

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Robert F. Sayre, PhD

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