HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Mid 20th Century: 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 he 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 o 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 gereration, 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 Communists 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 tradidion like John Collier.

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