HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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ENGLISH AUTOBIOGRAPHY – Early Modern Period

John Bunyan

John Bunyan is most famous for his once extremely well-know and widely-read allegory of a Christian's quest for redemption, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1675). For years it was like a companion to the Bible (which it frequently quoted). Later it was sometimes joked about (Mark Twain has Huckleberry Finn describe it as "a book about a man who left his family it didn't say why") but it had left its mark on the English language. Its names and places like "Mr. Worldly-Wise Man," "the slough of despond," and "Vanity Fair" are used by millions of people who no longer know their source. His *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) is not so famous, but it nevertheless has been called "one of the most enthralling autobiographies in the language." Bunyan is the archetypal sinful poor boy who finds religion and then struggles, with the help of God and the Bible, to become a true Christian.

He was born in a village in Bedfordshire, the son of a chapman, or peddler-trader, who also mended pots and pans. As he says in *Grace Abounding*, "My descent was of a low and inconsiderable generation, my father's house being of that rank that is meanest and most despised of all the families of the land." He had a simple grammar school education and became a tinker, like his father. He swore a lot, hung out with rough young men, and had no concern for religion. His mother died. His father remarried. And in 1644, age 16, he joined the Parliamentary army, aligning himself with the Puritans and enemies of the king and Anglican church. Leaving the army after the Civil War, he returned to his trade and his profanity and impiety. In 1650 he married a young woman whose father had left her an inheritance of only two books, the *Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven* and the *Practice of Piety.* They led him to religion and to try to become a Christian. But it was difficult, as his autobiography explains at length. Nevertheless, in 1655, thanks in part to the teaching of his pastor, John Gifford, he began preaching.

As an unlicensed preacher, he became very popular, but also controversial for his unorthodox views and style and supposedly immoral life. He was arrested, but still managed to stay out of jail, until 1660, when the restoration of the monarchy, under Charles II, and the re-establishment of the Anglican Church made it illegal to conduct divine services other than Anglican and for non-Episcopal ministers to preach.

Thus began Bunyan's nearly twelve years in jail. He supported himself and his large family by weaving shoelaces and preaching to other prisoners. He also wrote *Grace Abounding* and other books and entertained himself and others by making and playing a violin he made out of tin and a flute made from a chair leg. He was briefly released in 1666, but soon arrested for again preaching. His release in 1672 followed King Charles's issue of the Declaration of Religious Indulgence. He again became a popular preacher, but in 1675 was imprisoned again for six months with the revocation of the Declaration of Religious Indulgence. After that his immense popularity as a preacher and writer saved him from further arrest.

These facts and dates are important to know, but *Grace Abounding* goes far deeper into Bunyan's life. It is spiritual autobiography in the fullest sense. It is concerned less with his physical state than the state of his soul, less with his arrests than with the arresting thoughts and fears that seem to hold him suspended between heaven and hell, with only God's grace to depend on. Thus there is drama and conflict as Bunyan converses with the "Tempter" and battles with Satan. It can also be called intellectual autobiography, as when

Bunyan describes his evolving interpretations of many passages from the Bible and importance to him of reading Martin Luther's *Commentary on Galatians.*

One of the many interesting differences between this autobiography and Margery Kemp's is the reliance that Bunyan places Biblical verses, compared to her reliance on her visitations and instructions from Jesus, Mary, and God. She seems barely to have known the Bible. It was just being translated by Wycliffe, and copies were only in manuscript, print not yet having been invented. But Bunyan knew the English Bible intimately. Living after the introduction of print and the publication of translations, he was also at the end of the Renaissance and in the continuing controversies of the Reformation in England. For Margery Kempe authority was personal, from her mystical encounters with Jesus and Mary; for Bunyan authority is in the words of Jesus, the Old Testament prophets, and the disciples, as preserved in the Bible. Such authority was to him and his readers more objective. It could be read by all. It did not need, like hers, to be proven by miracles, which themselves had to be proven and attested to and ultimately written down by a third party. But the objectification of Bunyan's authorities left all the more room for his expansive descriptions of his doubts, fears, guilt, anxieties, exultations, and other mental conditions.

The fact that Bunyan is writing in the first person singular intensifies these descriptions of his inner life. He can quote a verse from the Bible or a sentence from another book, such as "Man knows the beginning of sin, but who can tell where it will end?" and then tell how, "For whole days at a time it caused my mind to shake and totter under the sense of the dreadful judgment of God that I was sure was upon me. And I felt such heat at my stomach, by reason of my terror, that it felt as though my breast bone would split apart;…"

Passages such as these are typical. Bunyan makes emotion physically real as few other writers do. In *Grace Abounding* he turns the Christian experience of conversion into a vivid drama of one man confronting his Devils and his God. It is indeed "enthralling autobiography."

Questions for Further Study:

1. Bunyan wrote *Grace Abounding* in prison. Many autobiographers also wrote in prison or about prison. How do you think his time and experience there affected what he wrote?

2. Do you think Bunyan exaggerates his sins and his sense of guilt? If so, why? What are the rhetorical and moral advantages of such exaggeration?

3. Read *Pilgrim's Progress* and compare the Bunyan of *Grace Abounding* with the Pilgrim.

Samuel Pepys

Samuel Pepys and John Bunyan were close contemporaries. But it is hard to think of two more different men, more different lives, and more different books. Pepys (pronounced "Peeps") was born in London on February 23, 1633, five years after Bunyan, the son of a London tailor. He went to St. Paul's School and later to Cambridge University, where he did well and might have become a lawyer. But through his father's ancestors, he was distantly related to Sir Sidney Montagu, whose son Edward, eight years older than Pepys, later employed the young Cambridge graduate as his private secretary. Montagu, at that time a supporter of Cromwell, became a member of Parliament and accepted other roles in the Puritan government; and Pepys took on other duties for him. Later, after Cromwell's death in 1658, Montagu switched his allegiance to Charles II, and as Montagu rose in the restored monarchy, Pepys rose with him. In 1660 (the year Bunyan went to jail), Pepys was given an important post in Navy Board. He rose further and was ultimately responsible for major improvements in the administration of the Royal Navy. He also grew very wealthy.

Superficially, about all that Bunyan and Pepys had in common was a love of music. But Bunyan played his prison-made violin and flute, while Pepys played more aristocratic instruments, sang, and attended musicales.

Nevertheless, there is a profound connection. Bunyan represents the pious, evangelical face of Puritanism. Pepys represents its dutiful, practical, book-keeping and worldly side, for although he gave up his early support of Cromwell and the Puritan revolution and became a nominal Anglican, he retained a certain amount of Puritan character. So Bunyan wrote a great spiritual autobiography, intensely focused on the state of his soul, and Pepys wrote one of the world's greatest diaries, intensely focused on the daily—from his sexual affairs to affairs of state and from the mundane and trivial to the catastrophic, like the Great Plague of 1665-6 and the Great Fire of London in November of 1666.

Pepys began his diary on January 1, 1660, with the appropriately ordinary fact that he got up and got dressed. He ended it on May 31, 1669, nearly 10 years later, saying he could write no longer, "having done now so long as to undo my eyes almost every time that I take a pen in my hand."

So how is one to read such a long diary, or "journal," as he called it? The most recent and most complete edition fills nine volumes. It also contains many footnotes, maps, and lists identifying the people Pepys referred to in each volume—all of which are very helpful. Without them one feels as if one has suddenly dived into a totally alien world. But no one can read all nine volumes in a week! So one alternative is to read a book of selections, but that too is unsatisfactory. It lacks continuity, and most shorter editions lack the necessary aids. So the best course is to try to find the complete edition and then read it selectively. For example, read the endings of years, like the entry for Dec. 31, 1667, where Pepys reveals a lot of his personal character. He woke up, he says, "with a full design to mind nothing else but to make up my accounts for the year past." So he dutifully went around paying his bills and then recorded his year's income and expenses and added up his net worth. He also noted, prophetically, that his eyes were very sore "with overworking them." Then he wrote a short, pessimistic description of the condition of the city, parliament, and the "sad, vicious, negligent Court," saying that "all sober men there [are] fearful of the ruin of the whole Kingdom…." It was not all that different, you might say, from what a thoughtful man might write in many years, which is one of the interesting features of diaries. They remind us that the more things change, the more they are the same. Finally, Pepys' very last words for 1667 were about his now owning enough silver to serve two and a half dozen people! His own wealth was secure, as many people would also like to believe at a year's end.

Or read his descriptions of the fire of London and the Great Plague. Find his references to his extra-marital affairs and compare them to his accounts of his arguments with his wife and his praises of her. Read his entries for different days, like Christmas, Easter, or your own birthday. Read all of the entries for a month in each of the years he wrote. It also helps to read some of Claire Tomalin's excellent biography, *Samuel Pepys: The Unequaled Self,* especially her account of the operation he underwent, without anesthetics, to remove a kidney stone. This was before he began the diary, but it is very revealing in many ways.

Finally, read enough to answer all of the following questions.

Texts:

Robert Latham & William Matthews (eds.), *The Diary of Samuel Pepys.* 9 vols. Univ. of California Press, 1970-76.
Richard Le Gallienne (ed.), *Passages from the Diary of Samuel Pepys.* New York: The Modern Library, 1959.

Questions for Further Study:

1. To write his diary, Pepys adapted a version of shorthand, making it very difficult to read (and for editors to transcribe into English print). What evidence do you find for his reasons for doing this?

2. The English Restoration was a time of much drunkenness, philandering, gambling, and general lewdness, personified in the stereotype "Restoration Rake." To what degree was Pepys one?

3. Using Pepys as your example, what are the character traits of a diarist? Regular habits? Discipline? Self-absorption? Introspection? A strong sense of history? Lively interests in one's friends, work, and surroundings? Something else?

Period II: Enlightenment (Boswell and Gibbon)

James Boswell

For many years Boswell's fame rested on his biography of Samuel Johnson, which was considered one of the greatest biographies in English. He had known Johnson well for nearly three decades, traveled with him, and recorded his brilliant conversation so faithfully that Johnson seemed to come alive on every page. Yet because of the biography's greatness, a kind of counter-image of Boswell developed as only a recorder of Johnson and not a great writer himself. At worst, he was satirized as a young toady who played up to Johnson, flattering him and sometimes maneuvering him into situations which Boswell could then exploit.

This all changed in 1950 with the publication of Boswell's London Journal. It and many more of his own journals and papers had been had been found in the 1920s in Malahide Castle in Ireland, but were known only, in parts, to a tiny group of scholars. (The full story of their recovery can be read in the introductions to the Yale University Press edition.) In it Boswell emerges in his own right. He is twenty-two years old, bright, ambitious, and delighted to have left his home in Edinburgh and be on his own in London, with a "small allowance" from his father and time to go to plays, study and write, pursue women, and meet the city's literary and social elite. It was an opportunity many young men dream of.

This is only half of what makes the Journal so interesting, however. Boswell was also a highly self-conscious modern man who was very aware of his social image. He often refers to "Mr. Addison," the author of The Spectator, the very popular magazine that was then the guide to London culture, manners, and morals, on whom he is trying to model himself. He is very self-critical. He is pleased when he is both a good speaker and good listener; he is displeased when he and his friends "were very genteel and very dull" (p. 49) He tries out different "diversions" and carefully records his reactions.

About all of this he is painfully honest. He records both his shame and his smugness in his encounters with London's prostitutes. He dramatically describes his progress in seducing Louisa, the actress he has chosen as his potential mistress; then describes his dreary months recovering from gonorrhea. He also records his slow realization that he does not really want to become an officer in the Guards, the aristocratic military unit he had come to London wanting to join.

But the Journal is more than just the honest record of these experiences and lessons. It is an essential agent. As he writes at one point, he wants it to "contain a consistent picture of a young fellow eagerly pushing through life." (p. 206) He lives an active, self-conscious life not just for its own sake but also to have it to write about and so make an interesting Journal. When his life has been dull, he laments that the Journal is dull. When it has been sophisticated and engaging, he is both pleased with himself and with the Journal.

The climax of these themes comes with his meeting Samuel Johnson. By 1763 Johnson was the most famous of London's men of letters: a literary critic, a biographer, a journalist, and the author-editor of the first great dictionary of the English language. No one, not even David Garrick the actor and theater owner-manager or the novelist-poet Oliver Goldsmith, both of whom Boswell had also met and befriended, had so much stature. Yet Johnson took to this young unknown Scot like a father to a son, and Boswell took to Johnson as a new father. They would not meet again until 1766. But from then on the qualities he had developed so conscientiously as an autobiographer – his skill in conversation, his self-consciousness, his skill as a writer and as a listener, even his skill at "nettling people"—would make him Johnson's great biographer.

Questions for Further Study:

1. In what ways did Johnson become a father figure for the young Boswell?

2. To whom, besides himself, do you think Boswell wrote, intentionally and unintentionally?

3. To what extent do you think Boswell tried to shape or structure his Journal? What effects was he seeking?

4. Compare Boswell as man and writer with Bunyan and Pepys.

Gibbon

Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is one of the greatest works and of the 18th-century Enlightenment and a landmark in historical writing. Its thesis that the introduction of Christianity was the cause of Rome's decline was immediately controversial, but did not stop it from being widely read and admired. Today it is still admired for Gibbon's research and learning and his powerful, balanced prose style. But his much shorter *Autobiography* is now far more approachable.

Even so, it too may appear forbidding. It has many long footnotes, some of which are in Latin or French; and roughly the last third of it is made up of letters by Gibbon to Lord Sheffield, his friend and literary executor. How can a reader today deal with this baroque text of a very upperclass English gentleman? For that matter, why should a reader today want to?

But the title, the *Autobiography of Edward Gibbon*, was not his. Gibbon himself called his manuscript not an autobiography but his "Memoirs of My Life and Writings." It was Sheffield who added many of the long footnotes and over a hundred pages of letters and an account of "Gibbon's Last Days," and then supplied the new title, when publishing it 1795, more than a year after Gibbon's death in January, 1794. And it was a new title in two senses, for at that time the very word "autobiography" had barely entered the English language. The older word "memoir" was in many ways simpler and more specific. With its connection to the word "memory" it generally was of a life or work or event or journey and not to be confused with a whole life or life story. The "autobiography" was the rather pretentious new kind of "biography" (life-writing) that was "self-life-writing." Since then "autobiography" has usually been defined as something longer, more comprehensive and complex. This distinction, although not absolute, can be said to have begun right here, with Lord Sheffield's incorporation of Gibbon's shorter, more direct memoir into a longer, more complicated and varied autobiography.

So the first way to make Gibbon less forbidding is to focus first on his Memoirs and not to be distracted by the long footnotes and letters added by Lord Sheffield. The second is to try to accept the three standards that he sets for himself in the opening paragraph: one, that "Truth, naked, unblushing truth...must be the sole recommendation of this personal narrative"; two, that the "style shall be simple and familiar"; and three, that "my own amusement is my motive." By both accepting these points and also going on to ask what Gibbon meant by them, reading his Memoirs can become a delightful and instructive experience.

An example of his telling the "naked, unblushing proof" is fulfilled in his story of how he became a pleasure-seeking playboy while at Oxford and also "bewildered myself in the errors of the Church of Rome." (p. 46) This so shocked his father that he was sent to Lausanne, Switzerland—the center of Calvinism—for the next five years to complete his education. There he again shocked his father by falling in love with Susan Curchod, the bright and virtuous daughter of a minister. "The report of such a prodigy awakened my curiosity; I saw and loved," Gibbon writes. But his father "would not hear of this strange alliance, and…without his consent I was myself destitute and helpless." This leads to one of the most quoted sentences in the book and one that is a good example of how "style is the image of character." "After a painful struggle I yielded to my fate: I sighed as a lover, I obeyed as a son." (pp. 83-4) It is not a long and complex sentence, like many of Gibbon's. But by opposing the two images of himself—"a lover" and "a son" and linking the one with romance ('sighed") and the other with duty ("obeyed") he clearly illustrates his character. There is also something very self-consciously operatic in this man and his language, in his style. Although the Memoirs are professedly a review of "the simple transactions of a private and literary life," (p. 1), he nevertheless loves to strike poses and call attention to himself.

This could be what Gibbon really meant when he wrote that "My own amusement is my motive, and will be my reward." He did not, like Boswell.write as part of his education and self-improvement. He was not a young man. He was a world-famous historian who was enjoying the fruits of his achievement, some of which were fame itself. So he performed, not just to "some discreet and indulgent friends" but to the whole educated world.

Recognizing this quality of Gibbon's book may lead us to think further about the possible differences between memoir and autobiography. Maybe memoirs are not simpler and more modest. Maybe Gibbon only chose the word because his readers would think so, thus allowing him to play the role of the private writer and then stun us by frequently breaking out of it, to become a grand public figure. If so, then Lord Sheffield was quite justified in adding more material and adding the new, somewhat more pretentious title: *The Autobiography of Edward Gibbon.*

Questions for Further Study:

1. The 18th-century is often called "the age of reason," because of its opposition to superstition and ignorance and emphasis on science and learning. How does Gibbon embody such enlightenment? How does he not?

2. Imagine a conversation between Gibbon and Boswell. How are their books similar and different? What would they like and not like about each other? Whom do *you* like more?

3. At the end of his memoirs Gibbon expressed his gratitude for having "drawn a high prize in the lottery of life." (See pp. 217-8) Is this offensively self-satisfied, or is it something that a fortunate, successful man like him should say?

Paper

1. Compare and contrast the autobiographies of Margery Kempe and John Bunyan, focusing on their religious experiences, their reasons for recording their experiences, and the effects of her dictating her story and his writing it himself. What are the additional differences resulting from difference in sex and literacy?

2. Contrast Boswell's *Journal* and Gibbon's *Memoirs.* Which is the more "enlightened" document? How different were their uses of their books?

3. As noted before, Bunyan and Pepys were close contemporaries. How do you account for the great differences between them and between their books? Which man is more sympathetic. Is a religious conversion narrative or a diary more intrinsically sympathetic?