several volumes of autobiography himself, further acknowledging its value, as well as his opinion that one might write each time of different aspects of one's self. At almost the same time as he was writing these column pieces, his friends and contemporaries Henry James, Mark Twain, and Henry Adams were writing their great autobiographies, and, in 1909, Anna Robeson Burr published the first book on the subject, *Autobiography, a Critical and Comparative Study*. In 1913, Theodore Roosevelt would publish his *Autobiography*, the first full length autobiography by a president or ex-president since Thomas Jefferson's.

The first period beginning in the late nineteenth century and extending up to the First World War, what historians call the "Age of Reform" or "Progressive Era," would add even more to the richness and significance of American autobiography. The experience of reform-of changing government and society and of changing and being changed oneself-was an inevitable subject for a new kind of confession and conversion narrative. The experience of immigration to America, followed by the learning of new customs and the difficulties of acculturation of assimilation, was another vast subject. Between 1890 and 1910, over thirteen million immigrants arrived in the United States, raising the population to nearly ninety-two million by 1910. All the new technologies of the twentieth century-a comprehensive railroad network, printing presses that now turned out hundreds of thousands of copies of newspapers and magazines in the time once needed to print just thousands, and inventions like the electric streetcar, bicycle, automobile, telephone, and electric light-now visibly demonstrated the progressively increasing power of industrial civilization. There was no going back. The nostalgic autobiographers of Howells' generation could look back in memory to times of frontier piety and simplicity, but the future seemed concerned only with civilization, technology, and progress. Thus, the men and women who came of age between 1895 and 1920 (and who wrote their autobiographies through the longer period of about 1900-1935) lived "lives in progress." They were lives in motion, lives in which the metaphors of progress and reform were far more important than they had ever been before, and lives which, to a great degree, they tried to live according to the modern virtues of education, science, and efficiency.

This is not to say that they were all alike. Looking just at the better known autobiographers of this generation, one sees an incredibly diverse group. Jane Addams, Chicago social worker and peace activist. Edith Wharton, well-born New Yorker who became a best-selling novelist. Teddy Roosevelt. Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell, journalists and muckrakers. Frederic C. Howe, reformer and public administrator. S.S. McClure, the founder of one of the major organs of journalistic muckraking, *McClure's Magazine*. Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, Chicago architects. Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, anarchists. Clarence Darrow, trial lawyer. Helen Keller, educator and advocate of the rights of the blind. Hamlin Garland, prairie farmer and author. Charles Eastman, a Sioux who became a medical doctor and an advocate of Indian rights. Booker T. Washington, the founder of Tuskegee Institute. W.W.B. Du Bois, a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. William Allen White, newspaper editor from Emporia, Kansas. Immigrants like Mary Antin, Edward Bok, Abraham Cahan, and Jacob Riis. And Indians like Geronimo and Sam Blowsnake, who did not voluntarily write their own stories but whose stories were solicited—Sam Blowsnake's by the young anthropologist Paul Radin and Geronimo's by the journalist S.M. Barrett.

Despite this diversity, these autobiographies had significant common features. All of their protagonists played out the latter part of their lives in the new industrial civilization that they celebrated or criticized. They wrote for newspapers, traveled on Pullman trains and ocean liners, lectured, organized clubs and associations, founded or went to new kinds of social institutions like settlement houses and graduate schools, and vacationed in summer cottages and cabins (to "get away" from these same new institutions). In such activities they were promoting causes and pursuing careers and professions, some of which were brand new. Indeed one of the features of the new civilization is that it had so many new careers, such as anthropology, sociology, social work, and public administration, while the older professions and businesses like medicine, law, journalism, engineering, teaching, and banking became much more specialized. At the same time, there were hundreds of new problems on which critics and reformers could work, like monopolies, immigration, labor organizing, strikes, juvenile delinquency, "frenzied finance," "the shame of the cities," modern marriage, women's rights, race problems and "the color line," and the conservation of natural resources. Once in such a "career," one was then expected to "progress," a career being by definition a field for consecutive achievement and advancement, as opposed to just a "job" or an "occupation." Equally important, the career or profession usually required special training and a new special emphasis on being scientific. For it was science and the scientific method that underlay the new promise of social progress. Even Geronimo and Sam Blowsnake, who were the victims rather than the beneficiaries of this new civilization, can be located within this picture. The Apache chief Geronimo served his editor S.M. Barrett as a sort of baseline against which to measure the "progress" of other Americans. Sam Blowsnake, as the unnamed author of the *Autobiography of a Winnebago*, served Paul Radin's anthropological study of the Winnebago tribe.

The selections given below illustrate these features of Progressive Era autobiography in a variety of ways. Jack London's "What Life Means to Me" was written in 1904, at a point when he was rededicating himself to socialism, after his early success as a writer and a period as a college student had given him a glimpse of bourgeois comfort and respectability. The experience of rising out of the working class and then associating with society women, capitalists, and professors has, he says, enabled him to survey civilization more thoroughly, so that he can now write as a disinterested investigator rather than an agitator or someone just jealous of the classes above him. This has also enabled him to see what all the classes have in common: "I saw the naked simplicities of the complicated civilization in which I lived." All men and women must sell themselves "to get food and shelter," he says, claiming to expose the hypocrisy of the upper-class men and women who pretend that they do not buy and sell. His illusions are gone, and he wants to shatter other illusions as well; indeed, he wants to work "shoulder to shoulder" with other socialists to "topple" the old order. But he still "look[s] forward to a time when man shall progress upon something worthier and higher than his stomach..." and he retains a "belief in the nobility and excellence of the human."

London's testimony aimed at reporting on his life as if it were a kind of experiment. His language was not only impassioned but also, in its way, clinical, stripping away deceptions, and he meant to persuade by giving empirical evidence (at least, as he thought of it), rather than by an appeal to higher morals and sentiments. This is another trait of the progressive as autobiographer, and, indeed, Randolph Bourne,

another writer of this period, wrote an essay called "The Experimental Life," in which he wrote: "Life is not a campaign of battle, but a laboratory where its possibilities for the enhancement of happiness and the realization of ideals are to be tested and observed." (2) It was in this spirit that Bourne wrote of his own experience as "The Handicapped," not seeking sympathy but recounting what he had learned as a consequence of growing up handicapped.

John Muir, though from the preceding generation, was also an experimenter, as he explains both in the chapter given here from *The Story of my Boyhood and youth* and in numerous parts of his books about conservation and the Sierra Nevada. As a boy, he was so overworked on his father's Wisconsin farm that he had to arise at 1:00 A.M. in order to have any time to read; so to get himself up he invented the alarm clock and tilting bed that he took to the state fair at Madison Wisconsin, just before starting his college education. Later he undertook every new climb in the Sierra as a challenge to discover more about himself and his beloved mountains. His scientific achievement was the discovery of the glacial origin of the mountain canyons and valleys. His progressive vision was his realization that without legal protection the Yosemite and other valleys would be destroyed by mining. Logging, and other commercial interests. His writing, which was almost all autobiographical, was a means of identifying himself with the wilderness and so promoting conservation.

From Muir's Wisconsin and California to Mary Antin's Boston may seem like a long way, but it is important to note that Muir, too, was an immigrant and that his collected work, too, might be called *The Promised Land*. Thanks to education and to the eagerness with which they adopted American manners and aspirations, both became assimilated very quickly-though not exactly into the so-called "mainstream" of American society, because both also preserved their distinct kinds of independence. Muir was the solitary mountaineer. Antin upheld a special Emersonian universalism. But in writing autobiographies, in adopting this increasingly popular way of telling their stories and advocating their causes-conservation in Muir's case, racial and religious tolerance in Antin's-they clearly showed that they had become fully active and articulate members of the new civilization.

Writers such as W.E.B. DuBois, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Roderick Seidenberg remained nearer to the fringes of their America, but their lives and writing also show passionate commitment to the ideals of social reform and human progress.

In 1920 when he published *Darkwater*, Du Bois was in the minority of American black leaders, which placed him in the minority of a minority, so to speak, The ideas and programs of Booker T. Washington still dominated the genteel side of American race relations, and lynch mobs dominated the less genteel side. During the Civil War, black troops had been trained mostly as work battalions, and after the war hate groups grew powerful in the Midwest as well as the South. In such an atmosphere, Du Bois' tones of reason and irony and his assemblages of fact and personal testimony were not likely to get a large hearing, but he persisted anyway, just as he had once persisted in getting himself a college and graduate education and a fellowship for further study in Germany. His scholarly studies, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* and *The Philadelphia Negro*, were ample evidence of his faith in reason. Autobiography and the autobiographical essay, furthermore, enabled him to reach beyond scholars to a middle-class audience of people of goodwill from both races. Indeed, American progressives and reformers were overwhelmingly middle-class, despite exceptions like Jack London, and the fact that all these men and women were writing their autobiographies was another sign that autobiography had now become solidly middle-class. But the Negro middle class and the sympathetic white middle class that Du Bois addressed were still small. Du Bois and his allies spoke of black Americans advancing behind the leadership of their "talented tenth," a term and a concept which were, in a way, to anticipate the reality. But for the idea to become reality, the people in it needed to become known, too, and autobiography was a means.

At the very moment in 1919 when Du Bois wrote his autobiographical introduction to *Darkwater*, Roderick Seidenberg was in an army prison, protesting not racial injustice but the war and the necessary agent of large scale war, military conscription. His supporters and future audience were even smaller than Du Bois'. But pacifism had been another expression of the broad progressive temper in the early 1900's, as perhaps best illustrated by William James' lecture-essay calling for "A Moral Equivalent of War." Pre-war pacifists, ranging from Andrew Carnegie to Jane Addams, looked upon war as a barbaric

anachronism and thought that reason and progress, as implemented through international agencies like the Hague Court, would eliminate it. The American imperialists like Theodore Roosevelt were more powerful, winning the intense controversy over annexation of the Philippines, but even in 1916, as demonstrated by Woodrow Wilson's election slogan, "He Kept Us Out of War," there was still strong anti-war sentiment. (3) In April, by only a small remnant of intellectuals, dedicated socialists, and members of little-understood religious sects like the Amish, Mennonites, and Quakers.

Roderick Seidenberg explains how these diverse men came together and led a highly successful work-stoppage at the Army Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. In smuggling out their letters, diaries, and newspaper articles protesting against their treatment, they had also begun using these different kinds of autobiographical writing as propaganda, just as earlier prisoners, slaves, and victims of oppression had done. Yet it was not until 1932 that Seidenberg published the story of his experience. By then, disillusionment with the war had begun to make pacifism socially and intellectually respectable again. The "War to End All Wars" had only produced inflation and economic depression in Europe, followed by depression in America-and disgust over stories of arms manufacturers who had sold weapons to both sides. So pacifists like Seidenberg could find people ready to listen to their experiences. Moreover, telling of the experiences was a way to reintegrate themselves into the larger American society, to break the veil of secrecy or shame or mystery that inevitably surrounded all those who had taken controversial or unpopular positions. No one else could really tell such experiences for them, either. Only prisoners could speak for prisoners, and, conscience being nothing if not individual, each Conscientious Objector had to speak for himself.

Even so, one of the remarkable features of Roderick Seidenberg's essay is the way he speaks for more men than just himself. He uses "we" as often as "I": "We were absolutists." "we were steeled to something beyond ourselves." "We had learned to become fighters, and to fight hard." He praises the variety of men "in our group," and the comradeship among them. Ironically, they are a little American melting pot, a group more diverse and egalitarian than the conscripted army they "refuse to serve." In this way, Seidenberg and his fellow CO's continued to affirm higher American values, even though once accused of cowardice and disloyalty. From the fringe-what some people might even have called a lunatic fringe-he attempted to restore American traditions of freedom, equality and individualism.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, in the two chapters "Love and Marriage" and "The Breakdown," from *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, tells a story which at the time seemed to isolate her from other men and women just as decisively as Du Bois and Seidenberg were isolated. Shortly after her marriage to a tender, devoted husband, she became unaccountably depressed. He stayed home and nursed her, yet she became worse. She spent sleepless nights and was feverish, nervous, and hysterical. The birth of a daughter briefly raised her spirits, but then she was depressed again. Finally, after attempts to cure herself by travel and after treatment by Dr. S.W. Mitchell, "the greatest nerve specialist in the country" and the expert on neurasthenia, the disease she supposedly had, she decided on a more radical measure: she decided to get a divorce. This was an almost unimaginable choice at that time (1887), and yet it was the decision that saved Gilman's life. It was also the decision that empowered her to undertake her studies of economics and to take up a life of agitation for fundamental changes in ideas of gender and work. She sought to rationalize and modernize domestic economy, applying progressives' thought to the home. In her short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," she wrote about the same experience, but stopped short of the divorce and left her fictional character on the brink of madness. That was an effective ending for fiction, but the facts are actually more dramatic. Her decisive, positive, radical change "validated her own decision to write, validated women's intellectual labor in general, and helped, finally, to invalidate neurasthenia as a role option." (4)

"Neurasthenia" was the fashionable disease of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a disease that a great number of the cultural leaders of this period were diagnosed as having. It was, however, a disease with different, often contradictory symptoms-dyspepsia, depression, lack of energy, excitability, insomnia, skin rashes, asthma, and headaches, to name a few-and different cures. It was also attributed to many different forces in American society-industrialization, rapid social change, the influx of millions of immigrants, the decline of older values, urbanization, and the creation of new wealth and greater leisure. As Tom Lutz has shown in *American Nervousness*, it was therefore available to all its

sufferers as a way of providing themselves with a crisis, an interlude, or a kind of psychic space in which “to re-explain the world to themselves” (23). It even provided a story, a line of discourse for “refashioning of one’s relation to a changing world” (25). Autobiography, because of its traditional structures of conversion, of recording a person’s progress from captivity to freedom, from sickness to health, from an old to a new self, was thus a favored form for representing the neurasthenic’s experience. Indeed, the more internal and supposedly rare and private the experience, the more it needed the confessional format of autobiography in which to be described. But the socializing and historicizing functions of autobiography also helped the neurasthenic to publicize his or her experience and reconnect with the larger society. Autobiography, we can see, was the neurasthenic American’s ideal literary form.

Whether the particular autobiographers of this period were or were not neurasthenic, their concepts of self were heavily influenced by ideas of change, progress, and reform. Words such as “genius,” “talent,” “virtue,” “nature,” and “character” were no longer so static, helping people to locate themselves within a finite world. Lives were in progress

Jack London (1876-1916) *What Life Means to Me*

London’s conflicting ideals appear in vivid relief in this 1904 autobiographical essay—on one side a Nietzschean worship of individual strength as the agent of progress and on the other side a belief in progress through socialism and class struggle.

London grew up in and around Oakland, California, raiding oyster beds as an “oyster pirate” at age fifteen and in 1893 signing onto the sealer Sophie Sutherland as an able seaman and hunting seals in the Western Pacific. Returning to California later that year, he did some newspaper writing, including a prize-winning account of a typhoon off Japan. For a time he roamed the United States as a hobo, and then attended a year of high school and one semester at the University of California at Berkeley. He left college to write professionally, but was unable to sell his work. In 1897, he joined the Klondike gold rush, until scurvy forced him to return home. In 1898 and 1899, he published stories about the Yukon in the *Overland Monthly*, then struck greater success in 1900 when the *Atlantic Monthly* published one of his stories and Houghton Mifflin brought out a collection, *The Son of the Wolf*. From then on, he produced writing of all kinds at an astonishing pace, in all some forty-three volumes.

In 1901, London ran for mayor of Oakland for the Socialist Labor party and began lecturing and propagandizing for socialism. This essay comes out of that effort. He celebrates the toughness of the working class and attacks the hypocrisy and corruption of the ruling class. He also tries to proclaim the oneness of all humanity, but more often in terms of its appetites and baseness than its virtue. Another problem with his approach is that his iconoclasm frequently leads to gross over-simplifications, as in the implicit feminizing of wealth and society and masculinizing of the poor and the workers. Even science and sociology, usually beacons of hope to members of his generation, get knocked down.

London’s underlying problem may be that he is too dependent on his personal testimony, for he becomes entangled in the inconsistencies resulting from his celebration of the working class and his celebration, too, of his own rise out of it. Thus he must attack the poor, in giving his motives to become rich, and then emphasize his disillusionment with the rich, to preserve his bond with working men.

In later life, London was less conflicted. His writing provided him with a comfortable income, and in 1907 he set off in his forty-five-foot yacht the *Snark* to sail around the world. When the trip was cut short by illness, he returned to his magnificent California ranch.

For biographical studies of London, see Joan D. Hedrick, *Solitary Comrade: Jack London and his work* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1982) and James Lundquist, *Jack London: Adventures, Ideas, and Fiction* (New York: Ungar, 1987).

Reading

The Road

<http://london.sonoma.edu/Writings/TheRoad/>

Randolph Bourne (1886-1918) *The Handicapped*

“Life will have little meaning for me,” Bourne writes, “except as I am able to contribute toward some...ideal of social betterment...” So does he show his allegiance to the major intellectual and social movement of his time, Progressivism.

Yet Bourne is different from other progressives like Charlotte Perkins Gilman in having been handicapped. He had a hunchback which was the result of spinal tuberculosis when he was four, and a misshapen face and deformed left ear which were the result of a messy birth, as he called it. He could never participate in Theodore Roosevelt’s “robust life” or assume a confident public role in reform movements, as Gilman and so many others did. He was also about a generation younger, and he died at only thirty-two, a victim of the 1918-19 flu epidemic.

In that short life he managed to write an amazing number of essays, letters, book reviews, and sociological studies—a large part of these from a very compelling autobiographical perspective. “Youth,” an essay which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in April, 1912, made him a spokesman for young intellectuals. After graduating from Columbia University in 1913, he spent a year in Europe on a travelling fellowship, and then became a contributing editor of the *New Republic*. In 1917, he moved to the *Seven Arts*, for which he wrote a series of powerful essays opposing American participation in the war.

This very early essay was unsigned. It was simply entitled “The Handicapped—By One of Them.” Bourne apparently wanted to direct attention away from himself as an individual and towards the common experience of all persons similarly “in the world, but not of the world.” Yet the way he gave that experience psychic reality was by talking intimately about him-self. He also, by daring to write it, fought against the lowered expectations and the silence which he says surround the handicapped. Also crucial is his emphases on friends as the keys that help him unlock himself. Readers are tacitly invited to become friends, too, whereupon he becomes more intimate, talking about his childhood, his ideals, and finally to others “who are situated as I am.”

In its daring and in its bursting of conventional genteel reticence, then, this essay does show a new kind of vigor and hope and a new concept of self. More-over, in taking on the paradoxes of how the handicapped are both similar and different from others, it looks forward to a lot of later American autobiography that took on the paradoxes of race, religion, class, and gender.

The text is from *The Atlantic Monthly* 108 (September 1911): 320-29. Bruce Clayton, in *Forgotten Prophet: The Life of Randolph Bourne* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Univ. Press, 1984), provides the definitive biography.

Reading

Trans-National America

<http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/rbannis1/AIH19th/Bourne.html>

Mary Antin (1881-1949) *Initiation*

The *Promised Land*, which was published in 1912, after being serialized in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1911, tells the story of Maryashe Antin's emigration from Polotzk, Russia, to Boston, where she became an outstanding student and a promising American writer. The early chapters describe in detail the privations and injustices of the Pale of "Pale of Settlement" in eastern Russia where Jews were required to live. Men were subject to conscription into the czar's army. Merchants paid protection money to avoid raids by the police. Gentiles and Jews never trusted one another. Education was all but closed to Jewish children, except for the Hebrew lessons and training in the Law given to boys. "A girl was "finished" when she could read her prayers in Hebrew, following the meaning by the aid of the Yiddish translation especially prepared for women. If she could sign her name in Russian, do a little figuring, and write a letter in Yiddish to the parents of her betrothed, she was called wohl gelehrent—well-educated" (111).

The middle part of the book describes her quiet but passionate rebellion against these restrictions and traditions, her family's emigration to America in her early teens, and her rapid and joyful casting off of her early identity as "Mashke" of Polotzk to become "Mary Antin" of Boston. "With our despised immigrant clothing we shed also our impossible Hebrew names," she says, speaking for her parents, brother, and two sisters (187), just before she started school. School, as this chapter explains, was the most welcome part of her conversion. She was such a good student that she went on to the prestigious Girls' Latin School, where she met the daughters of Boston's social and intellectual elite, and made plans to go to Radcliffe. Instead, she married a biologist she had met through the Natural History Club at the Hale Settlement House in Boston and went with him to New York, where she continued her education at Barnard.

The *Promised Land* is therefore a monument to the immigrant's successful assimilation, willing and welcomed, and it makes a fascinating comparison to other immigrant autobiographies. The story, some readers will think is too happy to be true. They may also object to her smugness. Yet she was not ashamed of her past, and she even attached a Yiddish-English glossary to the end of the book so that American readers could better understand Jewish customs. In 1941, with Hitler invading Russia, she published an essay expressing both her universalism and her solidarity with "my people." "I can no more return to the Jewish fold than I can return to my mother's womb: neither can I decency continue to enjoy my accidental personal immunity from the penalties of being a Jew in a time of virulent anti-Semitism."¹ She had become a kind of latter-day Transcendentalist, and saw the universalism of all great religions as having their political fulfillment in democracy.

The whole of "Initiation," Chapter 10 in the *Promised Land*, is given below. There is no biography of Mary Antin, but there is a brief biographical introduction by Oscar Handlin in a reprint of *The Promised Land* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969). *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 5 (1986): 29-53 has articles on Antin by Richard Tuerk, Steven J. Rubin, and Evelyn Avery.

"House of the One Father," *Common Ground* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1941):41.

Reading

The *Promised Land*

<http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/antin/land/land.html>

John Muir (1838-1914) *The World and the University*

John Muir is best known as the naturalist whose writings on Yosemite and fiery advocacy of a national forest reserve policy ignited public support for the early conservation movement. But this chapter from his autobiography of his childhood is very far from polemic. We are not even aware of the Civil War, which was in progress when he was in college. Instead, the young Muir encounters only sunny optimism and unquestioning faith in the power of learning and invention to improve life, as typified by the open-hearted approval of the Pardeeville townsfolk: "I wish I had that fellow's head. I'd rather have it than the best farm in the State."

Muir was born in Dunbar, Scotland, the third of eight children, and was educated there until the age of eleven, when he, his father, and two other children immigrated to prepare a home for the rest of the family in the wilds of Wisconsin. Muir's father was a strict disciplinarian who required daily memorization of Bible verses and filled Muir's days with the hardest farm world. A voracious reader, Muir continued his own education without formal schooling by rising early each morning (using the bed-clock mechanism described here), and in 1860 entered the University of Wisconsin. He left without a degree in 1863, undertaking botanical walking tours from the central states as far south as the Gulf of Mexico before turning west where he studied Yosemite Valley, Alaska, Nevada, and the Pacific Northwest. Marrying in 1880, he purchased part of his father-in-law's California fruit ranch and ran it so successfully that after 1891 he could devote himself completely to naturalism and travel.

Throughout Muir's account of his education runs an infectious and childlike enthusiasm for invention and progress. Yet the childlikeness is rarely Muir's—rather, it comes from those whom he meets, who are willing to sweep practical considerations aside to accommodate his ingenuity and promise. A train conductor arrives for him to ride on the engine, a ticket-taker at the Wisconsin State Fair waives his admission fee, and then a "dignified gentleman" makes his inventions a central attraction of the fair. At the University of Wisconsin a student encourages him to enroll, assuring him that he can live on a dollar a week. Soon janitors and professors make his room into the stuff of legends. Now that he is free of his father's dark and terrible Calvinism, all is promise and progress. There is even no conflict between Muir's love of nature and his love of machines. He easily moves on, though without a diploma, from the University of Wisconsin to "the University of the Wilderness."

The selection here is from Muir's *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916; reprint, Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1965). There have been several biographies of Muir, beginning with W.F. Bade, *The Life and Letters of John Muir* (1925).

Reading

Life and Letters of John Muir

http://www.yosemite.ca.us/john_muir_writings/the_life_and_letters_of_john_muir/

W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) *The Shadow of Years*

W.E.B. Du Bois was a master at writing fierce, tough-minded, and yet visionary essays with an autobiographical perspective, a form of literature perfectly suited to his training as a sociologist and to his later work as editor of *The Crisis*, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He helped to found the NAACP in 1909, so as to oppose Booker T. Washington's program of acceptance of menial labor and segregation, and he needed to write articles for *The Crisis* (and other journals) that combined sociological and historical data with the shocking and illustrative material of personal testimony. In that way he could both inform his biracial audiences and also give his readers a perspective they never got from white writers.

Darkwater (1920), subtitled *Voices from Within the Veil*, has many such essays, like "The Servant in the House," where he begins an attack on job discrimination by recalling his own refusal to accept service jobs, except for one summer at a hotel in Minnesota, and "Of Beauty and Death," where he gives his own experience of Jim Crow waiting rooms and railroad cars, as part of a build-up to attacking discrimination in the army in 1917-19. His anger, irony, and shifts of frame and context anticipate the essays of James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and other writers.

"The Shadow of Years," which is the introduction to *Darkwater*, is the most autobiographical of these essays, being about his family, childhood, and education—and the least polemical. But he still jabs at his white readers and shares laughs with his black ones. Through the entire account, he remains both disgusted by America and hopeful, telling of "Days of Disillusion" and ages of "Miracles." His progressivism shows up in the facts that the miracles outnumber the disillusionments, that he used his comparative good fortune in life in order to help others, and that he worked as a scientist and writer, not an evangelical preacher.

Du Bois published two more autobiographies, *Dusk of Dawn* (1940) and *The Autobiography: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (1968). *Critical Essays on W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. William L. Andrews (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1985), contains analyses of Du Bois and his work.

Reprinted from *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920) by permission of David G. Du Bois.

Reading

The Souls of Black Folks
<http://www.bartleby.com/114/>

Roderick Seidenberg (1890?-1973) / *I Refuse to Serve*

"I Refuse to Serve" (1932) is a personal testimony against military conscription by a World War I conscientious objector. It was published in H.L. Mencken's and George Jean Nathan's *American Mercury* at just the moment in the 1930's when deepening economic depression was creating widespread belief that the war had not "made the world safe for democracy" but mainly enriched arms makers. Pacifists, therefore, who had once been labeled traitors and been imprisoned and tortured, were now considered prophets. Meanwhile, Gandhi's massive demonstrations in India, such as the "Salt Satyagraha" of 1930, gave hopes that what William James had called "A moral equivalent of war" might indeed be found.

In 1917, the draft law required all men to register and be inducted into the army, after which they were to be given noncombatant service in the medical or supply corps, if their objections to war were considered sincere and based upon membership in recognized pacifist churches. But some, such as Roderick Seidenberg, who had been a friend of Randolph Bourne's at Columbia University, were political and philosophic objectors and also would not accept any form of noncombatant or alternative service. They, along with some religious objectors, became so-called "absolutists" and were all sent eventually to Fort Leavenworth. There, as Seidenberg describes, they pitted their wills against the army's, going on hunger strikes and refusing to work, organizing other prisoners, and secretly sending out reports on prison conditions. By January, 1919, outside journalists were also criticizing the army for continuing to enforce harsh wartime sentences. The result was that when the conscientious objectors turned a prison riot into a nonviolent work stoppage, the army negotiated. This was a major victory for the CO's and their methods, and it anticipated in some ways the nonviolent tactics of both the 1930's labor movement and the 1960's civil rights movement.

A sense of pride and a sense of comradeship thus qualify and even overpower Seidenberg's bitterness. He and his fellow CO's amply proved that they were not cowards and slackers. As autobiographer, he also wants to advertise the CO's' discipline, solidarity, and success in attracting support from the other prisoners. Methods that persuaded both them and the army might persuade readers, too. At the same time he does not want to make pacifists into saints.

After the war, Seidenberg became an architect, and in the 1930's he wrote the segments on architecture for the State Guides series that had been underwritten by Roosevelt's Work Projects Administration (W.P.A.). He also wrote books on social theory, *Post historic Man*, an *Inquiry* (1950) and *Anatomy of the Future* (1961).

The text of "I Refuse to Serve" is taken from *The American Mercury* 25 (January 1932): 91-99. For a more extensive history of conscientious objectors in World War I, see Norman Thomas, *The Conscientious Objector in America* (New York: B. Huebsch, 1923), which was republished as *Is Conscience a Crime?* (New York: Vanguard, 1927). On CO autobiography, see Robert F. Sayre, "Rhetorical Defenses: the Autobiographies of World War I Conscientious Objectors," *Auto/Biography Studies* 7 (Spring 1992): 62-81. There is no biography of Roderick Seidenberg. Some additional information can be found in his obituary in the *New York Times*, August 28, 1973, p. 38.

Reading

War Resistance

<http://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/8w9h3k>

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) *Love and Marriage and The Breakdown*

Rediscovered in the 1970's and '80s by the women's movement, Charlotte Perkins Gilman is now widely known, especially for the autobiographical short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" and the utopian novel *Herland*. But from the mid-1890's to World War I she was famous as a feminist and socialist, a popular lecturer, and the author of *Women and Economics* (1898) and many other books. After World War I, however, her progressive economic and political views went out of fashion, and she turned to writing her autobiography, completing all but the last chapter of it by 1925.

"Love and Marriage" and "The Breakdown" are chapters 7 and 8 of *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography*. They appear near the end of the first third and constitute the crisis of the book...and of the life, as here told.

In the opening of *The Living*, Gilman proudly tells of her New England ancestors (including Lyman Beecher, father of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was her father's grandfather) and their traditions of self-discipline, intellectual achievement, and service to others. Less enviable is the story of how, when her father learned that her mother could bear no more children, he left her and went to California. Mrs. Perkins, Charlotte, and an older brother Thomas were so poor they had to move nineteen times in eighteen years, mostly living with relatives. Stung by her husband's rejection, Mrs. Perkins determined to harden her daughter against a similar fate and so gave Charlotte no expressions of affection. From these combined inspirations and deprivations the adolescent daughter became a paragon of self-denial, hard work, physical health, and dedication to service. She also studied at the Rhode Island School for Design, and in May, 1884, married another artist, the handsome Charles Walter Stetson.

The experiences described below are first described in "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), and the two accounts make a fascinating comparison between "fiction" and the "factual fiction" that is autobiography. For additional interest, they can be compared to Gilman's "Why I wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper"" (1913).

Neither the "fictional" version nor the account of its writing mention her divorce from Stetson, which was the solution chosen in "The Breakdown." For where "The Yellow Wallpaper" is a story of descent into insanity, of a woman driven mad by perverse kindness, "The Breakdown" is the story of her clinging to her sanity and independence and bravely disobeying her doctor (the famous S. Weir Mitchell). The reasons for these different versions—and the different kinds of truth they possess—could be discussed at length. Clearly, Charlotte Stetson in 1891-92 and Charlotte Gilman in the 1920's were very different women, who, conceived of themselves in very different ways. Another factor behind the different versions involves attitudes towards divorce, for fictional characters rarely had recourse to it. But a divorce like the Stetsons', with "no quarrel, no blame...never an unkind word between us, unbroken mutual affection," would have been unthinkable in both art and life. This rationally chosen, unconventional, and humane choice in a way epitomizes the progressive temper.

In April, 1894, the divorce was finally granted. (It was difficult to obtain because there were bi acceptable grounds for divorce as it was legally defined.) Within a year, Mr. Stetson married Grace Channing, Charlottes' life-long friend, and the three remained close friends, raising their daughter (Grace's stepdaughter) Katherine Beecher Stetson together. In 1900, Charlotte married George Houghton Gilman, her first cousin, and the close relationship continued; with the two couples sometimes living in the brief final chapter of *The Living* tells that in 1932 Mrs. Gilman learned that she had breast cancer. But, not wanting to suffer a long period of mortal pain, uselessness to society, and trouble and expense to friends and family, she prepared to take her own life, which she did, an editorial note explains, on August 17, 1935. Rationalists and progressive, independent crusader against debilitating social conventions, she had thus come as close as any autobiographer can come to including in her story her own death.

This selection is taken from *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (New York: Appleton-Century Co., 1935; reprint, Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1990). For additional reading, see Ann J Lane, to *Herland and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (New

York: Pantheon Books, 1990). For background on neurasthenia, see Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991).

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Reading

Our Androcentric Culture

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Mid 20th Centur: Experimental Lives (1920-1960)

“One generation abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels.” (1)

These words of Henry David Thoreau aptly express the way in which the generation of Americans that came of age during and after the First World War quickly gave up, at least for a time, their predecessor's work and faith and the concepts of self related to these. The millions of dead, the bungling and arrogance of the military, and the nightmare-world of muddy trenches and devastated no-man's lands made such “enterprises” as progress, reform, and social betterment seem like jokes. As Paul Fussell wrote in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, a study both of the literature of that war and its impact on the twentieth-century mind, World War I “was a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century.” (2) The heroism and romance, the sense of purpose, and the accompanying sense of a self in progress were swept away in the withering winds of irony and despair.

Fittingly, therefore, the most esteemed autobiography of the immediate post-war era was not another officer's memoir or a prisoner's story expressing faith and determination. It was *The Education of Henry Adams*. Adams had died in March, 1918, at the age of eighty. The *Education* was published in September, from a corrected copy of the private printing of 1907, and it shortly became a best-seller. It was also eagerly read and admired by Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Sherwood Anderson, and many other writers and intellectuals of the new generation. Adams' corrosive ironies, his cosmic despair, and his sense of personal and cultural failure were all appropriate to the moods of what was to become known as “the lost generation.”

“You are all a lost generation.” Hemingway used these words as one of the epigraphs to *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), attributing them to Gertrude Stein. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), she in turn attributed the term to a French automobile mechanic, who had been talking of his poorly trained apprentices. But the term caught on, in any case, because it seemed to express the hedonistic (and also slightly romanticized) despair of post war youth. It also spread with the success of Hemingway's autobiographical novel, which described the prematurely world-weary American expatriates Hemingway had known in Europe. Five or six years before, in 1920, F. Scott Fitzgerald's autobiographical first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, had been an equal sensation. Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913), and Proust's multi-volume *Remembrance of Things Past* also came to be known to Americans of the 1920's as models of autobiographical fiction. Indeed, autobiographical fiction became the favored form of the “lost generation,” and many of its practitioners strove for such a level of achievement in it that most of them strongly resented having their work thought of as autobiography. Even Thomas Wolfe, whose long novels, beginning with *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929), became notorious for their subjectivity and self-absorption, resented being called an autobiographical writer.

The autobiographical novel, for this generation, was a work of art rather than referential history. Names were changed (usually) and characters were meant to be representatives of types of individuals rather than being the specific individuals they were modeled on. Incidents could be changed and invented, to be made more illustrative or dramatic. Dialogue could also be paraphrased or invented, and all language was expected to be more poetic and creative. It was heightened, polished, and made more economical, as had been done by Flaubert and Conrad, two admired predecessors. But perhaps the greatest difference between autobiography and the autobiographical novel was simply that the protagonist of the novel was more likely to be a young, unrecognized, non-heroic figure, such as Hemingway's Jake Barnes, than an older person who was famous and had played a recognized and active part in the world. The fictional protagonist was primarily a spectator, looking upon the world ironically and critically, like the artist. He even looked at himself that way, striving to be objective and without self-pity. Thus, though Jake Barnes once had been a soldier, he was now a wounded veteran who did not talk about the war or his wounds. Self-pity, sentimentality, and heroism were out. And even if the protagonist wanted to be the supreme artist, like Joyce's Stephen Daedalus, his ultimate goal was to stand outside his creation, “like the God of the creation, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his finger nails.” (3)

"Autobiography," therefore, came to be regarded as a pathetically inferior kind of writing. On the one hand, it was childish, something "anyone can write," as Gertrude Stein said, and likely to be boring, self-indulgent, and formless. On the other hand, it was identified with older, famous people ex-presidents wives like Mrs. Taft and Mrs. Wilson (who published their autobiographies in 1914 and 1939), retired preachers and missionaries, avuncular old Benjamin Franklin (who was mercilessly ridiculed by D.H. Lawrence in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 1923, and William Carlos Williams in *In the American Grain*, 1926). It was also identified with the very reformers and progressives the new generation had abandoned. Calling a book an autobiography or autobiographical was almost to patronize it, and, conversely, all good writing even autobiographies, had to be exempted from the category. For example, when Ezra Pound wrote an essay on Henry James and wished to praise *A Small Boy and Others*, he said it was not really autobiography.(4)

These attitudes of the young American modernists were not necessarily the attitudes of the public. In 1921, Hamlin Garland received the Pulitzer Prize for *A Daughter of the Middle Border*, the sequel to his popular *A Son of the Middle Border* (1917). In 1926, he published a children's edition of his earlier "novel" *Boy Life on the Prairie* (1899), now calling it an autobiography. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* was a regular title on school reading lists. College literature courses included Victorian classics like *The Autobiography of John Stuart Mill* and began to include "new" American classics like *Walden*. Lesser-known, earlier autobiographies continued to have their many readers, including really loyal readers who regarded the authors as true heroes and notable writers. Joshua Slocum, the first solitary circumnavigator and author of *Sailing Alone Around the World* (1900), remained a patron saint of sailing writers, and his name was eventually taken by the Slocum Society, the association of single-handed ocean sailors. Thoreau had dozens of imitators, including Henry Beston in *The Outermost House* (1949). But the young modernists scorn for autobiography meant that little original or experimental work would be done in it, or done in it and bear the name.

As we have been suggesting, however, the autobiographical novel must be seen historically as the genre of personal narrative I which the young modernists primarily chose to work. The very fact that they were young and were not famous prior to their writing made the writing of "fiction" more feasible and acceptable. It was less egotistical (at least on the surface). It was more representational, being about "typical" and "realistic" and "universal" experiences like growing up, going to war, or being in love, and so more intimate. The novel was a realistic genre. For this reason, some autobiographical novels and short stories definitely being in any broad history of autobiography and concepts of self.

Moreover, the very fact that so many young modernists experimented in life as well as fiction, doing unorthodox, independent, or rebellious things, insured that some of them would, sooner or later, turn to more explicit kinds of autobiography in order to tell new stories, and that they would, thus, alter the form itself.

One early example was E.E. Cummings, who, like a number of other Americans, had been a volunteer ambulance driver with the French army. His *The Enormous Room* (1922) tells the story of his and a friend's arrest and their confinement in filthy French prisons for supposedly writing treasonous letters. Refusing to pity himself, while also satirizing French and American officials, Cummings treats the experience as a modern Pilgrim's Progress. His fellow prisoners are "Delectable Mountains," a heterogenous and rebellious group who all refuse to submit to prison discipline and so represent the causes of freedom and individuality against the authoritarian state. Although few of his contemporaries were as anarchistic as Cummings, *The Enormous Room*, does illustrate their general questioning not only of the state but of civilization itself. In "the enormous room," one day is no different from another, and time stands still, a proposition that thoroughly undercuts the old Victorian possibilities of progress and progressivism, which must take place in time. The prisoners, even if all very different from each other, are alike in their basic human needs and their capacity to bore or inspire or amuse. This undercuts ideas of the superior man's duties regarding his inferiors and dependents, another important self-concept among the Progressives. Finally, in Cumming's prison, the comforts of life are no longer the gratifications of work and the luxuries of ocean liners and Pullman trains but the minimal pleasures of food, warmth, and a bath.

Another example of the explicitly autobiographical modernist was Anais Nin, who began writing her diaries at the age of eleven, and who continued because of her modernist awareness that “memory interfered and intercepted and distorted experience” and because she wanted to see her experience “in terms of a continuous evolution observing all its transformations.” The diary also “helped me to make the separation between my real self and the role playing a woman is called upon to do.” The diary “kept my other self alive.” Another discovery she made was that the diary became “an incentive” to keep her life more interesting, opening herself to new friendships and encouraging her and her friends growth. When she moved back to America at the time of the Second World War, the diary helped her to stay in touch with her earlier self. In all these ways, then, the diary both grew out of her sense of her life as an experiment, as something new and different and to be minutely observed, and become an essential instrument and aid to it. She kept a diary because she experimented, and experimented more boldly because she kept a diary. (5)

Gertrude Stein also brought an extraordinary modern sensibility and modern experience to autobiography. As a student at Radcliffe in the 1890's, she studied with William James and shared his interest in the processes of consciousness. Early experiments with narrative and point of view made her see autobiography as a literary and psychological and social issue, not simply a historical one. She also liked reading autobiographies, especially those of military and colonial leaders, Grant's *Memoirs* being one of her favorites. Meanwhile, her unusual life as lesbian, art collector, and leader of a Paris salon that included many of the American expatriates as well as new European painters like Picasso and Matisse, gave her unique material. One result was *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), in which she described her own life as if written by her close companion and secretary, Alice B. Toklas. The book was such a success that she went on a lecture tour in the United States, and later wrote *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937) partially as an account of that tour. Wishing, as she said, “to tell what each one is without telling stories,” she experimented with doing autobiographies as “portraits” rather than narratives, and wished to go beyond the comparatively traditional techniques she used in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

A rebel of a very different kind was Dorothy Day, author of *The Long Loneliness*. As she tells in its early chapters, her first ambition had been to become a novelist, and for a period in the 1920's she lived in Manhattan and on Staten Island with other young literary bohemians: Allen Tate, Kenneth Burke, Peggy and Malcolm Cowley, John Dos Passos, and an English biologist named Forster Batterham, who became, in effect, her common-law husband. Her first book was an autobiographical novel, *The Eleventh Virgin* (1924). She was also a political radical, having demonstrated for women's rights, and worked for *The Masses*. But as she grew happier in her independence, her love, and her enjoyment of the physical world, she also felt a need to express and share this happiness, which led, to her friends' amazement, to her joining the Catholic Church and to her founding, with the help of her new friend Peter Maurin, the Catholic Worker movement. Beginning with “hospitality houses” for the homeless and unemployed, and then launching the *Catholic Worker* newspaper (an ally and opposite of the Communist *Daily Worker*), the CW movement became a leader in nontraditional American Catholicism. Her second volume of autobiography, *From Union Square to Rome* (1938), describes this conversion. (6) Day and the Catholic Worker attracted other young Catholic intellectuals like Thomas Merton, and later inspired World War II pacifists and objectors to the Vietnam War. *The Long Loneliness* (1952) was a more traditional autobiography in the sense of being about her politics, her religious conversion, and her social activism. Indeed, it is in some respects very similar to Jane Addams' *Twenty Years at Hull House*. But the life-the greater independence, the Catholic radicalism, and her having and raising a baby “out of wedlock,” as people of her generation said-was more experimental than Addams' Day and *The Long Loneliness* are of the “lost” generation, not the era of progress and optimism.

The most celebrated autobiographer of the Jazz Age (as he called it) was F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose series of three short confessional essays in *Esquire* in 1936 about his “Crack-Up” was a sobering conclusion to the high-life and extravagance of his life in the 1920's. Fitzgerald, who was also a Catholic, though a lapsed one, turned to the familiar conventions of the conversion narrative in order to tell a secular story with an underlying religious theme. The three essays, “Crack-Up,” “Pasting It Together,” and “Handle with Care,” use slangy phrases but describe a classic three-stage journey from sin and despair, to conversion, to renewed faith. Adding to the religious nature of the story is the fact that

Fitzgerald was trying to speak not just for himself but for his friends, his generation, and for the whole country. As he had previously been the hero of the Jazz Age, drinking bootleg cocktails and spending lavishly, he now sought to make himself at least a representative, if not the hero, of a sadder, wiser, more conscience-stricken era. "My recent experience parallels the wave of despair that swept the nation when the Boom was over," he says, still maintaining himself as a spokesman for the nation. Such a spokesman serves the underlying religious purpose of uniting people, pulling them back together in a period of doubt. Though hardly as proud and boastful as Ethan Allen, he was also fabricating for himself a new identity, a national identity composed by his expression of national feelings.

The readiness with which many of Fitzgerald's friends both condemned and yet believed his "Crack-Up" essays is further evidence of the low opinion his generation had of autobiography-and of their innocence in reading it. If it was autobiography, then it had to be inferior to the novel, but if it was autobiography, it also must be true. They failed to see his artfulness-his achievement in adapting religious autobiography to his own purposes, and how he was in some ways hiding behind the persona of the reformed, confessing prodigal.

Yet, as the generation matured and its members continued with their unofficial, shared concepts of themselves as pioneers of modernism, experimenting in every art form and experimenting in styles of life, politics, and technology, their autobiographical experimentation continued, too. This is particularly true of the lives and autobiographies of black Americans and other Americans living on the fringes of supposedly "normal" middle-class, white society. As we have already seen, autobiography had long appealed to these Americans because their lives *were* different, and because they wished to express their protest and dissent or seek a way of integrating themselves within the rest of American society. These traditions, or conflicting traditions, continued during this long period from the 1920's through the 1950's.

The great new experience and experiment for black Americans, as for many other Americans in this period was the move from small towns and farms to the city. In 1900, approximately sixty percent of the American population was still rural, a proportion that did not change very much until the First World War. But by 1960, seventy percent of the total American population was still rural, a proportion that did not change very much until the First World War. But by 1960, seventy percent of the total American population and seventy-two percent of black Americans lived in cities. The city that attracted the largest numbers of black Americans was New York, with the result that in the 1920's Harlem became predominantly a black neighborhood and the site of a cultural renaissance. Writers had also come to Harlem- James Weldon Johnson and Zora Neal Hurston from Florida, Claude McKay from the Island of Jamaica, Langston Hughes from Missouri and Pennsylvania-and they joined with musicians and other artists in making it as exciting as other centers of modernism like Paris and Greenwich Village. Beginning in the 1930's, these four writers (and others) also wrote autobiographies of their experiences, adding a new dimension to the traditions of the slave narrative. The emphasis now was less on the oppressions of rural life and more on the excitement (and new oppressions) of urban life, including the experience of migration and transition.

A writer who was somewhat younger than these leaders of the Harlem Renaissance and who did not immediately go to New York but to Chicago was Richard Wright. His well-known autobiography *Black Boy* (1945) tells the frightening and courageous story of his childhood in Jackson, Mississippi, his youth in Memphis, Tennessee, and his departure for Chicago. With this emphasis on southern oppression and escape to the North, *Black Boy* recalls the contents and structure of a slave narrative. It is also like some slave-narratives in the occasional exaggeration and borrowing from other men's experiences in order for the author to make his experience seem more dramatic and universal. In this way it also resembles the autobiographical novels of the writers of this generation.(7) A work of Richard Wright which is not so well known is *American Hunger* (1977), which tells the further story of his experiences in Chicago after leaving the South, including his membership in the Communist Party. Reading *American Hunger*, one realizes how Wright continued to try new political and artistic experiments-and became disillusioned by them and by America in general.

It should be added that Wright's adventures with the Communist Party were not at all unusual. Many writers, artists, actors, film makers, and other Americans of the 1930's and early 1940's were drawn

to it. Lincoln Steffens, who had been one of the first to observe the results of the Communist Revolution, returned from the Soviet Union in 1919 with the exciting report, "I have seen the future and it works!" But with the Moscow trials and Hitler-Stalin pact of the late 1930's, communism became a fallen idol, and accounts of people's disillusionment with it became a prominent subgenre of autobiography, not only in America but in Europe as well. Parts of Lillian Hellman's autobiographies, such as *Pentimento* and *An Unfinished Woman*, offer late examples of the genre. The confessions of the ex-communist, some of which, like Whitaker Chambers' *Witness* (1952), were sensational and contributed to (or stemmed from) the furious anti-communism of the 1950's were a fairly traditional autobiographical genre with a new content.

A radical, experimental, angry autobiographer who did not turn to communism was James Agee, author of *Let us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) and the autobiographical novels *The Morning Watch* (1951) and *A Death In The Family* (1957). Agee, a younger than Richard Wright, was also from the South, and his description of the poor white tenant farmers of Alabama in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* complements Wright's description of black life in Mississippi. Wright wrote about his own life; Agee tried to record other lives more effectively and authentically by probing himself and purging himself of condescension. He and his collaborator, the photographer Walker Evans, tried to preserve the dignity of the families they lived with. They did not want them debased into trite, expendable ammunition for political protest, as Agee felt the communists would do. For these reasons-Agee's lyricism, his angry subjectivity, and his collaboration with Walker Evans-*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is one of the most experimental instances of autobiographical writing in this (or any other) period. It set a standard in personal journalism that the so-called "new journalists" of the 1960's aspired to.

Even *Black Elk Speaks*, the story of a supposedly very traditional Sioux medicine man, shows some effects of the modernist passion for experiment with new concepts of self. John G. Neihardt, who received and edited Black Elk's story in 1931, was actively looking for a traditional Indian-a figure most earlier friends of Indians had scorned and wanted to change. The ideal Indian of the Progressive Era had been Charles Eastman, who had become a medical doctor and the husband of the child-poet and missionary, Elaine Goodale. Black Elk's story appealed to the intellectual reaction against ideas of progress and to an interest in what was supposedly more authentic and primitive. Ironically, Black Elk himself, by the time he interviewed Neihardt, had already become a convert to Catholicism and served for many years as a leader among Indian Catholic laymen.(8) Black Elk, it might be said, had been leading an experimental life, too, both in the modernist sense of wanting to reject the past and in a still more profound sense of looking at life as in some way tentative and changeable. In his conversations with Neihardt, he did not disclose much about his Catholicism, and, it appears, by the 1930's he was again more attracted to his earlier Sioux visions and the recovery and preservation of traditional Sioux ceremonies. Also, very few people in the 1930's and 1940's read *Black Elk Speaks*. It was known mainly to anthropologists and to other, modernist defenders of Indian tradition like John Collier.

What the selections below all have in common then, is their demonstration of how modernism and manifold forms of experiment, in life and in writing, changed concepts of self and definitions of autobiography.

F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) *The Crack-Up*

When “The Crack-Up” first appeared in *Esquire* in February, 1936, many of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s friends and fellow novelists were disgusted. The Great Depression had put millions of Americans in far more desperate straits than he was in, and he seemed to be whining. Such private confessions also seemed beneath the dignity of a novelist. To make matters worse, he was appearing in an expensive, upper-class men’s magazine. “Christ, man, how do you find time in the middle of the general conflagration to worry about all that stuff?” John Dos Passos wrote him. “We’re living in one of the damndest tragic moments in history—if you want to go to pieces I think it’s absolutely O.K. but I think you ought to write a first rate novel about it...instead of spilling it in little pieces for Arnold Gingrich (the *Esquire* publisher).”¹

In the years since, however, beginning with the book of Fitzgerald’s uncollected writings which Edmund Wilson edited and entitled *The Crack-Up* (1945), the version of his life which Fitzgerald gives here has become a basic part of his legend. It’s simple, affecting pieces—early dreams, despair, and resolute stoicism—are classic, recalling hundreds of religious and secular conversion stories. Yet its language is fresh, lean, impudent, and colorful. Many phrases have become almost as familiar as passages in *The Great Gatsby*.

The assumption behind most readings of these three confessional essays, however—both the favorable and the critical—is the same: In them Fitzgerald was being unusually candid, artless, and personal. He was letting go with “self-revelation.” He was writing from deep in “a real dark night of the soul.” Liking it or rejecting it thus depends, supposedly, on how one feels about public confessions. “There are always those to whom all self-revelation is contemptible,” says the author. But he brashly offends them in order to say what he has to say and reach other people who care.

A more cautious reading of these essays might begin by noting what they leave out. We know now from Fitzgerald biographers that at the point when he began them, in November, 1935, his wife Zelda had had several nervous breakdowns and been in a sequence of mental hospitals. His alcoholism was severe despite his saying that he had “not tasted as much as a glass of beer for six months.” And his debts were very high. Yet none of these things is mentioned. Nor does he write about his delays in finishing *Tender Is the Night* (1934) or complain about his fallen literary popularity. He could, in other words, have written more “self-revelation” than he did.

Instead, with his talk of “not being big enough to play football in college,” and “not getting overseas during the war,” he seems to be confessing “regrets” and broken dreams that many other men of his age and class may have had. This is true also of the “grave sentence” his doctor gave him. Even the metaphors, like the cracked plate, his “mortgaging” himself and “over-drawing at his bank,” tend to touch many other people’s experience and so universalize or disguise his own.

We might therefore ask whose autobiography this really is: his, his generations, or the nation’s? We might also ask, as we study the differences between “fiction” and “autobiography,” whether Fitzgerald was more self-revelatory here or in a short story like “*Babylon Revisited*,” which was written at about the same time.

The source of the text below is *The Crack-Up*, edited by Edmund Wilson, and all ellipses are from that edition. There are numerous good Fitzgerald biographies. The fullest is Matthew J. Bruccoli, *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

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1. John Dos Passos, “A letter from John Dos Passos,” in *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson, p. 311.

Reading

The Crack-Up

<http://www.esquire.com/features/the-crack-up>

Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) From *The Gradual Making Of "The Making of Americans"*

The Making of Americans (1925) is Gertrude Stein's last read and most ambitious book, a 925-page novel based in part on the experiences of her and her family in evolving from immigrants into "Americans." It is repetitious, plotless, and chaotic—the consequence of some of Stein's conflicting or unperfected theories of modern fiction. It was written between 1902 and 1911, but waited many ears to be published.

Yet Stein thought so highly of the book as one of the ground-breaking experiments in modern fiction that she lectured about it on her trip to America in 1934-35. Hence this autobiographical lecture-essay about the writing of the book and what she was trying to do in it. Simply stated, her theory was that all human character is essentially expressible in a range of psychological types, types which are basically changeless except as the language in which they are "composed" changes. This language, "the composition in which we live," as she called it in another lecture,¹ comes out most forcibly in the unconscious patterns of ordinary speech—of repetitions, with shifting emphases and meanings, and without description and sequential narrative.

What she does in this essay, therefore, is express her character through her own patterns of speech: her way of asserting something and then repeating it with slight changes of words, word order, and emphasis. She tells how she arrived at her theory and how she attempted to use it, quoting passages from the book to illustrate it.

Such repetitions have made Stein seem like an oracle or a jokester, or just made readers ignore her. But when one approaches her style in the right spirit and takes it at the right pace, it becomes subtle and insightful. The sentence in the middle of this selection, "Slowly everyone in continuous repeating, to their minutest variation, comes to be clearer to someone," applies to how the style works. The ensuing sentences about how people understand one another, about history, and about resemblances and differences and how people feel about them are brilliant. They could be seen as representing Stein's theory of autobiography.

The selection below is taken from *Lectures in America* (New York: Random House, 1935). Stein's source citations of *The Making of Americans* within the text have been retained as given there. The indispensable book on Stein is Richard Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein in Pieces* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970).

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1. Stein, "Portraits and Repetition," in *Lectures in America*, p. 165.

Reading

Three Lives

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/15408>

James Agee (1909-1955) From *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*

James Agee was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, the son of middle-class parents. When his father died in an automobile accident when Agee was six, his mother, who had artistic interests, took over his education, sending him at age ten to St. Andrew's, a boarding school near Sewanee, Tennessee, but moving to Sewanee to be near him. He later went to Phillips Exeter and Harvard College.

On graduating in 1932, during the depression, Agee got a job writing for *Fortune* magazine, the prosperous new business magazine which pioneered in documentary journalism. Two articles Agee did on the Tennessee Valley Authority, the government's experiment in land reclamation, hydroelectric power, and flood control, won praise from Henry Luce, *Fortune's* owner. In 1936, Agee and a documentary photographer, Walker Evans, were assigned to do a piece on southern tenant farmers, focusing on the daily life of a supposedly typical farmer and his family.

But Agee found it "curious, not to say obscene and thoroughly terrifying" that a magazine should "pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings." With profit its ultimate motive and neither its editors nor its readers equally exposed or at risk.¹ The article Agee wrote was ten times longer than assigned and was also "too persona;" and "too violent."² Agee then got a contract with Harper and Brothers to develop the article into a book to be titled *Cotton Tenants: Three Families*. But when this manuscript was submitted in 1939, it too was rejected. Agee said he would not make "certain required changes through which it might be less unpalatable to the general reader."³ Finally, in September, 1941, it was published by Houghton Mifflin, with only the removal of "anglo-saxon monosyllables" that were "illegal in Massachusetts."⁴

What Agee had done was to break the rules of documentary journalism, which held that the author must be a rigorously objective spectator. He had introduced his own feelings—his anger, tenderness, and, as he called it, the full "individual, anti-authoritative human consciousness."⁵ In so doing, he exposed himself and his life just as daringly as he exposed the lives of the three families he wrote about. At one point, thinking of himself alone in the Gudger house, he even recalled how as a boy left alone in his grandfather's house he had pryed into forbidden drawers and closets and masturbated on other people's beds. Such self-exposure some critics called distracting, egotistical, and motivated from guilt. But Agee's defense was that uncovering the vulnerable reality of other lives necessitated recognizing his own. He wrote to shock, but also with great respect for human dignity. Significantly, the title of the book is from the forty-fourth chapter of *Ecclesiastics*, in a song praising the heroes of Israel's past.

The short selection here, entitled "A Country Letter," does not go deeply into Agee's own past, but it describes the setting of the Gudger house with Agee himself as an on-site, introspective observer. He also towards the end imagines himself losing his own "shape and weight and self" and becoming each person in the house, a kind of universal, Whitmanian auto/biographer of every one.

For additional biographical information on Agee, see Victor A. Kramer, *James Agee* (Boston: Twayne, 1975). The selection here is from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).

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1. Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, p. 7.
2. William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 262
3. Stott, *Documentary Expression*, p. 263.
4. Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, pp. 456, xiv.
5. Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, p. xiv.

Reading

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

<http://memory.loc.gov/master/gdc/scdser01/200401/telework/Let%20Us%20now%20Praise%20FamMen.pdf>

Richard Wright (1908-1960) From *The God That Failed*

Richard Wright's most famous autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945), gives a tense and inspiring account of his early life, and yet it is incomplete and misleading in several ways. On one hand, it exaggerates some of the horrors of his southern childhood; on the other, it omits references to some white people who befriended him, to his own stature among groups of black youth, and to the educational advantages he had from people he knew and members of his own family who were school teachers.¹ Moreover, by ending as it does with his departure for the North (and being published just five years after his great literary success *Native Son*, in 1940). *Black Boy* conveys the over-simple message that once he had left the South he was less oppressed and his genius bloomed.²

A fuller picture of his life and sense of his range as an autobiographer comes from reading his accounts of the rest of his early years which were originally written for a volume called *The Horror and the Glory*, which was to be published with *Black Boy*, the two together to be entitled *American Hunger* or *Black Hunger*. When *Black Boy* was published separately, Wright went ahead and published many portions of *The Horror and the Glory* in magazines and other places.

The first three chapters, parts of which appeared in *Mademoiselle*, dealt with the early experiences in Chicago. His first job was in a delicatessen where he could not believe that the owner would trust him and that white waitresses would be friendly. Yet when he worked as a janitor in a hospital, the doctors refused to recognize his intelligence. The last three chapters describe his experiences with the Communist Party. These were first told in the August, 1944, *Atlantic Monthly* ("I Tried to Be a Communist"); then retold in a collection of essays by Wright and five other European and American ex-communists, *The God That Failed*, edited by Richard Crossman and published by Harper and Row (Wright's publisher) in 1949.

Today *The God That Failed* is almost forgotten, but in its time it was a corner-stone in the building of an anti-communist, intellectual left. Other contributors were Arthus Koestler, Ignazio Silone, Andre Gide, Louis Fisher, and Stephen Spender—men who were not turncoats or heroes of the right like Whitaker Chambers. The book was assigned in many college courses and promoted Wright as an intellectual as well as a novelist.

The selection here is the last quarter of Wright's essay in *The God That Failed*. He has already bristled under doctrinaire Party orders and had the humiliating experience of going to New York for a Party writers' conference but not being given a hotel reservation because he was a Negro. So he has announced his resignation, but he continues to be harassed, as represented here. His experience makes an interesting comparison with the chapters on "the Brotherhood" in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

Yet disillusionment with the Communist Party is not the only message in *American Hunger*. One may also sense Wright's despair with all America. Because of its fear, the nation, too, fails to recognize someone who wants to help it.

In 1947, Wright established permanent residence in Paris and went on to become a leader in organizations of Third World, anti-colonial intellectuals, such as the Bandung, Indonesia, Conference of 1955. He died of a heart attack in Paris in 1960.

The selection below is taken from *The God That Failed*, ed. Richard Crossman (New York: Harper and Row, 1947). The two major biographies of Wright are Constance Webb, *Richard Wright* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1968), and Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: William Morrow, 1973).

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1. For a summary of the exaggerations and omissions in *Black Boy*, see David L. Dudley, *My Father's Shadow: Intergenerational Conflict in African American Men's Autobiography* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), pp. 113-14
2. Michel Fabre, "Afterword," to Richard Wright, *American Hunger* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 139-40
3. "Comrades": Communist Party members. (R.F.S.)

Reading

Black Boy

<http://memory.loc.gov/master/gdc/scdser01/200401/telework/Let%20Us%20now%20Praise%20FamMen.pdf>

Dorothy Day (1897-1980) *Having a Baby* and *Love Overflows*

Although she has not been canonized by the Church, Dorothy Day has been called a saint by many of her admirers; and as with saints, her behavior was often puzzling to her friends. As the following two chapters from *The Long Loneliness* (1952) illustrate, her behavior was also not the kind traditional hagiographers celebrated for imitation by the young. Yet, as Day tells it, it has a profound consistency.

The early chapters of *The Long Loneliness* tell of her childhood in Berkeley and Oakland, California (her father was a sports editor of a San Francisco paper), ending with the great earthquake of 1905 and her memories of the compassion among the victims. After the quake the family moved to Chicago, where Day showed early promise as a writer. She worked her way through the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, and then wrote for socialist papers in New York. She supported numerous radical causes and was arrested in a women's rights demonstration in Washington, D.C. In the 1920's she divided her time between Greenwich Village and a beach house on Staten Island which she shared with Forster Batterham, a British biologist and anarchist who was her common-law husband. She was extremely happy, sexually fulfilled, and artistically productive.

Unlike many religious conversions, therefore, hers did not come about from misery and dissatisfaction. Nor did it lead to a rejection of her political past. She remained an anarchist, pacifist, and advocate of the homeless and oppressed. In fact, the Catholic Worker Houses of Hospitality which she founded in the 1930's with her new friend Peter Maurin (Forster Batterham left her when she joined the church) and which she wrote about in her last volume of autobiography, *Loaves and Fishes* (1963), became famous examples of direct action.

All these changes and continuities in her life seem epitomized in these two chapters, which tell her overwhelming joy in the birth of her daughter, her decision to have her baptized a Catholic, and her own baptism a year later (in the summer of 1928). Her autobiography is a unique combination of tradition and change, social commitment and religious piety.

Our source is *The Long Loneliness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981). The definitive biography of Day is by William Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982). An excellent study of *The Long Loneliness* and her other Autobiographies is by June O'Connor, "Dorothy Day as Autobiographer," *Religion* 20 (1990): 275-95.

"Having A Baby" and "Love Overflows" are reprinted from *The Long Loneliness*, by Dorothy Day. Copyright 1952 by Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Harper Collins Publishers.

Reading

Memoirs

<http://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/deliberative-topics/religion-morality-in-public-life/dorothy-day-union-square-speech-6-november-1965/>

Anais Nin (1903-1977) From *The Diary of Anais Nin*

Anais Nin (pronounced "anna-ees neen") began her diary in 1914 on a ship from Barcelona to New York. Her mother was a classical singer of aristocratic French and Danish parentage; her father was a Spanish composer and musician. But he was frequently unfaithful and had sent his wife, Anais, and two sons to New York, saying he would join them later. Anais began the diary as a letter to her absent father, whom she loved and admired but feared. It was years before she would see him again.

The diary continued for the rest of her life, finally filling over two hundred manuscript notebooks. It covered her schooling in New York, where her mother turned to giving singing lessons. It chronicled her years in Paris after the First World War, where her husband Hugh Guiler was a banker; her break from him and friendship with Henry Miller; her other friendships and acquaintances with a great number of artists, writers, psychoanalysts, and film-makers; her travels; and her numerous other writings and difficulties in publishing them. For Nin clearly wished fame and success as a novelist and critic (her first book was *D.H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study*), and once turned to writing erotica in order to support herself and raise money to give to friends. She also had conflicting impulses about the diary, which some friends urged her at times to quit. She wrote of it as being like an appeal to her father, a mirror, a window, a drug addiction, an obsession, and a form of dream and revelation of the unconscious. During the Second World War, simply keeping it safe was a serious problem.

Finally, in 1966, she published the first volume of *The Diary of Anais Nin, 1931 – 1934*, based on the manuscript volumes 30 to 40. But it was not a word-for-word transcription. Working with an editor, Gunther Stuhlmann, who, she said late, helped her "with the balance" and "structure" of the narrative, so she did not "get lost in the detailed work,"¹ she had cut out approximately half of the material. She also occasionally moved pieces out of the original order of composition, which itself had sometimes been sporadic, revised more or less heavily, and even wrote things anew. The original material also included letters to her, excerpts from fiction, excerpts from friends' diaries. And copies of book reviews; and these she selected, edited, and moved around as well. The result blurs simple distinctions between diary, autobiography, and fiction. Two critics call it "a journal-novel."² Another prefers to treat it as really an autobiography.³

Volumes 2-6, taking her from 1934 to 1966, appeared over the next ten years (1967-76), and they were edited along the same lines. Volume 7 (1966-74) appeared in 1980, after Nin's death from cancer in 1977. Between 1978 and 1985, *The Early Diary of Anais Nin (1914-31)*, not edited by Nin, was published in four volumes, "essentially in the form in which it was written."⁴ It makes a useful contrast with *The Diary*, a basic difference being that most entries in it are dated, whereas in the *Diary* specific dates are dropped and entries are loosely identified only by month and year. Still another version of the diary is in *Henry and June: From the Unexpurgated Diary of Anais Nin* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

Representing such a massive work in just a few pages of excerpts is practically impossible. But the following passages give an idea of Nin's passions for experiment and variety, for studying herself as a woman, and for friendships and social intercourse. The description of her costume for the masquerade "to which we would come dressed as our madness" is also stunning. It is a surrealist image of herself and her diary.

The excerpts below are from volumes 2, 3, and 5 of the six-volume *Diary of Anais Nin* (Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1967-74). Two useful studies of Nin and the diaries are Benjamin Franklin V and Duane Schneider, *Anais Nin: An introduction* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1979), and Nancy Scholar, *Anais Nin* (Boston: Twayne, 1984). Claudia Roth Pierpont's "Sec, Lies, and Thirty-Five Thousand Pages" (*The New Yorker* 69 (March 1, 1993): 74-90), is a thoughtful attach on her work.

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permission of Harcourt Brace and Company. All excerpts are also reprinted from *The Diaries of Anais Nin*, by permission of Peter Owen Publishers, London.

1. Duane Schneider, *An Interview with Anais Nin* (Athens, OH: Duane Schneider, 1970), p. 10; quoted in Benjamin Franklin V and Duane Schneider, *Anais Nin: An Introduction* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1979), p. 170.
2. Franklin and Schneider, *Anais Nin*, p. 176.
3. Nancy Scholar, *Anais Nin* (Boston: Twayne, 1984), p. 15ff.
4. John Ferrone, "Editor's Note," in *Linotte: The Early Diary of Anais Nin, 1914-1920* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. ix.

Reading

Winter of Artifice

<http://archive.org/details/winterofartifice00nina>

Late 20th Century : Quests for Identity (1960-)

All autobiography involves a quest for identity: a re-seeing of the past, a reconstruction of the paths that led to the present, a definition of the self, or an attempt to defend the self. Each of these efforts entails, to some degree, a search for the self, in order to present a version of this self to an audience of one's self and others.

Only in the last generation, however, have autobiographers and their readers seemed to become truly aware of how autobiography creates the self. In the 1920's, in his attack on Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, D.H. Lawrence never considered that the *Autobiography* might have been a means Franklin used to examine or create a self. Instead, Lawrence took Franklin's character as something already complete when Franklin wrote. Yet, it is now quite common to regard the *Autobiography* as a means by which Franklin remade and even invented himself: his text is not just a statement of self, but a process of finding and inventing it.

That we have come to see autobiographies this way is reflected in the parallel development and popularization of the word *identity*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the word is derived from *idem*, the Latin for *same*, and in early usage it meant sameness or likeness. It signified the opposite of diversity. In the seventeenth century, it also came to be applied to persons and to the "continuity of personality," "the sameness of a person at alltimes or in all circumstances." In this sense, it commonly referred to internal and essential qualities, and to consciousness, rather than to external features.

During the Second World War, a group of psychiatrists working at a veterans clinic began to use the term "identity crisis" to describe patients who had "lost a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity." Soon Erik Erikson and his associates "recognized the same central disturbance in young people whose sense of confusion is due, rather, to a war within themselves, and in confused rebels and destructive delinquents who war on their society." (1) When Erikson went on to develop his very influential concept of the life cycle, he focused on youth as the period of identity formation. The revolt of youth in the 1960's, Erikson speculated, was caused by changes within western society-changes in technology, culture, and human expectations-which had disrupted how youth (and other people) knew themselves and each other. The affinity between person and culture could be broken when one changed without the other.

Persons and cultures also need change,however; it is how they grow and learn to adapt. This seems particularly true in the United States of the 1960's, when it was finally waking up, or being awakened, to its long-festering racial injustice, its entrenched poverty, and the brutality of the war in Vietnam. In the summer of 1963, over 100,000 people took part in a "March on Washington" to demand the passage of a Civil Rights Act. From 1965 to 1967, there were massive riots I the black ghettos of the cities across the country. Demonstrations and sit-ins against the Vietnam War and in favor of new programs like Black studies occurred at nearly all the major universities. The publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, in 1962, also began to make people aware of the dangers of DDT and other chemicals that had once beenseen as benign and as scientific miracles. Meanwhile, television changed the way people learned about and experienced these changes in the world. In November, 1963, following the Kennedy assassination, the whole country watched television day and night and saw Jack Ruby, a previously unknown, small nightclub owner, shoot Lee Harvey Oswald, the once unknown assassin. In July, 1969, it watched men land and walk on the moon. Television could almost instantly gain the attention of the whole country, and possibly even the whole world, momentarily uniting it or alarming it. In the process, television made great heroes or villains out of people once as unknown as any of the millions of people in the audience. The age of the instant celebrity had begun.

Spinoffs of the creation of the instant celebrity were the invention of the commissioned autobiography, the publishing of more ghost-written autobiographies, and the "unauthorized biography"-books about such men and women who could capitalize on their quick electronic stardom. In the 1970's for instance, there were autobiographies of the Watergate burglars and White House staff members who planned the burglary. By the 1980's, television (and radio) had also become a standard agency in the promotion of new books, including new, mass-market autobiographies. Authors routinely appeared on local and national talk-shows, morning, noon, and night, to give a quick resume of their books and to

recount the emblematic events in their lives that would explain the writing of the book and relate it to the audience's interest and experience.

There are other reasons for this surge in the writing, reading, and talking about autobiographies than just the new media and the related changes in book marketing, however. In a culture that is changing fast and struggling to deal with the conflicts of permanence and change, people are inevitably interested in how other people are handling these conflicts and opportunities, how they are "coping." For this, the writer did not have to have been a Watergate burglar, a hostage in Iran, or an astronaut to have a significant story. Quite the opposite. People were more likely to be interested in things that were also happening to them—divorce, a drug problem, a weight problem, teenage pregnancy, the loss of a job, a "midlife crisis," alcoholism, retirement, abortion, a change of religion, living with a serious disease, and so on. Autobiographies merged in such cases with self-help books (and were often read by groups of people discussing some common problem). They could also be inspirational and about success, two long-standing traditions in American autobiography. With the nation going through a "national identity crisis," as it was sometimes called, there was inevitable interest in individual identity crises and their endings, sad or happy.

The increasingly frequent use of the word *identity* also seems to have changed its meaning. For some people, the word no longer has its traditional association with sameness but connotes something which is the core or essence of a person's being. It is almost a synonym for self. It also seems, sometimes, to be nudging aside the traditional terms "character" and "personality." *Character* traditionally referred to someone's moral worth, or lack of it, and to virtue, although it obviously carried other meanings as well. *Personality* applied more to what is entertaining, or even flashy and distracting. One "turns on the personality," but one does not "turn on character." *Identity* seems more serious than personality, less pretentious and moralistic than character, but still related to one's basic *integrity*. Identity can change and can or must be searched for. It is also something which is usually shared with other people of the same race, culture, or background, as in "black identity," "feminine identity," or "middle-class identity." And this should remind us that identity, in being shared with others, does have to be more or less the same in all those people, something like a theme with many variations. (2)

These changes in the vocabulary of selfhood are vitally important to the American autobiographies of this current or most recent generation, the autobiographies written from approximately 1960 to 1990. Finding one's identity, in the sense of what is unique and also what is shared, what is permanent but also subject to change, and what is real and yet also in some ways an artifice (a product of culture and history), and then expressing, explaining, and interpreting it has been the great goal of the best recent autobiographers.

Nobody Knows My Name, the title of James Baldwin's book, virtually announces his need to make his name, the designator of his identity, known—known to those who would miss it or misinterpret it or mistake him for someone else. They might miss it because, from arrogance, they had habitually paid no attention to "Negroes" (Baldwin's term). Or they might mistake him because when they looked at him they did not see *him* but one of the stereotypes of Negro character which they had acquired from the American past. The title of Ralph Ellison's great novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), announced almost exactly the same problem. The black man in America did not suffer from being "highly visible," as some experts said; he was invisible, operating always from behind a host of masks and shadows of himself. Thus one of the things the autobiographies and autobiographical essays of Baldwin, Ellison, and other black writers of the 1960's and '70's did was to analyze these masks and try to show the authors in more complexity and depth. They also, on occasion, attempted to defend themselves against the false accusations and misrepresentations which white Americans made about them. As a part of this whole difficult, painful but also liberating process, we might note that the word "Negro" itself gave way to "black" or "Black" and "Afro-American."

A careful reader of Baldwin's "Discovery of What It Means to Be American" will see that his exposure of these stereotypes and misrepresentations generates the intense emotional power of his essay. A "Negro" was somehow not expected to discover what it means to be an American. He was expected to be "only" a Negro, an inferior American. Thus Baldwin aroused his white readers's secret prejudices and fears and kept all his readers uncertain of what role he would play next—the expatriate, the

man of letters, the responsible citizen the angry prophet, or something else the reader had never seen before. As a man writing from Paris, he also appropriated some of the status, favorable or unfavorable, of the American expatriates of a generation before. He could talk in a worldly way of French waiters being better than American waiters. He could talk of his friends from different parts of the French capital.

Saying these things and, consequently, manipulating his readers emotional expectations, Baldwin was indeed "discovering what it means to be an American." He was carving out a new identity for himself as American, black American, writer, and prophet. He was using the autobiographical essay to discover his powers and to create who he was.

The autobiographies of Jewish-Americans of this period make an interesting comparison with those of Afro-Americans like Baldwin. Jews, too, faced discrimination by the white Christian majority, but had made much faster progress in overcoming it, as measured by admissions to elite schools and colleges, access to the professions, good salaries, and houses in suburbs, though they were still barred from many private clubs. Jewish traditions, however, continued to hold great meaning to Jewish Americans. The irony of Abraham Cahan's autobiographical novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), was that as the hero succeeded in American business and "rose" to become a millionaire, he "fell" as a Jew. At the end of the book he realizes sadly, "My past and present do not comport well"-a lament that has been called "the tragedy of Jewish reconciliation with America." (3) Even Mary Antin's confident integration into American life as described in *The Promised Land*, was later qualified by her writing just at the beginning of World War II that she had to remember her Jewish past and try to preserve solidarity with the Jews still in Russia and Europe. After the war, the horrifying revelations of the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel made Jews all the more aware of their Jewish identity.

Thus, in post-war Jewish-American autobiographies, the conflicts of culture are intense, and the quest for identity is complicated by the recognitions of different interpretations of both "Jewish" and "American." In *A Walker in the City* (1951), the first of Alfred Kazin's three volumes of autobiography, the young Kazin is just as eager to shed his immigrant past as Mary Antin was. In the next two volumes, *Starting Out in the Thirties* (1965) and *New York Jew* (1978), he is successful, like Levinsky. He also tries harder than Levinsky to make his past and present "comport well." *Starting Out in the Thirties* is full of excitement of becoming a writer and teacher and working on *On Native Grounds*, his classic study of American literary realism. Kazin kept a certain Jewish sense of being an outsider to American culture, but by playing a leading role in the writing of American literary history, he was also discovering and possessing American culture, defining it for other Americans. This status as both the outsider and the authority seems confirmed in *New York Jew*, where Kazin seems almost to invite the antagonism of the old Gentile establishment. He is now proud of being what they detest. He also does not wish to drop his ancestral past into the great American melting pot. He wishes to hang on to his particularity just as tenaciously as any descendants of the *Mayflower* who once dreaded a "New York Jew's" entry into "their" colleges or clubs.

"One of the longest journeys in the world," Norman Podhoretz began, in his autobiography *Making It* (1967), "is the journey from Brooklyn to Manhattan-or at least from certain neighborhoods in Brooklyn to certain parts of Manhattan." He added that "I have made that journey." But because of his smugness and brazenness about it, many readers have never felt quite comfortable with him and his story. They further resent his absorption in the literary circles of Columbia University and *Commentary* magazine. Still, Podhoretz seems to speak for a lot of Brooklynites and ex-Brooklynites when he says that as a child he did not think of himself as an American. "I came from Brooklyn, and in Brooklyn there were no Americans; there were Jews and Negroes and Italians and Poles and Irishmen. Americans lived in New England, in the South, in the Midwest: alien people in alien places." (4)

Where Kazin and Podhoretz clung to their ethnic heritage in order, finally, not to identify with those "alien people in alien places," Allen Ginsberg attempted both to celebrate his Jewish past and to universalize it as a piece of all human experience. It was a bold undertaking, but then "Kaddish" is an extraordinary autobiography. It is a poem, first of all, and therefore a better medium than prose for Ginsberg's extended and seemingly spontaneous lyrical flights. Its models are not other autobiographies but works like Shelly's "Adonais," the Jewish Kaddish, the Buddhist Book of Answers, and Ray Charles' singing.

Nevertheless, his "Kaddish" is full of the particulars of the early twentieth-century Jewish-American immigrant experience. Naomi Ginsberg grew up in Newark, New Jersey, and it was as far from the tenements of Newark to the fashionable streets of Manhattan as it was from Podhoretz's Brooklyn. She was a communist union organizer, who sang hymns and workers' songs, went to union summer camps, and was full of "mad idealism." In this sense, as Ginsberg tells it, her story could have been the story of thousands of people in the early American labor movement. The sad difference is that in 1919 Naomi began to have nervous breakdowns. Later, with the approach of World War II, she saw Hitler, Mussolini, Roosevelt, and the FBI spying on her. Allen, we gather, became her caretaker—the person she would still trust, the person who at just twelve had the responsibility of taking her to a rest home in southern New Jersey, and the person she sometimes seductively flirted with. It was, in turn, Allen who inherited her idealism, her visionary fears and ecstasy, and also her tendencies to madness, as the world defines it. This identification with his mother contributes to the profound autobiographical nature of the poem. Different as they are, the poet and his mother are also so much alike that their stories are fitted together like lock and key. Her message that "The key is in the sunlight at the window" is the eternal mothers message: to come home, to let himself in, to cease being the prodigal ("Get married Allen don't take drugs"), and to know himself by knowing her.

Black and Jewish Americans were not the only ones to seek their identities by reclaiming their racial and cultural heritages in the process defining their relation to the rest of America. One of the most unusual was N. Scott Momaday's quest for Kiowa heritage, recreated in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) and *The Names* (1976). As he explains in the latter, his father was Kiowa, but he himself had been raised mainly at Jemez Pueblo in New Mexico, where for twenty-five years his parents taught school. Later he went to a military school and the University of New Mexico, then took a PH.D. in English at Stanford University in 1963. *The Way to Rainy Mountain* poetically records a journey from the northern Rocky Mountains out onto the Great Plains and then down to Rainy Mountain in Oklahoma, a journey which follows the historic path of the Kiowa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Along the way, as it were, Momaday juxtaposes Kiowa legends, as told by his father and his ancestors (and recovered from ethnographic works), with historical material and his own memories and observations. The combination is *original* autobiography in the fullest sense—a search for origins as well as a new and different kind of book. It also serves as a kind of abbreviated Kiowa tribal history and example of Plains Indian experience, thus giving the book an even greater historical interest than usual.

In *The Names*, Momaday told a more particular family history, including the story of his mother Natachee Scott, who was descended from white Tennesseans. But her name, "Natachee," had come from a great-grandmother who was Cherokee, and this was the ancestor the teen-age girl chose to identify with. "She imagined who she was," wrote Momaday, adding that "this act of imagination was, I believe, among the most important events of my mother's early life, as later the same essential act was to be among the most important of my own." (5) Such a statement epitomizes the role of imagination in modern ethnic identity quests. Identity, to such an autobiographer, is not given, fixed, and changeless. It is an act of passion, will, and vision working upon the diverse materials of history. These materials of history, moreover, are also viewed as created things, being as they are the results of earlier acts of passion (like sexual union), legal procedures (like marriage), and will or accident (like someones saving the stories, records, or photographs with which the autobiographer works).

Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman," from *The Woman Warrior*, and Richard Rodriguez's account of his experience with skin color and his definition of machismo, from *Hunger for Memory*, provide further illustrations of modern ethnic identity quests. Kingston's making a fascinating comparison to Momaday's, because in it, too, identity is a fusion of ancient myth or legend, various kinds of history (some of which are on the verge of legend), and personal memory. Rodriguez's books is a good contrast to Baldwin's, because it deals more with race as a social and economic issue in America and with the more immediate experiences of prejudice. But Rodriguez takes a much more conservative position than Baldwin did. In fact, before his book was even published, he had announced in various journalistic articles that he opposed bilingual education in schools because he thought it so important for children to be required to learn English as the "public" American language, the language which had enabled him to participate fully in American life. As a very well-educated Mexican-American, he had, in turn, won

scholarships to prestigious universities and so did not consider himself as needing the assistance of affirmative action programs.

Rodriguez's articles against bilingual education and affirmative action made him widely sought as a conservative lecturer. His autobiography was in turn, sought as a further statement and explanation of his views, and it became hotly controversial. As such, it is a perfect example of the interplay among media, public issues, and autobiography. Yet there are precedents for *Hunger for Memory* as an apology. Rodriguez insisted that he had been misunderstood and his message oversimplified. He argued that he really opposed affirmative action because it gave unfair advantages to people who did not need help, such as the educated middle class, and deflected attention from the poor and uneducated who needed more special programs like Headstart. His book should, therefore, be read in full, along with the well-reasoned replies that it provoked from other Mexican-Americans. (6)

The Woman Warrior has also been attacked. Chinese-Americans have accused Kingston of misrepresenting Chinese-American experience, making her own life over into something exotically "oriental," and distorting Chinese legends. Frank Chin has raised the additional argument that *The Woman Warrior* is untrue to Chinese tradition because autobiography is a peculiarly Christian literary weapon." (7) Indeed, the debate raises questions not only about Chinese-American autobiography but about autobiography in general. (8)

Many other autobiographies have come out of the political controversies of the sixties, seventies, and the eighties. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) was solicited by publishers after Alex Haley's widely read interview with Malcolm X in *Playboy*. The difficulty with Malcolm X and Black Muslims had in obtaining sympathetic reports from white journalists made a partnership with Haley very valuable, even though Malcolm X at first distrusted him. Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* was the account of his service in Vietnam, his being wounded, and his conversion from a born patriot and believer in the war into an anti-war activist. Kat Millett's *Flying* (1974) was her account of her discovery of herself and her deeper sexuality in the process of becoming a feminist. In *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973), Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston told of her coming of age in an internment camp for Japanese-Americans during World War II. In her essay included here, "Beyond Manzanar," she describes her later conflicts between Japanese and American concepts of womanhood. Her conflicts will be understandable to many other women (and men) caught between cultures and between traditions.

At the same time, earlier American identity quests which had been ignored or forgotten were rediscovered. *Black Elk Speaks* is now recognized as a classic Native-American autobiography. Yet, between its initial publication in 1932 and the late 1960's, when it began to be read by a few anthropologists, hippies, and young Indians, it had been virtually forgotten. Suddenly, Black Elk's account of his visions and his later finding his role in Oglala Sioux society as a medicine man and healer had enormous appeal. (9)

Some other classic autobiographies rediscovered in this last generation are Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859), Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* (1943), and Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). In the latter case, Alice Walker took the lead, having discovered Hurston in the course of trying to write a short story about voodoo. Until then, as she says in her autobiographical essay, "looking for Zora," (10) she had never heard of Hurston's work. Once found, her affinities with Hurston were so great that she identified with Hurston on many levels. Hurston became a role-model, a teacher, and an inspiration.

The universal need for such models is surely another reason for the continued and growing popularity of autobiography in the last generation. From its beginnings, autobiography has been written to be used as instruction. But the early religious autobiography was generally much narrower in focus and more inclined to leave out material that might show the subjects faults or have a detrimental effect on the reader. Such selectivity was even more pronounced in didactic, inspirational autobiographies like Lydia Sigourney's *Letters of Life* and Lucy Larcom's *A New England Girlhood*. A reader could turn to them for moral elevation, but not for much consolation or sympathy. Autobiographies such as Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) or Patricia Hampl's *A Romantic Education* (1981)

represent more of the ups and downs, the disappointments and struggles, and the uncertainties of life. By telling their tales, Angelou and Hampl make the lives of other women in similar times and places easier to live and easier to tell about. Their identity quests help readers to find their own identities.

In the chapter from *Black is a Woman's Color*, bell hooks goes a step further by telling a series of stories which are not just representative or illustrative ones but ones which could be even more central to contemporary culture. The six stories in this provocative chapter have as their subjects the straightening of hair, the discovering of jazz and poetry, memories of her father's attacks on her mother, her mother's leaving, and her own rebellion against her mother. The stories move from a relatively innocent initiation into black sisterhood to a very dangerous, passionate initiation into our society's conflicts of authority: the socially accepted but unjust authority of an abusive father, the inadequate authority. Clearly, this series of stories is more than just hooks own "life" or *bios*. It is what another black woman autobiographer, Audre Lord, called "bio-mythography," an extension of autobiography into a personal-cultural mythology. Autobiography has long had a certain mythic function—think of Franklin's *Autobiography*; primarily, however, an autobiography is *one* person's story, where a myth is *everybody's* story, a story which has either happened to everybody or which everybody shares in. Hooks stories qualify as myth in these senses. Without being a full cultural hero, someone, say, who in slaying a dragon has saved everyone in the village, she has made herself someone around whose story others can tell their stories and talk of their needs for liberation, and its pains and obstacles, thus helping these others to liberate or, as hooks says, "to recover" themselves.

Race and gender are not the only sources of modern identity, however. The true "guardian of identity," Erik Erikson thought, was "*ideology*," and he italicized the term to give it the widest possible meaning, applying it to any social system that conveyed to its members a faith that "the best people will come to rule and rule will develop the best in people." (11) One of the reasons for identity confusion in modern America, therefore, may actually be that we have so many rival ideologies, yet such an oversimplified dominant public one. That is to say, the dominant modern American ideology of free enterprise, which represents the self-made man rising to "rule" simply by being "best," in the process showering himself and his family with consumer comforts, is one that nearly every American over the age of eighteen has at some time or another found to be a hollow lie or one offering goals that do not satisfy. "Sexist" and "racist" are only the latest epithets directed at it. Its older critics long ago found it selfish, deceitful, and spiritually lacking.

Thus we end this selection with two contemporary American autobiographies that represent yet two more American "ideologies." The first is Wendell Berry's story of his finding "all I need" in his "marginal farm" in Kentucky. It brings to mind Daniel Boone's autobiography, for the "great-great-great-grandfather" of berry's who first settled there in 1803 would have been a contemporary of Boone's. But where Boone was interested in settlements and was as restless and violent as many other Americans of 1800, Berry is interested in *re-settlement*, and there is an enormous difference. Berry tells in this essay (as in many of his other novels, poems, and essays) of the time, work, and thought he has given to correcting the abuses of the restless, violent exploiters of the land. No crops on hillsides, such as the early settlers tried to grow. A return to farming with horses, which the later farmers and developers had abandoned. And promotion of subsistence, "marginal" farming, even though acknowledging that he also depends on the income from his writing. But he does this not only because he is ecologically conscious, he does it because he truly loves his land. The land and proper husbanding of it are his ideology, the truest guardian of his identity that he can imagine. His first Kentucky ancestor may have been a contemporary of Boone's, but Berry's ideological ancestors are Jefferson and Thoreau.

Modern autobiographers who are close to Berry are other nature writers and ecologists, even though their own physical turf may be as far away as Anne LaBastille's cabin in the Adirondacks or Edward Abbey's house trailer in Arches National Monument, celebrated in *Desert Solitaire*, or Gary Snyder's homes in the "back country." They all identify with nature and a place, which in turn means that the more they know that place and the more eloquently they can describe and protect it, the better they can identify themselves.

Another person strongly identified with place is Annie Dillard, who in 1974 became famous almost overnight for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. But unlike Berry, she has not chosen to stay in one place. In the

years since *Tinker Creek*, she has lived in many other places, such as Middletown, Connecticut, and Bellingham, Washington. In *An American Childhood*, she celebrated Pittsburgh, a very unlikely place because it is so different from "Tinker Creek" in rural Virginia. But it was the town where she grew up, and it was, therefore, inextricably connected for her with all the awakenings, discoveries, and rebellions of childhood and youth. Her parents and grandparents houses, a friends house in the mountains outside Pittsburgh, the Allegheny, the Monogahela, and the Ohio rivers, the Pittsburgh Pirates, and the outstanding local libraries and museums all contributed to making her who she was.

Something else that Dillard said about writing *An American Childhood* is also very important to the issue of autobiography and identity, however. In a talk that she gave at the New York Public Library shortly before the book was published, she said,

My advice to memoir writers is to embark upon a memoir for the same reason that you would embark on any other book: to fashion a text. Don't hope in a memoir to preserve your memories. If you prize your memories as they are, by all means avoid-eschew-writing a memoir. Because it is in a certain way to lose them. You can't put together a memoir without cannibalizing your own life for parts. The work battens on your memories. And it replaces them. (12)

Not all writers of memoirs and autobiographies might agree with Dillard, but many critics and careful readers of autobiography today would. The text-the words on paper-are not the reality. They are a book, not a life. And they reshape the life- "cannibalizing" it, as Dillard says-until there may be very little of it left. The words on paper also ave an independent force because of the echoes and shades of meaning which they carry from elsewhere, from other books and from other texts of all kinds. Furthermore, traditions of autobiography shape the kinds of texts the author chooses to write, as we have pointed out before.

Do the modern identity quest in autobiography is a complex process. From one point of view, the words make the new life, even though the author chooses the words, being more or less conscious of what words he or she is using and exerting more or less freedom in choosing them. On the other hand, since autobiography is a referential art, the words must also refer to facts, and the facts, in turn have to do with the deeds and events and places that the author-as-actor performed or experienced. And yet these deeds and events and places and memories of them become cannibalized in the writing.

Adapting Dillard's metaphor of cannibalism, we might compare the whole process to a kind of food chain. Words eat memoreis, which have grown fat on experience. Experience happens to and is caused by persons. Persons seek their identities and start to write words, which again start eating up memories, changing the identities. The process is also like a food chain in that it is not necessarily a perfect circle. The creatures in it may cross over: new experiences may arise and eat up memoreis before the words even get to them. And all this takes place in a forest we might call Culture, which both sustains and destroys all the creatures-the words, memories, experiences, persons, and identities-as well as all the little micro-creatures within them. Moreover, the process never stops. We can imaginatively halt it and look at a part of it, but it is ever-moving, and all parts are necessary, all interdependent.

This, then, is the ecology of modern autobiography, in which Americans continue to seek their identities and express their latest concepts of self.

James Baldwin (1924-1990) *The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American*

Born in New York, James Baldwin attended public schools in Harlem and graduated from De Witt Clinton High School in 1942, where he co-edited the school newspaper with Richard Avedon, the future photographer. In his teens he was also a “boy preacher” for several years at the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly.

Moving to Greenwich Village in 1944, he was introduced to Richard Wright, who liked his writing and helped him to win two literary fellowships, and whom he followed, in 1948, to Paris. There he finished *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953); a novel based on the religious experiences of his boyhood, and began to publish a number of powerful personal essays about the race problem in America. *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) was his first collection of these, *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) was his second, and a third, *The Fire Next Time* (1963), became a best-seller. The essay below was first published in the *New York Times Book Review* (January 25, 1959) and was later the opening essay in *Nobody Knows My Name*.

In his essays Baldwin spoke both intimately and analytically about his experiences as a black in America while at the same time insisting on his right and responsibility to speak as any other American and to attack the prejudices that would make him “merely a Negro.” He made his personal identity quest a public issue, breaking out of the racial stereotypes that had made him “nameless.” Thus in this essay he speaks as both white and black. He identifies with Henry James and the traditions of American artist-exiles and is also “as American as any Texas G.I.” Yet he listens to Bessie Smith “to dig back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was a pickaninny.”

Baldwin was later attacked by white and black writers. In *Advertisements for Myself*, Norman Mailer called him too introspective, saying he would never be a great writer till he “smashed the perfumed dome of his ego.” Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* attacked him as a homosexual who lacked black pride and was not sufficiently militant. Cleaver and later black writers wished to discover not what it means to be an American but what it means to be black. Both Baldwin and Cleaver had become public figures, however, largely because of brilliant autobiographical essays. The definitive biography is James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (New York: Viking, 1991).

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Allen Ginsberg (1926-) *Kaddish*

The Kaddish, which means “holy” in Aramaic, refers to any of five different prayers which have been recited in Jewish services for thousands of years. One of these, the Mourner’s Kaddish, is a prayer for the bereaved to recite in honor of their loved ones. Two lines of it—“Yisborach, v’yistabach...b’rich hu”—are quoted in Section II of the poem and then translated in lines 1-2 of the “Hymmn” section. Nevertheless, as this excerpt illustrates, the prayer does not speak of loss, mention the dead, or mention the feelings of the Mourner. It simply praises God as the supreme source of peace, the eternal power and eternal rest.

In the poem “Kaddish,” Allen Ginsberg mixes this Jewish tradition with very intimate, painful memories of his mother Naomi Ginsberg’s death after years of madness, suicide attempts, and confinements in mental hospitals. He also writes frankly and realistically and sometimes humorously about his own life—his homosexuality, his taking drugs, his rivalry with his brother, his restless travels, his visions, and his ambition to be a great visionary poet. It is possibly the most autobiographical poem Ginsberg has written, and all his work has been autobiographical, as a part of his aesthetic of spontaneity, expressiveness, and energy.

However with the exception of Part II, which, as said in the poem, was written in twenty straight hours, after a night without sleep, the poem was not written quickly. According to Ginsberg’s account in “How “Kaddish” Happened,” Part IV was written first; then a year later parts I and II; and still later Part V. (He does not mention Part III.)¹ He also waited a year before making a clean draft of the manuscript, fearful that the poem was too long, disorderly, and private—a rather startling thing for Ginsberg the supposedly wild man to admit. But it has since been recognized as a great poem: both ecstatic and controlled, funny and sad, personal and universal.

The text below is from *Collected Poems 1947-1980* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984). Barry Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography* (New York: Viking, 1989) is the latest biography. Jane Kramer’s *Allen Ginsberg in America* (New York: Random House, 1969) is an invaluable study of the man and the myth. *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. Lewis Hyde (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1984) has a rich collection of reviews, essays, and documents.

“Kaddish for Naomi Ginsberg 1894-1956” from *Collected Poems 1947-1980* by Allen Ginsberg, copyright 1959, 1984 by Allen Ginsberg, is reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., and Penguin Books Ltd.

1. In *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, ed. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman (New York: Grove, 1973), pp. 345-47.

N. Scott Momaday (1934-) From *The Way to Rainy Mountain* And *The Names*

The Way to Rainy Mountain (1969) is a short book that poetically retraces the route of the Kiowa two hundred years ago from the northern Rocky Mountains onto the Great Plains and down to Oklahoma. It is in three parts, "The Setting Out," "The Going On," and "The Closing in," and is framed by a brief "Introduction" and "Epilogue." Within each of the parts the narrative proceeds through the representation of the three different kinds of material: myth, history, and personal memory, distinguished by three different type faces. There are also ink drawings and designs by Al Momaday, Momaday's father.

Thus *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is in a sense collaborative autobiography, a tradition in Native American personal narrative. Coup stories and hunting stories were often told by several people, with one supporting or adding to what another said, and the tribal histories such as "Winter Counts" were kept by one person, but when they were told, they could be filled out by other people's memories. Momaday's collaborators are not only his father but also the old anonymous myth tellers and the other Kiowa he interviewed.

The selection below is the beginning of "Setting Out."

Momaday's *The Names* (1976) is more like a family scrapbook. It has old family portraits and snapshots with handwritten captions. The material is also more specific to Momaday himself and his family, especially his mother. Had Momaday not first published his novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968; Pulitzer Prize 1969), *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, and several other books, there probably would have been no occasion for publishing *The Names*; nevertheless, the comments on imagination and the reconstruction of his childhood definitions of "Indian" go well beyond the material of the celebrity autobiography.

The texts below are from *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (New York: Ballantine, 1969) and *The Names* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976). Matthias Schubnell, *N. Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1985), provides useful biographical information. *Ancestral Voices: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday*, by Charles L. Woodard (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1989), provides further information.

The selection from *The Way to Rainy Mountain* copyright 1969 The University of New Mexico Press is reprinted by permission of the author and the University of New Mexico Press. The Selection from *The Names* is reprinted by permission of the author.

Maxine Hong Kingston (1940-) *No Name Woman*

Maxine Hong was born in Stockton California, and graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1962. Her father, who had been a poet and calligrapher in China, had immigrated to New York in the 1920's and become part-owner of a laundry. He sent money back to his wife, who used some of it to study medicine and midwifery. In the late 1930's he sent for her and they were finally reunited, after twelve years.

The Woman Warrior (1976) goes way beyond such biographical data as this, however, for it fuses ancient Chinese legends, family history, and personal memory into a new kind of autobiography of consciousness. It fuses these materials as closely together as the growing daughter felt them, until the reader, too, cannot be sure where they meet.

The selection below, the first and shortest of the book's five chapters, is a good example. This chapter is entitled "No Name Woman": it is, as Kingston tells it, a story her mother, Brave Orchid, told about the author's father's sister, who has no name and must never be referred to because she had an illegitimate child. Both internal and external evidence, however, indicate that this is a proverbial story which Chinese mothers told to their daughters at puberty to warn them against having sex before or outside of marriage. So isn't "true". Yet if the young Maxine thought it was true and believed in for so many years that it shaped her life, what are we to say?

The later chapters tell more combinations of myth and family memory, or "talk-stories," as the daughter heard them from her mother—stories of a legendary Chinese woman warrior, stories of Brave Orchid's encounters with ghosts while she was a medical student in China, stories of relatives, and stories of Maxine's childhood. In all, the over-arching theme is the power of speech itself—the power of the teller of the "talk-story" to create reality and so fashion an identity for herself.

Kingston's stories also make a fascinating comparison with other stories of first-and second-generation immigrants and all stories that question the nature of identity: whether identity is something immutable and transcendent, whether it is based on action and historical circumstance, or whether it is created in language, narrative, and "talk-story."

Kingston's second volume of autobiography, *China Men*, was published in 1980. For additional biographical information, see the entry in *Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series*, vol. 13 (1984), pp. 289-94. There is an excellent critical study of *The Woman Warrior* in Paul John Eakins's *Fictions in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985)

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Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston (1934-) *Beyond Manzanar*

Manzanar, which means “apple orchard” in Spanish, was the name of a large internment camp which the U.S. government built for Japanese and Japanese Americans in World War II. It was in eastern California, in the Owens Valley, on the eastern side of the Sierras. Along with her mother, brothers, and sisters, Jeanne Wakatsuki was taken there in 1942, from their home in Long Beach. Her father, a commercial fisherman, had been arrested earlier and sent to a camp in North Dakota, having been falsely accused of communicating with Japanese submarines off the California coast. They were part of the 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry moved from homes on the West Coast by the War Relocation Authority.

In 1973, assisted by her husband, the writer James Houston, she published a powerful memoir of the experience, *Farewell to Manzanar*. It tells of the pain and humiliation of the internment, the consequences to her family, her father’s shattered pride and heavy drinking, the makeshift arrangements people made, and the difficulties the family had in starting over again after the war. It also tells of ballet classes, baton twirling, picnics, and other more normal childhood activities. A movie based on the book has been broadcast on television.

This autobiographical essay, which was written in 1978, is both a sequel to the book and an independent exploration of the ambivalences in being an American woman of Japanese descent. On one side is the example of her mother, who, though independent enough to have married for love, fully accepted Japanese ideals of wifely and motherly behavior. On the other side are the ideals of personal fulfillment, not through sacrifice and cooperation, but through self-assertion and competition. The conflict is further complicated because the two sides are internalized and felt in different ways at different ages and in different moods. Friends, brothers, sisters, and children also give conflicting advice and evoke different impulses.

The essay is reprinted from *Beyond Manzanar: Views of Asian-American Womanhood* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1985), pp. 7-25. More information about Houston can be found both in *Farewell to Manzanar* and in the essay she wrote for the *Gale Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, vol. 16.

“*Beyond Manzanar*” copyright 1978 by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, is reprinted from *Beyond Manzanar: Views of Asian-American Womanhood*, Capra Press, Santa Barbara. Reprinted by permission of the author. This essay was first delivered as a paper for The Seminar on Ethnic Lifestyles, Oklahoma State University, March 1978.

Wendell Berry (1934-) *The Making of a Marginal Farm*

As this autobiographical essay perfectly illustrates, Wendell Berry is both a farmer and a writer, and he seems to allow neither a permanent priority.

He was, as he explains, born in Henry County, Kentucky, and now lives there. In between, he went to the University of Kentucky (A.B., 1956; M.A., 1957) and the writing program at Stanford University. He also taught at Stanford, Georgetown, and New York University, and held a Guggenheim Fellowship in Italy and France. But unlike many distinguished contemporary writers and professors he no longer moves.

Berry is an eloquent advocate of the eighteenth-century Jeffersonian farmer. For him, the small, self-supporting yeoman is independent and the backbone of democracy. He thinks and acts for himself and resists demagoguery. He in turn supports democratic government because it represents and supports him. He is also the best husbandman to the land because he wants it to continue to sustain him and his family.

With these virtues under great pressure from all sides—corporations, universities, city-dwellers, and larger farmers—meanwhile forgotten or turned into slogans and shibboleths, Berry has not only written about them but attempted to prove that a person can still live by them. He also used the standard of the Jeffersonian farmer-intellectual to write harsh and prophetic judgments of modern industrial capitalism, such as *The Unsettling of America* (1977).

To Berry, therefore, “marginal farming,” is not something to eliminate but the very opposite: the wise, just, instructive, environmentally right and socially and aesthetically beneficial way to live. What’s more, as he says, in “settling on his place, I began to live in my subject.” He “pass(ed) through the surface.” The farm became the expression of himself, as he was the caretaker, keeper, defender, and voice of the farm. Yet Berry might also say that this formulation is too fancy, or too neat. He says it better himself: “our reclamation project has been, for me, less a matter of idealism or morality than a kind of self-preservation.”

The source of “Making of a Marginal Farm” is *Recollected Essays, 1965-1980* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981). There is no biography of Berry. The article by Gary Tolliver in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol 5 (1980), is authoritative, however, Tolliver also having written his Ph.D. dissertation on Berry (Ohio Univ., 1978). A good critical article is William Merrill Decker’s “The Wild, the Divine, and the Human World: Rereading Wendell Berry,” *North Dakota Quarterly* 59 (Spring 1991): 242-58.

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Richard Rodriguez (1944-) From *Complexion*

Published in 1982, *Hunger for Memory* has been a controversial book. Conservatives have liked it for its opposition to affirmative action and bilingual education; the left has objected that, as the exceptionally talented, well-educated young man, Rodriguez does not speak for all Mexican-Americans or member of minorities

In the book, Rodriguez acknowledges his good fortune. His parents aspired to the middle class and sent him and his brother and sisters to good Catholic schools in Sacramento, California. They did not live in a barrio. When Richard's teachers suggested to his parents that he would learn English faster if English were spoken at home, the family obliged. Later, he felt very grateful because "What I needed to learn in school was what I had the right—and the obligation—to speak the public language of los gringos" (19). He became an outstanding student, won a scholarship to Stanford, and did graduate work in English literature at Columbia University, the Warburg Institute in London, and the University of California, Berkeley. At Berkeley in 1975, he then had his pick of jobs at prestigious colleges. Not feeling like a member of a "disadvantaged minority," however, and not approving of affirmative action, which gave "benefits for the relative few because of the absence of the many" (164), he turned them down. Then he says, he retired to an apartment in San Francisco to write "this intellectual autobiography" (175)

As this selection from the chapter "Complexion" shows, Rodriguez was not spared insecurity about his skin color. With his Spanish and Mexican inheritance, he also held different values and different definitions of manhood. The latter part of this short selection is typical of his gentle insistence on explaining misunderstood cultural differences and establishing his individual relationships to them. As he says at the end of *Hunger for Memory*, reversing the stoicism and insularity of his parents, "I have come to think that there is a place for the deeply personal in public life" (185).

The selection is taken from *Hunger for Memory* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982). For further biographical information about Richard Rodriguez, see *Contemporary American Authors*, vol. 110 (1984), pp. 429-30.

Annie Dillard (1945-) From *An American Childhood*

Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) was a book of nature essays and personal meditations based on a year's residence, in 1972, in the Roanoke valley of rural Virginia. It won the Pulitzer Prize and was often compared to Thoreau's *Walden*.

More extensively autobiographical than *Tinker Creek* is her *An American Childhood* (1987), which is about her childhood and adolescence in upper-middle-class Pittsburgh in the prosperous, confident 1950's and early '60s. It is a story of her dawn of memory and consciousness, running on into a very privileged education and self-education. She collects butterflies and classifies rocks and minerals, studies drawing, practices the piano, reads omnivorously, and spends comfortable vacations with her wealthy paternal grandparents on Lake Erie and in Florida. She also rebels against her family's respectable Presbyterian church and the class traditions enshrined in country clubs and private schools. Like other young artists from other cities, she dreams of someday escaping. But Annie Dillard (Dillard was the name of her first husband) also seems grateful for the advantages she had as Annie Doak, eldest daughter of Pam and Frank Doak and big sister to Amy and Molly.

The following untitled chapter balances these joys and frustrations of being brilliant and spontaneous, and troubled and troublesome, in a town which is stuffy but also comforting and nurturing. It is also humorous. But was the humor felt at the time or only seen later?

The escape which Annie Doak did make was to Hollins College in Roanoke, Virginia, where she majored in English and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1967.

The selection below is from *An American Childhood* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988). There is no biography of Dillard. The sketch in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Yearbook* (1980) is informative, however, and the sketch in *Contemporary Authors* (New Revision Series, vol. 3) has a lengthy survey of reviews of her work.

Reprinted from *An American Childhood*, by Annie Dillard. Copyright 1987 by Annie Dillard. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

Bell hooks (c. 1953-) From *Black Is a Woman's Color*

Ain't I A Woman (1981), bell hooks' first book, was a pioneering contribution to black feminism, and it launched her on a prominent career as teacher, author, and lecturer. But in it she said very little about herself, preferring, as she said later, to keep the narrative impersonal and not emphasize her own experiences. The name "bell hooks" (uncapitalized) was a pseudonym.

Since then, however, she was revealed more about herself and her reasons for writing. Her full name is Gloria Jean Watkins. She was born in rural Kentucky and attended segregated schools until her sophomore year of high school. She went to Stanford University, worked with other black women at the Berkeley Telephone Office in 1973-74, and then went to graduate school in English at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Southern California, finishing her work at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She has taught English, African American Studies at Oberlin, Yale, and the City College of New York.

Her later work has also become more autobiographical. As a means of over-coming the effects of oppression of black women, she has worked privately and with other women on what she calls "self-recovery," a significant term which simultaneously suggests personal history and personal therapy. A thoughtful reader can see how the chapter below is an example of such an effort. Here, too, however, she writes not only as "I," but also as "we" and "she" and one of the daughters—all ways of generalizing her experiences. These experiences convey much of cultural portent, beginning with her account of hair-straightening, which invites comparisons with the "conk" story in *The Autobiography of M.L.C.O.M.*

In a short essay called "Writing Autobiography," she has also written about the experience of writing. "I began to think of the work I was doing as both fiction and autobiography," she says, like what "Audre Lorde, in her autobiographically based work *Zami*, calls bio-mythography."¹ Another revealing comment is that the telling of these stories bough "both a sense of reunion (with the past) and a sense of release." In another essay, "To Gloria, Who Is She: On Using a Pseudonym," she tells of choosing the name "bell hooks" both to honor a great-grandmother on her mother's side and because it evoked a "much that I am not" and had "a strong sound...of a strong woman."² We can therefore ask to what degree "Black is a Woman's Color" brings "release," and whether it is bell or Gloria.

The selection here is the excerpt from "Black Is a Woman's Color" published in *Callaloo* 12 (1989): 382-88.

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1. Bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), pp. 157-58
2. Hooks, *Talking Back*, pp. 160-61