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David McCooey

Excerpt

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Introduction

In the last two decades literary critics have become noticeably interested in autobiography. Given the context, this is not surprising: the rise of theories in opposition to New Criticism has undermined simplistic ideas of textual integrity and the hierarchical pattern which saw poetry as the supreme (perhaps the defining) mode of literary discourse. This interest has been coincident with, and often originated from, post-structuralist reconfigurations of concepts such as text and author. To ask questions of autobiography now is to ask questions such as: 'To what extent does the autobiographical text refer to the world?' 'To what extent is subjectivity an "effect of discourse"?' 'Is it possible to make any distinction between fiction and autobiography?'

The puzzles of autobiography have, in the main, been confined to the Anglo-American 'tradition'. But Australian literature is also a rich field of autobiography. Of primary importance is Hal Porter's *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony*, described by John and Dorothy Colmer as the 'greatest single landmark in the history of Australian autobiography'.¹ Since the publication of *The Watcher* in 1963 by the 'famous and fastidious house of Faber and Faber',² Australian autobiography has steadily gained acceptance as a mode worthy of critical study. Porter's critical success has also meant that earlier autobiographies have received attention. John and Dorothy Colmer's anthology of Australian autobiography includes a number of extracts from autobiographical or semi-autobiographical works published before 1963. This discussion will be mostly concerned, however, with autobiographies published

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after Porter's. This is partly a methodological decision, given the vast number of texts which could fall under the classification of 'Australian autobiography'. More importantly though, *The Watcher* has come to represent a shift in Australian autobiographical practice around the middle of the century, when the aims and aesthetics of autobiography became noticeably complex. As Chris Wallace-Crabbe makes clear in his essay on autobiography in *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, Australian literary autobiography in the 1960s, and again in the 1980s, represents a move away from the belief that autobiography is merely a secondary form of writing, towards an acceptance of it as a 'discernible artistic genre'.³ This shift in value in autobiography, which also occurred in North America and Britain, is related to the shift in critical attitude alluded to above.

It was once fashionable, indeed *de rigueur*, for critics and historians of autobiography to claim autobiography as an ignored genre, merely a subsection of descriptive non-fiction. The interest shown in the problematic aspects of autobiography over the last two decades, by both practitioners and critics, has made such a gesture out-dated. In Australia, critical interest took a little longer to flower, so that Joy Hooton in her work on autobiographies of childhood by Australian women could, with justification, point to the critical neglect of Australian autobiography. This too, however, is rapidly changing, thanks in large part to Hooton's scholarship. Since this work was conceived, critical studies of Australian autobiography have been published by John Colmer and Joy Hooton, as well as work by Chris Wallace-Crabbe in his collection of (sometimes autobiographical) essays entitled *Falling into Language*.⁴ Added to this is the regular publication of essays on a wide range of autobiographies in scholarly journals, as well as numerous courses on autobiography in Australian literature departments. Autobiographies themselves seem to be published more than ever, making it impossible for the student of autobiography to remain up to date for long. Neither is the Colmers' anthology an isolated event: anthologies of autobiographical accounts of specific experiences have appeared steadily since the mid-1970s, among them *Living Black*, *Sweet Mothers*, *Sweet Maids* and *The Half-Open Door*.⁵

Whilst the present work is not a literary history of Australian autobiography, it is presented as an addition to the history which has been constructed by earlier critics of Australian autobiography. Although it deals with questions generally pertinent to modern autobiography in the West, it seeks at the same time to consider the particular Australian articulation of autobiography: the practice of Australian autobiography as seen in context. It is a mistake to claim, as a number of critics dealing with a national culture have

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done, that autobiography is primary to one's country. For instance Robert F. Sayre is one of a number of critics who suggests that 'Autobiography may be the preeminent kind of American expression.'⁶ Australia might also be considered the pre-eminently autobiographical country. Its early literature was the utilitarian kind necessary in a new colony, for readers both within and beyond the colony, which concentrated on description and factual accounts: reports, letters and descriptions of expeditions. The latter part of the nineteenth century saw a marked rise in the publication of what we would consider modern autobiography or memoir, no doubt in response to factors such as increased national consciousness, the maturity of 'currency' lads and lasses who had lived their lives entirely in Australia, and a communal desire to look back to the pioneering and roaring days of the mid-century. Such arguments of primacy are unnecessary and ignore one of the major points of studying a national literature: to consider how it particularly enunciates forms which may be common to other nations.

Within the context of this discussion, to be concerned with 'literary' autobiography is not to say that the autobiographer is a 'Poet' in Richard N. Coe's Romantic sense of the word,⁷ but rather to suggest that the writer's intention is to interpret the past, as much as to represent it. What literary critics usually mean by literary autobiography is a form of writing which demonstrates the aesthetic and technical control that the 'higher' forms of literature do. The 'artfulness' of literary autobiography is not denied here, but the idea of 'literary' autobiography is taken at its broadest possible definition, though this does not transfigure autobiography into a fictional mode of writing. Literary autobiography so described can accommodate a whole spectrum of style and technique. Many writers of literary autobiography, such as Mary Rose Liverani, are not otherwise known as writers. Others are, but not of the great triumvirate of poetry, fiction and drama. Academics, historians, critics, journalists, artists' agents, and ambassadors are all represented here. The term does exclude works of the *res gestae* (chronicle of deeds) type, which are usually ephemeral and commercially predicated. So-called 'autobiographical' works are not discussed as autobiography: fictional autobiography, travel writing (with some exceptions), diaries, confessional verse, letters, and interviews are not primary sources for this book. Why this is so will be made clear in the following chapter.

Why are we—as critics, general readers and writers—so interested in autobiography? What makes it seem both so easy and so hard? Part of the attraction of autobiography no doubt is the pleasure of remembering, the intrinsic emotional force of recalling the past. Significant also is the value of

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autobiography to social history: in the autobiographies of James Murray, Hal Porter, and Patsy Adam-Smith we learn about the nightsoil man, the lamp-lighters, and the railway gangers who existed in Australian towns and cities a mere lifetime ago. Much of what is most interesting or pleasing in the reading of autobiography has to do with its evocative particularity: the descriptions of work, clothes, books read, films seen and so on. Beyond this, as countless critics have pointed out, the experience of reading autobiography is unique in the degree to which it forces the reader to consider his or her own life. The self-consciousness of the writer is translated to the reader. Reading autobiography makes us remember our own childhoods, our own families, our own experiences; it makes clear that we make sense of our own lives with reference to the lives of others. We are also intrigued by autobiography because it appears both so artful and so historical. Some of the intersections of these two enigmatic categories are traced in the following pages.

This work is framed by two chapters on the status of autobiography. The first is theoretical, and readers not interested in theory may wish to move straight on to Chapter 2. Chapter 8, however, is a practical consideration of how autobiography is distinct from fiction, a central question of the first chapter, and it may make better sense in relation to the earlier theoretical considerations. Chapters 2 and 3 are concerned with childhood and beginnings. The former discusses how autobiographers begin by relating to national and familial pasts, so as to understand continuity as well as disjunction with the past. Chapter 3 discusses the mythological quality of childhood in autobiography and its relation to the Edenic myth of paradise and fall. Chapter 4 argues that education, a central theme of autobiography, is often associated with a crisis with a parent and the guilt associated with that. Chapter 5 discusses how autobiographers who seek a 'hidden past' illustrate the connection of ideas of continuity and community with parentage. Chapter 6 is concerned with 'autobiographies of displacement', and the extent to which individuals maintain a relatively coherent 'narrative life' even in the face of such displacement. The following chapter discusses the importance of place in the Australian imagination, and how Australian autobiography articulates a number of figures and attitudes particular to Australia. Chapter 8 discusses autobiography and fiction, and the conclusion considers the relationship between death and autobiography.

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CHAPTER

1

Autobiography and History

Interpretation would be impossible if expressions of life were completely strange. It would be unnecessary if nothing strange were in them. It lies, therefore, between these two extremes.¹

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Defining autobiography is notoriously difficult. To consider autobiography as a historical discourse and distinct from fiction is currently (perhaps surprisingly to some) an unfashionable position. It is not, however, one which should be dismissed out of hand; not only because such a position may give insights into the condition of autobiography, but also because issues of historicity, reference and individuality relate directly to people's everyday experiences.

The difficulty in defining autobiography has arisen from the sense of relativism and indeterminacy commonly associated with post-structuralist literary theories. In failing to find a formal definition of the genre, many theorists of autobiography simply refuse any generic difference between autobiography and fiction. Numerous critics in recent years have argued for the fictional status of autobiography. For instance, Robert Elbaz states that 'through the process of mediation (by linguistic reality) and suspension (due to the text's lack of finality and completion), autobiography can only be a fiction',² and Susanna Egan believes that fiction 'ensnares reality from the beginning' of the autobiographical act.³ Some commentators make up for this apparent fictionality of autobiography by claiming that a 'higher truth' can be rendered which goes beyond mere historical detail. Such a view is implicit in James Olney's consideration of Eliot's *Four Quartets* as autobiography as it deals with personal truths.⁴ In this model, the biographical status (the *bios*) of

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the autobiographical subject is irrelevant. 'Bios' refers to the concept of a life having been lived (the historical events) and must constitute, in part, the idea of autobiography.

Elbaz's comments demonstrate a misunderstanding regarding the status of texts in general. Few would seriously argue that texts are not part of a process of mediation. The concept of recounting the past 'as it was' is a concept long given up by historiographers. The text's 'lack of finality', as will be further argued, is in fact a sign of its non-fictive status, one that it shares with history, since narratives of the past are always contingent and dependent on the changing face of the future. They are always incomplete and open to other texts, in a way that fictional or poetic texts could not be said to be. It is not a reasonable question to ask what happens further at the end of a novel; it always is of an autobiography. Elbaz mistakes autobiography's 'fallen' nature for fictiveness.⁵

However, ideas concerning the genre's fictionality often merely defer the problem of reference in autobiography from the formal level to the intentional level. For instance, those who deny theoretically any ontological difference between the genres and who then attempt to present this in their critical writing of individual texts, still (if only implicitly) run up against the problem of *bios*. For instance, Joy Hooton in *Stories of Herself When Young* discusses works unproblematically considered to be autobiographies as well as novels implicitly believed to be 'autobiographical'.⁶ These 'fictional autobiographies', however, retain (at least in the critic's mind) a vestige of the author's *bios*, as can be seen by the inclusion of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, *My Brilliant Career* and *The Man Who Loved Children*, for it is public knowledge that these novels are in some way 'based on' their authors' lives. It is significant that not any novel by a woman is considered. Is Jean Bedford's *Sister Kate* (an account of Ned Kelly's sister) a fictional autobiography? Probably not, except in the 'universalist' perspective considered below, which is even less useful for critics of autobiography.

Maintaining that *bios* is irrelevant leads to further claims of fictionality, and can present autobiography as a kind of displaced spiritual writing in which the self is presented 'through' fiction. In *The Forms of Autobiography*, William C. Spengemann posits a developmental model of autobiography based on three categories, which he terms the 'historical', 'philosophical' and 'poetic' modes. The last of these categories is concerned not so much with forms as with allegories: 'What makes *Sartor Resartus* and *David Copperfield* autobiographies ... is not their inclusion of biographical materials but their efforts to discover, through a fictive action, some ground upon which conflicting aspects

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of the writer's own nature might be reconciled in complete being.' This, as Spengemann goes on to explain, is based on the belief that autobiography traditionally sought out an expression of an 'absolute' self through 'conditioned individual experience' (p. 134). In the modern world, in which the self is 'displaced', it follows that the *bios* becomes less important, which leads to the conclusion that autobiography 'becomes synonymous with symbolic action in any form, and the word ceases to designate a particular kind of writing' (p. 168). This is not unlike Paul de Man's conclusion that autobiography is merely a literary effect.⁸

Both these pictures of autobiography are insufficient. The former, in understanding the problematic nature of formally distinguishing between fiction and autobiography, believes the distinction to be impossible, though a vestige of it can be seen through the implication that not anything can be a fictional autobiography. This merely leaves us with the same problem on a different plane: what makes a novel a 'fictional autobiography'? In the second model, the self (the *autos*) is the defining aspect of autobiographical writing, and thus its dissolution over time makes anything autobiographical. In the configuration of self (*autos*), life (*bios*), and the act of writing (*graphe*), the dissolution of the former two leaves us only with the last category. This 'universalist' model is of little practical use, and ignores the fact that autobiographies are still written and read as such.⁹

The desire to see any 'symbolic action' as autobiography is indicative of a critical fundamentalism which refuses to make distinctions between 'autobiography' as an intended narrative account and 'autobiographical' as an unintended or related product of another form of writing. It is not hard to see how any mark of an individual (such as a signature) is autobiographical, but to represent it as autobiography is much like the ambiguity which has commonly surrounded the term 'history'. History is taken here to mean *a narrative account of the past*, not 'the past itself'.

Obviously, these two pictures of either the inevitability or impossibility of autobiography (sometimes, paradoxically, both) are reactions against idealistic notions of the 'the truth', 'the absolute, unconditioned self', and of an immediate and unproblematic distinction between fictional writing and non-fictional writing. However, these two pictures—one sceptical, the other metaphysical—ignore two important aspects in the ontology of autobiography: intent, and the importance of narrative. Before considering these, it should be made clear that it is not proposed that autobiography is a transparent account of reality and a 'unified' self; that is, an 'essentialist' form of history. As Jerome Bruner states in 'The Autobiographical Process':

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Perceiving and remembering are themselves constructions and reconstructions. What is 'laid down' in memory is not some aboriginal encounter with the 'real world', but is already highly schematized. There is no mental reference shelf of our aboriginal 'real world' encounters, any more than there is an aboriginal real world 'out there' made available to us by means of them.¹⁰

This voices well the post-Derridean nature of autobiography theory, for it accords with Derrida's (in)famous statement that '*There is nothing outside of the text.*'¹¹ This, as Kevin Hart glosses, means not an abject formalism, but that

any knowledge one can glean of the writer's life and intentions will not provide one with a privileged point of access to the text; it will involve one in yet another network, such as, for example, the writer's various relations with other writers, living and dead, the writer's construction of a text of history, as well as the various texts in which the writer is always already inscribed. The doctrine that there is nothing outside the text is neither esoteric nor difficult: it is merely that there is no knowledge, of which we can speak, which is unmediated.¹²

As Hart adds, this knowledge is always in the process of constitution, rather than ever being constituted. It is not axiomatic that a text is merely 'yet another' text. From the point of view of text users, texts are not merely in a random succession, but are articulated; they have, as it were, a status accorded to them. A 'privileged position', in the guise of an absolute overseeing position of authority, is obviously a metaphysical abstraction, but that is not to say that all reading positions are equal. It is for this reason that autobiography can operate among cultures which recognize such a genre. To argue the historical status of autobiography is not to ignore the constituting nature of knowledge, nor other key concepts of deconstruction, such as that textual meaning can never be totalized; indeed, such concepts are related to modern concepts of historiography and they do not, in fact, make concepts such as reference and meaning redundant.

Those who argue for autobiography's fictional status do so from a peculiarly literary perspective, concerned to a large extent with form. This is problematic firstly because of the heterogeneity of forms in autobiographical practice.¹³ As many have noticed, there is little basis on formal grounds to distinguish autobiography from the novel, another form marked by its heterogeneity. Autobiography, then, becomes an act of intentionality, since many novels 'look' like autobiographies and vice versa. The autobiography is not distinguished by form alone, but by the extra-textual knowledge on the part of readers that the work which they are reading can be thought of as an

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autobiography. In this way we read *Moll Flanders* as a novel, and Gibbon's memoirs as autobiography. We have ample evidence that Gibbon existed and thus we are obliged, partly by the genre, but mostly through social values, to maintain a link between the man and the sign of the man's name. The signature (that which is *accepted* as an individual's sign) is proof enough that texts do operate morally and actually in the world in a variety of non-ambiguous ways. It is the formal similitude between autobiography and novel which leads many to see autobiography as posturing as something it is not. From this view, to recover one's life textually is, as H. Porter Abbott characterizes it, 'a doomed struggle with inherited literary forms. The text becomes a strange residue of that struggle.'¹⁴ In other words, the concern with literature has, ironically, led to a suspicion of the genre *because* of its literary status.

The suspicion of literature encompasses those who seek an alternative to the sceptical viewpoint. For instance, Abbott, who is also dissatisfied with current descriptions of autobiography, nevertheless believes that 'all autobiographies ... are *corrupted* by the present' (p. 602, emphasis added). For Abbott, it is the temporal difference which is significant: between the finished novel, which is always finished, and the autobiographical process, by which the writer's present creates a tension between the past and the writing of a 'well-rounded' account of it. Abbott asserts that 'autobiography does not end in the way that fiction or history do ... insofar as autobiography can be said to end its ending is the action of its discourse' (p. 606). Abbott is correct in pointing out the different teleological conditions of fiction and autobiography, but it is curious that he should align fiction with history, for history does not end in the way that fiction does. A historical account is always subject to the asking of questions and the changing of circumstances. Historical texts are always contingent and open to reinterpretation.

The difficulty with these concepts is based on two implicit beliefs of theorists: that individuals and historical thinking are somehow unrelated (that history is a discipline not akin to ordinary experience), and that narration is somehow a falsifying of experience. If it were true that history and autobiography were mutually exclusive ways of thinking about the past, then it would be true that autobiography is merely a form of fiction pretending to be something that it is not. However, individuality and historical understanding are inter-dependent concepts, and to further understand the condition of autobiography we must turn our sights away from literature towards history.

The distinction earlier referred to between autobiography and autobiographical was based on intent and narrative.¹⁵ It was precisely this narrative aspect of autobiography which (in different ways) has seen so many critics

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suspicious of autobiographical claims. If narrative is inherently fictional, then history would be a doomed discipline. To understand the 'condition of autobiography, we must consider the suspicion of narrative from another angle. Rather than assuming that narrative falsifies experience, we should consider whether or not 'experience' is inherently narratological. Significantly, the suspicion amongst literary theorists of the ability of narrative to render historical events is one replicated in historiography.

The modern debate over the place of narrative in historiography emerged in the 1960s when a number of philosophers of history, such as W. B. Gallie, Morton White, Arthur Danto, and later Louis Mink, published works on the subject.¹⁶ Narrative was in turn seen by some as simply the inessential 'writing-up' aspect of historical research.¹⁷ The narrativists themselves tended towards 'anti-realist' positions, seeing narrative as a 'literary' view, or falsification, of experience (much in the same way that literary theorists see autobiography as fiction). For instance, Louis Mink, who has much to write on the *configured* nature of experience, nevertheless writes that 'Stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles, or ends ... Narrative qualities are transferred from art to life.'¹⁸ This presents a picture of experience (or the 'world') as a chaotic succession of moments, incoherent and without structure. A response to this can be found in David Carr's *Time, Narrative, and History*, in which Carr uncovers the 'narrative features of everyday experience',¹⁹ arguing that even in the most elementary actions and events a narrative structure can be discerned. He uses this perception to move his argument by degrees from small- to large-scale phenomena, and from individuals to social groups.

Carr argues that there is a temporal horizon to even supposedly undifferentiated events, such as the single tone of a clock striking. The tone is heard as part of a series; that is, with reference to what preceded it and what might follow it. These actions are characterized as retention and protention. Although we are always 'located' temporally in the present,

this ever-changing point is a vantage point from which the other phases of the sequence, future or past, are grasped. What is grasped, moreover, is not two undifferentiated continua or sequences simply receding into the infinite distance. Rather, the temporal span is structured or configured into *events*, in the one case, and *actions* in the other. [pp. 40–1]

Events and actions, even the most momentary, are configured by the 'grasp' into the past and future, the retentional and protentional grasp. Time, then, is articulated, rather than a series of meaningless moments. Conceptually, a