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MODERNISM AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

This volume offers seventeen original essays that attest to the extraordinary inventiveness and range of modernist autobiography. It examines the ways modernist writers chose to tell their life stories, with particular attention to forms, venues, modes of address, and degrees of truthfulness. The essays are grouped around a set of rubrics that isolate the distinctive character and shared preoccupations of modernist life-writings: questions of ancestry and tradition that foreground the modernists' troubled relation to their immediate familial as well as cultural past, their emergence as writers whose experiences found expression in untraditional and singular forms, their sense of themselves as survivors of personal and historical traumas, and their burdens as self-chroniclers of loss, especially of self-loss. It will appeal especially to scholars and students of literary modernism and English literature more generally.

MARIA DIBATTISTA is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Princeton University. She has written extensively on modern literature and film, and her books include *First Love: The Affections of Modern Fiction*; *Fast Talking Dames*, a study of American film comedy of the thirties and forties; *Imagining Virginia Woolf: An Experiment in Critical Biography*; and *Novel Characters: A Genealogy*.

EMILY O. WITTMAN, Associate Professor of English at The University of Alabama, has published widely on literary modernism, translation studies, and autobiography. She is coeditor (with Maria DiBattista) of *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography* (Cambridge, 2014) and cotranslator (with Chet Wiener) of Félix Guattari's *Soft Subversions: Texts and Interviews 1977–1985* (2009).

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EDITED BY
MARIA DIBATTISTA
Princeton University

EMILY O. WITTMAN
The University of Alabama



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ELIZABETH ABEL is a Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago, 1989) and *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow* (California, 2010); and the editor or coeditor of *Writing and Sexual Difference* (Chicago, 1982); *The Signs Reader: Women, Gender, and Scholarship* (Chicago, 1983); *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (New England, 1983); and *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (California, 1997). She has published essays on gender, psychoanalysis, race, and visual culture.

ROBERT L. CASERIO, Professor of English at Penn State, University Park, is coeditor, with Clement Hawes, of *The Cambridge History of the English Novel* (2012) and editor of *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth-Century English Novel* (2009). His *Cambridge Introduction to British Fiction, 1900–1950* is forthcoming.

MARC C. CONNER is Ballengee Professor of English and Associate Provost at Washington and Lee University. He is the editor of *The Aesthetic Dimensions of Toni Morrison* (Mississippi, 2000), *Charles Johnson: The Novelist as Philosopher* (Mississippi, 2007), and *The Poetry of James Joyce Reconsidered* (Florida, 2012) and has written extensively on American, African-American, and Irish modernism.

SANTANU DAS is a Reader in English at King's College London. He is the author of *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge, 2006) and the editor of *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (Cambridge, 2011) and *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War* (2013). Currently, he is completing for Cambridge University Press a monograph titled *India, Empire and the First World War: Words, Images and Objects* and leading a collaborative research project involving partners across Europe on "Cultural Encounters in a

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Time of Global Crisis: Colonials, Belligerents and Neutrals during the First World War.”

MARIA DIBATTISTA, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Princeton University, has written widely on modern literature and film. Her most recent works include *Fast Talking Dames* (Yale, 2001), *Imagining Virginia Woolf: An Experiment in Critical Biography* (Princeton, 2008), and *Novel Characters: A Genealogy* (Blackwell, 2010).

JAY DICKSON is Professor of English and Humanities at Reed College. He is the author of multiple articles on modern British literature and culture, including essays on such figures as James Joyce, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, and Lytton Strachey.

JONATHAN GREENBERG is Associate Professor of English at Montclair State University. He is the author of *Modernism, Satire, and the Novel* (Cambridge, 2011) and the forthcoming *Cambridge Introduction to Satire*, both from Cambridge University Press, as well as numerous articles on twentieth-century literature. You can follow him on Twitter.

ALLAN HEPBURN is James McGill Professor of Twentieth-Century Literature at McGill University. He is the author of *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture* (Yale, 2005) and *Enchanted Objects: Visual Art in Contemporary Fiction* (Toronto, 2010). In addition to having published articles on Joseph Conrad, Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, and other authors, he has edited three volumes of material by Elizabeth Bowen: short stories, essays, and broadcasts. A fourth volume, devoted to Bowen's book reviews, is forthcoming. Since 2008, Allan Hepburn has been coeditor of the McGill–Queen's University Press poetry series.

MICHAEL LEVENSON is William B. Christian Professor of English at the University of Virginia and author of *A Genealogy of Modernism* (Cambridge, 1984), *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality* (Cambridge, 1990), *The Spectacle of Intimacy* (Princeton, coauthor Karen Chase, 2000), and *Modernism* (Yale, 2011). He is also the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (2000, 2nd edition 2011). He has been Chair of the English Department and is the Founding Director of the Institute of Humanities at the University of Virginia. He has received grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities

and the Mellon Foundation and currently serves as a Fulbright Senior Specialist.

RÓNÁN MCDONALD holds the Australian Ireland Chair of Irish Studies at the University of New South Wales and is Director of the Global Irish Studies Centre. He is the author of *The Death of the Critic* (Continuum, 2008), *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett* (2007), and *Tragedy and Irish Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) as well as numerous articles and essays on modern and Irish literature. He is currently editing a volume of essays entitled *The Values of Literary Studies*.

LEE MITCHELL is Holmes Professor of Belles-Lettres at Princeton University. His books include *Witnesses to a Vanishing America: The Nineteenth-Century Response* (Princeton, 1981), *Determined Fictions: American Literary Naturalism* (Columbia, 1989), and *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (Chicago, 1996)

FRANCIS O'GORMAN has written widely on English literature, mostly on poetry and nonfictional prose from 1780 to the present. His recent publications include editions of John Ruskin's *Praeterita* (Oxford, 2012), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers* (Oxford, 2013), and essays on Larkin, Wordsworth, Swinburne, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Tennyson, and the modern university. He is currently editing Swinburne for Oxford University Press and is a Professor of English at the University of Leeds.

MAX SAUNDERS is Director of the Arts and Humanities Research Institute, Professor of English, and Co-Director of the Centre for Life-Writing Research at King's College London, where he teaches modern literature. He studied at the universities of Cambridge and Harvard and was a Fellow of Selwyn College, Cambridge. He is the author of *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1996, 2012) and *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford, 2010) and the editor of four volumes of Ford's writing, including an annotated critical edition of *Some Do Not ...* (Carcanet, 2010). He has published essays on life-writing, on impressionism, and on a number of modern writers. He was awarded a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship in 2008–10 to research the To-Day and To-Morrow book series.

BARBARA WILL is Professor of English at Dartmouth College. She is the author of numerous articles on modernism and two books on

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EMILY O. WITTMAN is Associate Professor of English at The University of Alabama. Her work lies at the intersection of literary modernism, translation studies, and autobiography. She is coeditor (with Maria DiBattista) of *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*, 2014) and cotranslator (with Chet Wiener) of Félix Guattari's *Soft Subversions: Texts and Interviews 1977–1985* (Semiotext(e)/MIT, 2009).

MICHAEL WOOD is Emeritus Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Princeton University. He is the author of, among other books, *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge* (Cambridge, 2005) and *Yeats and Violence* (Oxford, 2010). Most recently he has edited an English-language selection of the letters of Italo Calvino (Princeton, 2013).

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Modernism and Autobiography: Introduction

Maria DiBattista and Emily O. Wittman

“This whole book is the distillation of a deep personal experience; it is autobiography in the truest sense, in terms of what outward impact set the inner life in motion towards its true relation to the world: the story of the search for what is truly one’s own, and the ability to recognize it when found, and to be faithful in love of it.”¹ What is most noteworthy and ultimately intriguing about Katherine Anne Porter’s reflections on the essential character, favored story, and distinctive aims of life-writing is that they are inspired by Eleanor Clark’s *Rome and a Villa*, a work most readers would regard as travel literature. Indeed, a book that begins, “The first thing about the Campidoglio, besides what it is, is the stairs,” would hardly seem to lend itself to the kind of autobiographical interpretation Porter affixes to it² – to anyone, that is, not familiar or patient with modernist experiments with the form. Porter’s notion that the quest for what is truly one’s own need not follow the spiritual itinerary of Augustinian conversion narratives or pursue the curriculum vitae outlined in memoirs of childhood and young adulthood, need not, in fact, even present the self as its immediate subject, represents a singularly modernist conception of life-writing. As such, it provides an introduction to the themes and concerns of this collection, which explores how modernist writers transformed the conventions and expanded the scope of autobiographical writings.

As the essays in this volume attest, modernist autobiography, which often draws an arc back to the speculative mood and variable lengths of Montaigne’s *Essays*, typically challenges the established narrative practices of the genre. In place of the traditional life-narrative that traces the progress of the self as it moves toward, and ultimately claims, what is truly its own, modernist autobiography might concentrate on short periods of a person’s life (a “growing season” such as Paris in the twenties was for Hemingway); or else it might restrict its focus to a particular, life-defining and often life-altering problem – sexual abuse, such

as the childhood molestation Virginia Woolf confronts in her “sketch” of the past; nervous collapse, such as recounted with such pitiless candor in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Crack-Up*; or addiction, such as dramatized in Jean Rhys’s depressive but strangely exalted novels of alcoholic breakdown.

Nothing less could be expected of modernist writers, who, however they differed in temperament, style, class, politics, and, of course, life experiences, cultivated a reputation for iconoclasm, nowhere more relentlessly and ingeniously than in their assault on traditional notions of what a self, indeed what life, is. Modernist autobiography troubles both the “bios” – the life-matter – and the “auto” – the grammatical and existential first person – of the form. W. B. Yeats worried that to write about oneself was to “exchange life for a logical process” and so took pains to keep his autobiographical notes “natural” as “a casual thought” so “that I may not surrender myself to literature.” Yet as Rónán McDonald recounts, Yeats’s *Reveries*, although philosophically convinced of “the failure of abstract ratiocination to express the underlying integrity of lived experience,” are surprisingly open to scientific paradigms of thought and remarkably porous to literary allusion. The very word “life,” as Elizabeth Abel and Michael Wood remark, asserts its authority while refusing to yield its ultimate meaning in the criticism, fiction, and life-writing of Virginia Woolf and Samuel Beckett. Woolf’s manifesto for modern fiction is predicated on the conviction that “life” is not as the Edwardian “realists” described it, but is rightly apprehended as “this varying, unknown, uncircumscribed spirit.”³ And while few might share Moran’s conviction that his life constitutes an “inenarrable contraption,” many might anxiously entertain Molloy’s surmise that “if I go on long enough calling that my life I’ll end up by believing it. It’s the principle of advertising.”⁴

If this principle is dubious – and it is – there exists another, less commercially viable but also less compromised principle to help determine whether what one feels and experiences can truly be said to amount to a life. This principle postulates that life, whether figured as inerrable contraption or elusive spirit, is ineluctably mutable. This principle is personified in the tutelary genius of Proteus that Ralph Ellison located at the center of the American life-experience. Life, the shape shifter, can take many forms, a fact the modernists acknowledged by looking for life anywhere and everywhere it might manifest itself. A recipe can tell us as much about what life was like in modernist Paris as a firsthand account of who attended the famous dinner for the Le Douanier Rousseau or the details of how Picasso managed his strict diet during the First World War and

the Occupation (the one to be found in the “autobiography,” the other in cookbook of Alice B. Toklas).

To accommodate the fluidity and variousness of life and how it feels to be living it, modernist autobiography often tampers with sequence and chronology, sometimes abandoning the very idea of eventfulness in favor of recounting memories or anecdotes that evoke the emotional and moral texture of ordinary experiences that hardly qualify, by any standard of measurement, as momentous or life-altering. Yet despite their apparent ordinariness, and even triviality, such remembered sensations or experiences prove consequential in influencing the attitudes of adulthood. At times these attitudes prove coherent and profound enough to qualify as a philosophy of life, such as Virginia Woolf reports crystallized out of those “moments of being” that shocked her out of the existential torpor of daily existence. She devotes the first pages of “A Sketch of the Past” to describing how these moments of sensuous and emotional receptivity, which initially left her feeling passive and subjugated to a reality utterly indifferent to her own existence, ultimately spurred her to formulate what she calls her philosophy or “constant idea that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art ... we are the words, we are the music, we are the thing itself.”⁵

Such apparently dis- or unconnected moments of heightened perception and agonized awareness can be so luminous as to obscure the outlines of the “story” one has or would like to tell; they can even blot out entire regions of lived experience. Modernist retrospection seldom reinserts itself seamlessly into the past, but proceeds, if proceeds is the word, along a meditative course riddled with ellipses, plagued by lapses in memories, and compromised by deliberate omissions. The obliteration of entire stretches of personal history is most often the work of voluntary rather than involuntary forgetting, such as notoriously and hauntingly exemplified in Henry Adams’s famous chapter heading “Twenty Years After,” which silently passes over any mention of his wife’s suicide or of the years that led up to and followed from it. In her unfinished autobiography, mordantly titled *Smile Please*, Jean Rhys depicts her life as unrelievedly bleak without making a single mention of her criminal escapades or even the existence of a daughter.

Other writers prefer to toy with the pretense of candid soul searching or to dispense with the teleology that informs so many life-narratives, a teleology encapsulated in the theme of “How I Grew,” the actual title of Mary McCarthy’s caustic portrait of herself as a young girl. Such writers approach themselves aslant, at those busy intersections where life-writing

crosses paths with adjacent subgenres, such as the personal essay, travel writing, food writing, literary journalism, criticism, even movie reviewing. Autobiography that takes this form may avoid the crippling self-consciousness of more introspective and self-focused narratives that hesitate before the full disclosure promised by the autobiographical mode of confession or self-exposé. The self they reveal may be hiding in plain sight, to be inferred from outward shows of feeling, taste, and opinion. In the introduction to her 1994 collection of film reviews, *For Keeps: 30 Years at the Movies*, Pauline Kael remarked: “I’m frequently asked why I don’t write my memoirs. I think I have.”⁶

Kael’s rejoinder, which might strike some serious devotees of autobiography as flippant, nonetheless reflects the wide latitude modernist writers permit themselves in recalling the experiences and defending the opinions that define them. The narrators of these renegade life-writings invade and invariably colonize venues and formats typically reserved for more impartial observation or for outright entertainment. Evelyn Waugh, as Jonathan Greenberg reveals, commandeered travel writing to establish impeccable, if doctored credentials for what Greenberg identifies as his “writerly” as opposed to biographical personality. This Waugh is unfailingly witty, knowing, and, above all, metropolitan. Elizabeth Bowen, protective of her privacy even as she enjoyed her growing celebrity, was particularly deft, as Allan Hepburn demonstrates, in crafting and monitoring her public image in interviews, publicity blurbs, and promotional materials for her work.

Others turned to popular forms not, as Waugh and Bowen did, to seek out or develop serviceable disguises, but rather to disclose aspects of their lives and experiences that could not be revealed in any other format. Barbara Will reflects on how Alice B. Toklas reappropriated the use of her own voice, so uncannily ventriloquized by Gertrude Stein in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, in a cookbook that also bore her name on its cover, but lacked, as Will points out, an authorial signature on the title page, a fact Will takes as indicative of the deep complementarity of these life partners, who often referred to themselves as “Gertrice-Altrude.” In reproducing the recipes she had collected and prepared over the years and in recalling the people who enjoyed the meals prepared from them, *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* qualifies as autobiography in its truest sense, at least as Porter defines it – a work in which Alice describes the modern métier and household art that she recognizes and loves as truly her own. Toklas thus takes her honored place in the culinary wing of modernist life-writing, whose cornerstone is M. F. K. Fisher’s *How to Cook a Wolf*.

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Published in 1942, *How to Cook a Wolf* is a unique literary blend of war memoir and survival manual with chapters devoted to practical matters – “How Not to Boil an Egg” and, most elementally, “How to Stay Alive” – and others that offer meditations (and titles) worthy of Montaigne (“How to Comfort Sorrow”) and Thoreau (“How to Practice True Economy”).⁷

Such radical departures from the conventions and formats of traditional autobiography court as well as exhibit extravagance (in the etymological sense of wandering far afield, transgressing set boundaries), but not simply out of a love of novelty and adventure. Their breach of revered epistemological divisions between fact and fancy, fiction and nonfiction reflected, as Katherine Mansfield observed, how “intent” modernists writers were: “We are intent as never before on trying to puzzle out, to live by, our own particular self. *Der Mensch muss frei sein* – free, disentangled, single.” “Is it not possible,” she writes in a journal entry Jay Dickson recommends to our attention,

that the rage for confession, autobiography, especially for memories of earliest childhood, is explained by our persistent yet mysterious belief in a self which is continuous and permanent; which, untouched by all we acquire and all we shed, pushes a green spear through the dead leaves and through the mould, thrusts a scaled bud through years of darkness until, one day, the light discovers it and shakes the flower free and – we are alive – we are flowering for our moment upon the earth. This is the moment which, after all, we live for, – the moment of direct feeling when we are most ourselves and least personal.⁸

To puzzle out “our own particular self” requires a revised grammar of autobiographical persons in which we are, in Mansfield’s trenchant formulation, most ourselves when we are least personal. The possibility of such a transformative grammar of impersonality is comically entertained by the “I” of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, a linguistic façade for the book’s “real” author, Gertrude Stein. Hemingway begins *A Moveable Feast* by addressing himself in the second person, thus grammatically uniting the self who writes to the self who lived (so innocently! so richly, despite his poverty!). This “you,” who (or which?) is located both outside and within the Hemingway who writes, is a creature of the past who survives, is indeed stored away, in what Hemingway hauntingly designates as “the *remises* of my memory and my heart.”⁹ This “you” lies dormant until retrieved from the *remises* of memory and of the heart and revived in the continuous present of the page on which it is written back into existence.

Beckett, who would be appalled by any promise or augury of resurrection, dissects the precisions and treacheries of the second person as autobiographical device in a passage from *Company* that is devastating in its lucidity:

Use of the second person marks the voice. That of the third that cankerous other. Could he speak to and of whom the voice speaks there would be a first. But he cannot. He shall not. You cannot. You shall not.¹⁰

Here we see how right Yeats was to worry that the ratiocinations of logic might drive out life. Beckett forbids himself the thought of a first person to whom he might speak as of and to himself. Nonetheless, he seems equally resolved on sparing himself the indignity of the contagious, corrupting effusions of that “cankeraus other” that may lurk within or barely apart from him. No wonder he wants for company, devising all alone as he does in the dark, hoping “to kindle in his mind this faint uncertainty and embarrassment” about his own solitary existence (5). Henry Adams, on the other hand, can only speak to and of himself with elaborate formality in the third person, a tactic, as Lee Mitchell shows, that may inoculate him from the cankerous emotions of self-sympathy, false certainty, and pleasure in the wrong company. The third person is a device that allows Henry Adams to consider himself as a monitory rather than cankerous example of a failed education, or rather of an education into a failure that was historically, as it was psychologically, inevitable.

These grammatical experiments with narrative persons suggest how charged the very concept of personhood, almost but not quite a cognate for selfhood, was for modernists. Michael Levenson draws attention to the singular meaning and significance that attaches to Conrad’s use of the word “personally” in his autobiographical reminiscences, *A Personal Record*. Levenson remarks that, “along with its variants (‘person,’ ‘personal’ ‘personality’)” the word “leads a complex career in the fiction.” Equally complex, as Max Saunders observes, is T. S. Eliot’s use of the word “personality” in his letters “so as effectively to redefine it, away from the Romantic sense of an authentic, interior identity which literature is charged to ‘express,’ towards a concept of a false self: the sense of a self inflated by its own emotional attitude to the extent that all it can express is its own emotionality.” Ellison, as Marc Conner notes, also contributes to the rich, if vexed history of the modernist personality in the autobiographical fragment “Leaving the Territory,” where he speaks directly of “your own incongruity of personality.” The incongruity arises from Ellison’s recognition that the personality – what is “truly one’s own” – is not single and unified,

but exists as an ensemble of multiple, mutually combative, and dissenting identities constantly shifting places and forms. Hence the importance of Proteus as a figure for Ellison's literary or, as Greenberg terms it on his essay on Waugh, his "writing personality." The distinctly modernist turn toward abstraction, impersonality, and self-dissolution can be traced, as Robert Caserio shows, to a distrust of the instability of personality and a growing aversion to what Woolf called "the damned egotistical self."¹¹

Impersonality, considered either as an aesthetic doctrine or as an ethical ideal, renders the problem or puzzle of identity primarily as one of visibility. But audibility also presents a challenge to would-be self-chroniclers. How to record a life became a literal problem for modernist autobiographers confronted with, and eventually dependent on, new recording and dictating technologies that obstructed as much as they facilitated the translation of the writer's voice and thoughts into signs on a page. Max Saunders wonders how Eliot's being "forced" to dictate his letters rendered them less direct and more impersonal. In old age, Rhys was terrified of tape recorders, but used them because she feared even more the possible distortions that writing by dictation might occasion. Santanu Das questions the very assumption that autobiography is a text produced by hand – either through the pen that inscribes or by tapping out words on a keyboard. Das not unreasonably asks that we consider the situation of semiliterate sepoys whose life-writings exist beyond the realms of the self-scripted and are made up of "objects, images and words."

Such uncertainties, embarrassments, and evasions, along with the hazards and errors of transcription, suggest how compromised, inaccurate, or outright deceptive modernist autobiography can be. Yet many of the autobiographical writings considered here, even those that are selective in the facts and feelings they record, are searingly honest in confessing that life has disappointed rather than fulfilled their quest for what is truly and rightfully their own. They do not pretend to offer serene, satisfied, or even resigned reflections on a life nearing its end. More often they suggest the emotional tremors of a life in danger of collapsing: Edmund Gosse, whose young life, as Francis O'Gorman relates, was marked by his mother's agonizing death, the "perverse malady" of his father's religious obsessions, and an abduction by a mentally ill woman of his father's congregation, attempting to rest content, as Gorman says, "with living nervously"; James recovering from the nervous breakdown following the failure of the New York edition of his novels; Conrad reacting to the increasing weight of financial burdens and responsibilities caused by the birth of a son and the increasing invalidism of his wife; T. S. Eliot, as Max

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Saunders reflects, composing *The Waste Land* (that self-described “personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life,”)¹² and developing his theory of impersonality in response to the war and his own fear of madness, a loss of reason horribly vivid to him in his wife, Vivien’s nervous disorders and in the growing symptoms of his own breakdown in 1920–1; Evelyn Waugh attempting to disguise and morally rehabilitate himself after the sexual calamities, humiliations, and subsequent indecorously rapid demise of his first marriage; Woolf’s nerves, never steady or strong, rattled by the war-time bombings of her beloved London; Ellison never recovering from the trauma of his father’s death and the great Refusal by the man he regarded as his surrogate father. No wonder Stein found identity bothersome and confessed, almost as if it were a condition of being alive, “Identity always worries me and memory and eternity.”¹³ It should probably worry all of us, which is one reason, among many others, why we should reflect, as do the essays in this volume, on how modernist authors converted this worry into works of art.

This volume consists of essays on modernist autobiographies that address these worries in various forms, venues, modes of address, and degrees of truthfulness. The essays are grouped together under a set of rubrics that isolate the distinctive character and shared preoccupations of modernist life-writing: questions of ancestry and tradition that foreground the modernists’ troubled relation to their immediate familial as well as cultural past, their emergence as writers whose experiences found expression in untraditional and singular forms, their sense of themselves as survivors of personal and historical traumas, their burdens as self-chroniclers of loss, especially of self-loss (necessary self-loss for Henry Miller, and inevitable self-loss for Rhys and Beckett).

Roland Barthes, an inheritor and an adept of modernist autobiographical practice, understood and experienced his attempt to capture himself in writing as the dispossession of his body. He tells us how *Barthes on Barthes* entailed taking “my body elsewhere far from my imaginary person, toward a kind of meaningless speech of the People, of the non-subjective mass (or of the generalized subject), even, if I am still separated from it by my way of writing.” “By my way of writing” – so Barthes recalls and reinscribes on the threshold of his own autobiography the image of those circuitous routes, detours, and byways that one follows in quest of what is truly one’s own. Barthes, who once rather confidently proclaimed the death of the author and the historical necessity of his demise, here contemplates being transported to that “elsewhere” where he no longer exists, except in those forms of nonbeing that prevail in modern life: in the meaningless speech

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of the People, of the nonsubjective mass. Barthes's response to the modernist situation in which he must pursue and "write" himself is to detach his autobiography from any "representation of an individual with a private life and a civil status." He dedicates himself to creating a repertoire of images that "will be free of its own, never figurative signs." Barthes makes one exception to this rule of exclusion – images begotten and inscribed by "the hand that writes."¹⁴ The hand that writes – this image alone survives for Barthes as an emblem of the embodied self in quest of its truth, its essence, and, if those prove unreachable, traces of its existence. For this reason it adorns our cover, an emblem of the modernist autobiographies that are considered within this volume and those hovering on the horizon of the landscape surveyed in the pages that follow.

Notes

- 1 Katherine Anne Porter, "Eleanor Clark," *The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1970), 80.
- 2 Eleanor Clark, *Rome and a Villa* (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 2000), 3.
- 3 Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, 1953), 153.
- 4 Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 53, 114.
- 5 Virginia Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past" *Moments of Being*, with introduction by Jeanne Schulkind, ed. (New York: Harcourt, 1985), 72.
- 6 Pauline Kael, *For Keeps: 30 Years at the Movies* (New York: Dutton, 1994), 3.
- 7 M. F. K. Fisher, *How to Cook a Woolf* (New York: North Point Press, 1999).
- 8 Katherine Mansfield, *The Scrapbook of Katherine Mansfield* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), 160–1.
- 9 Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast: The Restored Edition*, Seán Hemingway, ed. (New York: Scribner, 2009), 9.
- 10 Samuel Beckett, *Nohow On* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 4.
- 11 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* (New York: Mariner Books, 2003), 22.
- 12 Eliot's remark was reported by Theodore Spencer and recorded by the poet's brother, Henry Ware Eliot. It is printed as an epigraph in Valerie Eliot's edition of the manuscripts.
- 13 Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1991), 119.
- 14 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2010), 3 (approximately).