HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Early 19th Century : Self-Liberators (1836-1865)

Although the autobiographical writers of the Revolution and years following had achieved (and helped the nation to achieve) national identities, they had not necessarily achieved or helped others to achieve personal and cultural independence. Approximately one-ninth of the population was, in fact, enslaved, and the native Indian population was not regarded as a part of the nation at all. They were not citizens and could not vote. Women could not vote either, and their rights to property were in most cases tightly restricted even white males frequently chafed against the nation's psychic bondage to English and European traditions and its lack of a literature and culture of its own. When Emerson said in his now famous Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard in 1837, "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe" and lamented that "The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame," he was only saying what scores of American commencement speakers had said before. The United States were no longer colonies, but many people still had a colonial mentality.

What was new and liberating in Emerson's message to the Harvard graduates of 1837, however, was the linkage of a cultural independence for the nation with individual freedom from social conventions. He lined up Europe, tradition, the past, oppression, conformity, and society on one side, and America, innovation, the future, the individual, and freedom on the other. "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members," he later said in "Self-Reliance." Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist," He also said, and, "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your won mind." Such sentences were intentionally short. Emerson, that "winged Franklin" (as one of his contemporaries called him), replaced Poor Richard's prudential maxims with a whole new almanac of inspirational sayings that for his generation (and after) were to become personal mottoes, icons of the ego.

In the Emersonian vision, autobiography occupied a very large and lofty place, as the short selections on it that are given here indicate. Emerson saw the new age, the nineteenth century, as an age of introspection. Kant, Goethe, and Coleridge appealed most to him for their individualism, as expressed in their journals and conversations and "aids to reflection," and he valued his own journal accordingly. He also advised journal-keeping to friends, as a means of discipline and self-discovery. From his journals would later come his lectures and essays, which were unified more by their inspirational tone than by sequential logic. Indeed, one often feels that he wrote first of all to inspire people to freedom-starting with himself. Thus, his whole literary production seems an ongoing experiment in inspirational autobiography. Yet his lectures and essays inspired his audiences, took, from associations of young mechanics in Boston to farmers and lawyers in Illinois. His private reflections expressed the aspirations of pre-Civil War America, or at least the northern half of it. Thus he himself realized the comparison to Dante (or Dante as he saw him) that he made in the essay "The Poet": 'he dared to write his autobiography in colossal cipher, or into universality."

The apposition "into universality" indicates, however, the paradox in Emerson's concepts of autobiography, as in his concepts of self. The Emersonian or Transcendental "self" was not a mean or selfish ego. It was more like the Christian soul. It was "part or parcel of God," as Emerson wrote in the beginning of his first book, *Nature*. It was "a transparent eyeball," and when he suddenly transcended his ordinary being and reached this state, he said he felt "the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me" True autobiography should be the expression of this more noble, purer, universal self-a restriction that almost idealized it into thin air. Once can read all day in Emerson's essays and never learn who his parents were, where he went to college, or how he earned his living.

Thoreau and Whitman and Margaret Fuller were equally concerned about universals and transcendence but much more inclusive of particulars in their definitions of self. The self had to have a location, like a house and a pond (and a book), a *Walden.* It could not just stand " on a bare common." Indeed, Thoreau was unlikely to see *bare* commons, or *bare* woods; he described their history, their

botany and zoology, and he appropriated all these details as parts or mirrors of the self. For Whitman, the self thrived on its relations to other selves, the great democratic multitudes which he celebrated and appropriated in his poetry. For Margaret Fuller, the self had to be a woman and had to be revolutionary. It was what drove her to be different, to seek greater fulfillment, and to contend with the status quo.

In their own ways, then, all of these decidedly autobiographical writers continue to reflect some of the prejudices against autobiography which ruled during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. None wrote autobiographies in the manner of Franklin, Goethe, or Rousseau, and all had reservations about the specific egotism those autobiographies reflected. The New Englanders, in the tradition of their Federalist ancestors, also had reservations about rowdy democratic individualism, including manifestations of it in autobiography. And thus we have the curious paradox of American Transcendentalism that, as Lawrence Buell put it, "The most egoistic movement in American literary history produced no first-rate autobiography, unless one counts *Walden* as such." (1) One answer, of course, is that the kinds of autobiographies Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and Margaret Fuller (as well as Hawthorne, Melville, and Dickinson) *did* write are decidedly better and more characteristic of them than if they had written imitations of Franklin, Rousseau, and Goethe. But the fact remains that autobiography of this more lengthy and directly individualistic and particular sort continued in disrepute, at least among the class of Americans who where well educated and became writers, artists, and leaders in political or professional life.

In this respect, it is interesting to note that none of the eleven U.S. presidents between Jefferson and James Buchanan wrote an autobiography (see Louis Kaplan's *Bibliography of American Autobiographies),* and Buchanan's was only a thirty-page reminiscence of his early years. Lincoln, his successor, was the first president to write what might be called campaign autobiographies, and those, one of which is included here, were primarily sketches for use by newspapermen preparing biographies of him. The first literary autobiography Lawrence Buell believes, in the sense of an autobiography written by someone whose major work was writing poetry or fiction, was Lydia Sigourney's *Letters of Life* of 1866, an excerpt of which is included below.

But stories of religious experience and stories of adventure, like travel books and narratives of enslavement, captivity, and escape, did continue to be written, and it was out of these traditions that the new kinds of popular autobiography grew. The religious autobiographies, by and large, were "a gentry-class product," (2) such as Orestes Brownson's *The Convert* (1857). Brownson told of his spiritual odyssey from Presbyterian to Roman Catholic, passing through Universalism, Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, and various reformist and utopian programs like Saint-Simonianism. The adventure narratives were mainly lower-class, coming from sailors, escaped slaves, and victims of Indian captivity. These lines were not rigid, however, and one of the most interesting of the full-length religious autobiographies of the period is Peter Cartwright's *Autobiography* (1856). Cartwright (1785-1872) was backwoods preacher who joined the Methodist Episcopal Church in Kentucky at age sixteen and soon began speaking at camp meetings, one-room schoolhouses, and new churches all through the Ohio Valley. Such men faced the same kinds of physical obstacles that Charles Woodmason had, as well as resistance and rivalry from atheists, agnostics, other churchmen, drunks, and frontier bullies. Thus, autobiographies of frontier preachers like Cartwright combine religion and uproarious adventure. Cartwright was no intellectual like Jonathan Edwards, and his sectarian prejudices are narrow and dated, but such autobiographies are extremely revealing documents of frontier life and culture. It was the frontier that gave American Protestant churches the room to expand and to develop a more democratic liturgy and governance, and the autobiographies of their ministers are one of their most characteristic forms of history and expression.

The frontier also provided the setting for a lot of the travel narratives of the period. Men and women traveling the overland trails to California and Oregon in the 1840's and '50s very often kept diaries in which they recorded the number of miles traveled each day, encounters with Indians, the hardships of the journey, and the deaths of their friends and family members from diseases like cholera. A recent annotated bibliography of the diaries and memoirs of just the Platte River route contains hundreds of entries. *Women's Diaries of the Overland Trail,* edited by Lillian Schlissel, comments on the differences between the men's and women's experiences and the ways of writing about them. At the same time,

upperclass easterners undertook journeys to the West as a way of breaking free from social conventions, recuperating from illness, and learning (and writing) about the new country. Washington Irving helped establish this convention with a *Tour on the Prairies* (1835) about his journey into present-day Oklahoma in 1832, after seventeen years of living in Europe. Margaret Fuller went to Illinois, via the Great Lakes, in 1843 and published her *Summer on the Lakes* in 1844. Francis Parkman followed with *The Oregon Trail* in 1849. Richard Henry Dana, meanwhile, had been one of the most daring of these eastern adventurers when he sailed for California as a seaman in 1834 and spent over a year loading hides off the beaches, before returning to Boston and graduating from Harvard Law School. His *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840) encouraged Herman Melville to write about his seafaring adventures and helped arouse public sympathy for the plight of sailors.

What these many kinds of first-person accounts of travel and adventure illustrate is that by the 1840's and '50s Americans of many backgrounds did, in fact, have the freedom and the opportunity to go to many backgrounds did, in fact, have the freedom and the opportunity to go to many new places and engage in a much more expansive life. Their autobiographical writings became more diverse and extensive because their lives were. Meanwhile, P.T. Barnum, as impresario and entrepreneur, capitalized on such adventurers, and the curiosities they discovered by setting up his American Museum in New York in 1842. His *Life of P.T. Barnum*, which in turn capitalized on the curiosity millions of Americans had about his own tricks and adventures, was published in 1855, just in time for a reviewer in the *Knickerbocker Magazine* to write about it and *Walden* in the same column, under the title "Town and Rural Humbugs"! The contrast between Barnum and Thoreau is stunning.

But in radically different ways they had shown the range of personal freedom and freedom of enterprise in the mid-century United States.

The black and the women autobiographers of this period, however, did not have such freedoms, or had to earn them in even more daring and subversive ways. Yet, as some commentators like William L. Andrews and Jean Fagan Yellin have noticed, this makes the slave narrators and the feminist writers the period's most representative lives, in the full Emersonian sense of people who experienced in the greatest intensity and wrote most movingly about what all men and women knew. They spoke for more than just themselves.

Jarena Lee appears first in this group because her *Life and Religious Experience* was published in 1836, and because she was one of those who made religious autobiography a means of both religious witness and personal liberation. Like Peter Cartwright, she was of the Methodist Episcopal Church, but she belonged to the African-American branch of it founded in 1794 by Richard Allen, a former slave who had been born in Philadelphia in 1760 and who purchased his own freedom in 1777. Lee had not been born a slave, but, even so, "at the age of seven years I was parted from my parents and went to live as a servant maid…" At age twenty-one, she began her emancipation fro his work when she became aware of, or "convicted" of, her sins. Gradually but relentlessly, she gained the rights to exhort and then to preach, finally becoming a traveling revivalist like Cartwright, operating mainly in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, also helping "to set the world on fire" for Methodism (Cartwright's words). Even more than Cartwright's *Autobiography*, her *Life* was an important part of her liberation. She sold it to help support herself; it was proof of her conversion and an example to her followers; and the fact that she had written it and published it was further evidence of her mastery of the written language-what had previously been the master's language.

Mastery of the master's language, his "script," so to speak, is also a very important theme in the writing of ex-slaves, as readers of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* or Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl* know. Just to write one's autobiography was "to tell a free story"-to tell a story of (relative) freedom, in (relative) freedom. Yet there were still some things which the ex-slave could not relate, and one frequently was the specific story of how he or she had escaped. Frederick Douglass censors himself at this point in both his *Narrative* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), though he does tell the story in his *Life and Times*… (1881), the last of his three autobiographies. An excerpt from this work appears in the next section of this anthology.

Another representative life from this period of the American Renaissance, as F.O. Matthiessen called it over fifty years ago, was the life of Fanny Fern. Matthiessen and his contemporary discoverers of the "great" American literature would never have called her so significant. They dismissed her as just a tearful newspaper columnist. But her fight to support herself and her children, as told in her autobiographical novel *Ruth Hall*, is a story of the trials and prejudices a woman faced. Writing newspaper columns was her way up from poverty. The columns were also autobiographical, and they were so moving and so satirical and sassy that they made her "the first woman columnist in the United States" and also one of the best-paid writers in the United States. (3) Just as for ex-slaves, therefore, autobiography for Fanny Fern was a means of protest. Within her columns and her novels, she could attach the men who had struck the poses of sentimental regard for women without delivering the substance. She could also expose their demeaning condescension and misinformed notions of women's experience and sensibility, while boldly writing about her own true feelings.

For those who like to collect telling historical trivia, there is an unexpected coincidence in the lives of Fanny Fern and Harriet Jacobs. Nathaniel P. Willis, Fanny Fern's selfish brother, who would not help support her when she was destitute, who printed her columns without paying her, and whom she satirized as "Apollo Hyacinth," was Harriet Jacobs' employer. Willis and his wife had hired Jacobs as a children's nurse, shortly after her escape from North Carolina. When his first wife died, Willis took her to England with his children, and she continued working for him after he remarried. But all this time Jacobs sensed that he was pro-slavery, so she hid her manuscript of *Incidents* and only worked on it in secret.(4) Thus, for both Fanny Fern and Harriet Jacobs (or "Linda Brent," to use her pseudonym), autobiography was not only a means of protest but something written under circumstances of secrecy or subversion, also something that had to be written under a "nom de plume," as book reviewers elegantly said.

Lydia Sigourney did not face such immediate physical and familial obstacles. As her autobiography makes abundantly clear, she led a highly privileged, financially secure life, and her parents and husband did not oppose her literary activity. Still, she had anxieties about writing her own life history, just as forty years before, in 1815, she says she had compunctions about publishing her first book. That book, *Moral Pieces in Prose and Verse,* had been published at the urging of Daniel Wadsworth, the backer of the school she ran in Hartford, Connecticut, and Wadsworth "took upon himself the whole responsibility of contracting with publishers, gathering subscriptions, and even correcting the proof-sheets." (5) Publishing a book was then "a novel enterprise for a female," as she puts it, and Wadsworth, whom she calls "my kind patron" and the book's "disinterested prompter," shielded her form these sordid details (325). Such were the restrictions of gender and gentility in 1815!

By 1865, when she wrote *Letters of Life,* many of those restrictions had fallen. The descriptive catalogue of her own books which she gives in the last chapter of *Letters of Life* lists fifty-five titles. She had also edited religious journals and children's magazines, until what she delicately calls "the financial feature…which at first supplied only my indulgences, my journeying, or my charities, became eventually a form of subsistence" (378). But she still had hesitations about writing an autobiography. "You request of me, my dear friend, a particular account of my own life," she begins, thus adopting the formula of a series of letters written to oblige someone else. She is also cautious to be modest and to insist that as in all writing "two principles" are "ever kept in view." The writing will not "interfere with the discharge of womanly duty" and will "aim at being an instrument of good" (324). In addition, as the record of her "earthly pilgrimage," this book "might impart some instruction to the future traveler, and set forth His praise, whose mercies are 'new every morning, and fresh every moment'"(5)

Lydia Sigourney thereby made domesticity, beneficence, and piety the ends of the first American literary autobiography-a woman's equivalent of Benjamin Franklin's promotion of industry, doing good, and modestly instructing his "son" (or sons) in the ways of Providence. But where Franklin repeatedly stressed his active roles of going into business, promoting good causes, and seizing one opportunity after another, there is a heavy passivity in the life and style of Lydia Sigourney.(6) She accepts responsibilities because she is asked; she writes because she was a lonely child; and she publishes to oblige Wadsworth, as she later wrote many obituary poems because someone asked her. Indeed, at the end of her list of her fifty-five books, she adds nearly ten pages listing some of the requests she has had from readers asking for odes, elegies, epitaphs, book dedications, and hymns for them, their families, and

charities! No other kind of laborer, she protests, gets asked for such donations. And yet her sense of woman's literature, like women's work, as a service to others inflicted these obligations on her.

Nevertheless, Lydia Sigourney's *Letter of Life* also projects her solid satisfaction with her domestic and literary accomplishments. There is a difference, after all, between just being passive-serving others, being genteel, and living a life of self control-and successfully writing books commending the woman's passive role. The writing is active, and the success leads to a greater pride, to financial independence, and to a sense of individual fulfillment. As Jarena Lee had gone into the pulpit and preached, and as prominent early feminists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had stepped onto the platforms and begun to lecture, so had Sigourney walked into the literary marketplace (however hesitantly at first), using her own name and becoming famous. Moreover, unlike most women of her time, she had written histories and biographies on public events and figures, and not merely on women's matters. As Nina Baym has pointed out, Lydia Sigourney became a major voice in the interpretation and celebration of the American Revolution, providing her readers with images of patriotism, dedication, and sacrifice. Thus, despite her modesty and caution, she was a public figure's right to tell her own story, in her own words, from childhood to old age. It was a new freedom, both for women and for American authors.