Arguing that the study of autobiography is driven by questions that mirror the practice and theory of larger critical trends—from the philosophy of language to the politics of cultural identity in recent criticism—this essay traces the evolution of autobiographical theory in the 20th century.

Critical Mirrors: Theories of Autobiography

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Critical attempts to establish a theory of autobiography are fairly recent despite the long history and great variety of the subject. In 1981 Albert E. Stone could still describe the study of autobiography as “an important new field for scholars and critics” (1). Only two years later, however, in 1983 Avrom Fleishman complained that, “No one can tell what autobiography is, yet that has not dispelled a surge of recent efforts to define it” (53). These efforts, of course, raised more questions than answers, and the growing competition of voices soon itself became the subject of criticism. Indeed, as Robert Smith remarked in his 1995 study, Derrida and Autobiography, “The theory of autobiography has become very well trodden terrain. So much so, in fact, that there are now not only many theories of autobiography, but there is also a growing number of theories of those theories” (51).

My purpose in the following essay is to explore how what twenty years ago was seen as a “new field” could have so quickly become a contested area, and in the course of doing so I wish to address a series of related questions: is there a coherent theory of autobiography to unite its many different forms? how does the study of autobiography mirror the evolution of literary criticism in the 20th century? why is the discussion of autobiography as a genre so
mindful of the need to discover or invent its own history? This essay is neither a complete survey of theories of autobiography, nor a particular study of one critical approach, but rather an exploration of how this growing field reflects the larger academic study of literature and history.

After looking briefly at the origins of autobiography as a genre and the way that critical trends in historical writing and literary criticism in the first half of the 20th century limited the study of autobiography, I explore how changing definitions of fact and fiction then moved questions of autobiographical theory more to the center of critical inquiry, illustrating them by references to the self-reflexive and metafictional novels by Vonnegut and Doctorow in the 1960s and 1970s. The surge of interest in the study of autobiography that marks the final decades of the century is then explored in the context of evolving critical theories about the different ways to define or construct the meaning of self and subject. The shift in critical agenda from the identity crisis of postmodernism and deconstruction to the politics of race, class, and gender is finally seen to have influenced, if not demanded, the current interest in and need for theories of autobiography.

The word “autobiography” was invented in 1797 by a linguist who perceived the need for a common term in English to cover the many different accounts that authors make of their own experience. The creation of a new word from classical roots was typical of the 18th century with its special concern for dictionaries, but the story of how and why “autobiography” was coined into English was not told until 1976 when Thomas Cooley reported how the word was first used in a work of professional criticism, and why the creator of “autobiography” was concerned about the new word sounding rather “pedantic” (3). This concern late in the 18th century appears to have been a response to the gap between personal narrative and the professional study or review of such writing, the very gap that theories of autobiography in the late 20th century have still been attempting to bridge.

While other labels such as “memoir” and “life” continued to be favored by authors well into the 19th century, editors and scholars began to adopt the word “autobiography” to designate this genre of writing about the self. A field of study then started to emerge as different examples of autobiography from past centuries were brought together under the new label. The first appearance of “autobiography” in a title was for an 1832 edition of The Autobiography of Thomas Shepard. When this Puritan minister wrote the account of his life in the 17th century, he merely called it “My Birth
and Life,” but two hundred years later an editor could decide upon the more formal title. In the same way, the memoirs left by Benjamin Franklin were becoming known in the middle of the 19th century as his Autobiography. Thus a word that did not exist during the life of either man became a common label for their different records of personal experience. The invention of “autobiography” as a critical term marks the birth of a genre—not in practice, of course, which goes back at least as far as Augustine, but in theory which has been called forth by the act of definition.

Once the terms and attitudes were in place to consider autobiography as a particular kind of writing, the time had come to recommend the genre as a crucial form of evidence for the study of social and cultural history. Thus the remarkable claim by Wilhelm Dilthey in 1883 that autobiography is “the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life confronts us” (85). Given the academic separation of literature and history departments at most North American universities, however, the early union of autobiography and the study of history proved to be less than a happy marriage. As long as scholarship was closely related to the concerns of philology, the subjects of history, literature, and autobiography could be held together by their common interest in the roots of language. For most of the 20th century, however, boundary lines were set to mirror the opposed definitions of fact and fiction, and autobiography was left in limbo between the departments of history and literature. Only in the last three decades has a new synthesis emerged that ironically returns to language as a common denominator.

Despite the extensive scholarship of Georg Misch in Germany and a few critical surveys in America, the first half of the 20th century was hardly a productive time for the study of autobiography. As late as 1956, for example, The Curious Art of Autobiography was published as a “Philosophical Library” volume despite its complete lack of critical perspective. The author, H.N. Wethered, thinks of his subject merely as a genre with “considerable quaintness and much useful information” (1). Such a view itself ought to sound quaint in the second half of the 20th century, but the study of autobiography had indeed languished for decades. The situation was so bad that in 1964 Robert F. Sayre observed that common distinctions between fiction and autobiography remain “shamefully unanalyzed” (ix).

Autobiography suffered from benign neglect for more than half a century because it was treated as a poor stepchild by professors of both history and literary criticism. Although several forms of autobiography—
memoirs, confessions, etc.—continued to be used as evidence for the writing of history, the increasing effort of historians in our century to measure their work after the models of science was bound to cast doubt upon the reliability and usefulness of autobiography. The high claim voiced by Dilthey that autobiography is the most instructive form of historical evidence did not impress historians looking for more accurate statistics. Moreover, the required impersonality of historical writing meant the dismissal of autobiographers as role models. If historians believed in the goal of objectivity, and were taught to keep themselves out of their writing, then admitting subjectivity in the form of autobiography would appear to be at odds with such enterprise. Why risk the questions of personal narrative, or sacrifice the mask of impartiality?

Through the middle decades of the 20th century the study of autobiography did not fare any better among academic critics of English and American literature. Information concerning an author's life was typically excluded from the discussion where the teaching of literature was dominated by the theory and practice of New Criticism. If biography and history were held in doubt, autobiography was discounted on principle. As long as the intentional falacy was accepted as critical dogma, how could literature be explored in terms of personal statement? As long as critical analysis was restricted to a close reading of individual texts, the larger context of history and language was hardly discussed. The practice of New Criticism might discover seven types of ambiguity, but it could not approach or discuss literature in terms of personal or political discourse. Autobiography was sacrificed by the New Critics on the altar of formalism.

A revolution in the critical theory of both literature and history was necessary to create the current interest in the study of autobiography, and here deconstruction clearly played a major role. By advancing a radical skepticism about the coherence and referentiality of language, deconstruction offered critics a sophisticated way to doubt the claims of historical truth. When the traditional difference between fact and fiction is questioned, autobiography can easily become a subject of literary criticism. If any text is full of inherent contradictions which can be exposed by the methods of deconstruction, then autobiography can be applauded for its creation of multiple and contradictory self images. While irony and ambiguity were much discussed by the New Critics, it was still believed that differences in meaning could be resolved into a unified and coherent interpretation. Deconstruction, however, called into question not merely
the objectivity of the text but also its interpretations. J. Hillis Miller has
argued that deconstruction reduces the “apparently solid ground” of a
text to nothing “but thin air” (341). The new skepticism, of course, was
based on a revolution in language theory. If meaning is generated by dif-
ference in sign or code, not by direct reference, then fiction and history
alike may be seen as the self-dramatizing acts of language. The study of
autobiography benefited from this skepticism because the genre often
asks readers to observe language as a field of contradiction. “Autobiogra-
phy is an all-inclusive genre,” declares Peggy Kamuf, “precisely to the
extent that it remains impossible to conclude whose life is being written—or read” (124). When the status of the writing self is no longer either
singular or knowable, the result may be what Fredric Jameson has called
the postmodern “disappearance of the individual subject” (16).

If deconstruction helped to free autobiography from the claims of his-
torical truth, the critical agenda of new historicism called for a different
blurring of traditional distinctions. Literature and history become inter-
changeable when all writing is interpreted as a form of power. Any work of
literature is then a social and political act; any description of the past now
invokes such narrative concerns as point of view, selection of detail, and
concept of audience; neither literature nor history then remains as a sepa-
rate or self-sufficient text. The implications of this critical view require the
definition of “self” at the center of autobiography to be understood in
terms of political and social power. In his 1986 study of “fame,” for exam-
ple, Leo Braudy not only explored “the changing ways by which individu-
als have sought to bring themselves to the attention of others” (4), but also
observed how writers like Augustine and Franklin redefined the concept
of self in creating their autobiographies. The critical study of autobiogra-
phy was then called upon to explain how any personal statement could be
viewed as a political act, and conversely how all forms of social and politi-
cal discourse both disguise and promote definitions of self. Instead of
being treated as a poor stepchild of opposing disciplines, autobiography
was discovered again to be implicit in both literature and history.

As the study of autobiography began to reflect the critical trends associ-
ated with deconstruction and the new historicism, narrative experiments
by writers like Kurt Vonnegut and E.L. Doctorow made clear why autobi-
ographical theory could no longer distinguish history from fiction.
Vonnegut, for example, began Slaughterhouse-Five (1969) with an autobi-
ographical chapter where he introduced a persona of himself who then
intrudes from time to time into the fictional account of historic moments
in Dresden. Even the title page mixes information about the bombed city with the author’s intentions for a “telegraphic schizophrenic” narrative. The multiple claims of Slaughterhouse-Five are clearly beyond the formal concerns held by the New Critics. The mixture of history and fiction calls for a critical method able to view the novel in a political context, and the author’s professed intentions call for autobiographical and deconstructive criticism. Vonnegut’s work was hardly discussed by literary critics until Robert Scholes used terms like “metafiction” and “fabulation” to explore its post-structuralist style. The advances in critical theory then allowed for acceptance and understanding of Vonnegut’s complex fusion of history, fiction, and autobiography.

Doctorow has further explored this critical situation in a series of novels and essays. “I am thus led to the proposition,” Doctorow affirms, “that there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative” (Essays 26). His novels are typically narrated by an autobiographical persona for whom history and fiction are interchangeable. Doctorow thus entertains his audience with the game of reversing expectations about historical truth. When asked if some events in Ragtime really happened, Doctorow replies, “They have now” (Essays 166). The narrator of Ragtime, for example, is telling about the history of his family long after the events supposedly took place, but the narrative point of view is connected only by inference to a minor character who is presumed to have inherited the pieces of the story. The unseen narrator may be taken as a prototype for the nascent theory of autobiography because he creates an illusion of history from what are alleged to be personal records and memories.

For Fredric Jameson, the condition of Doctorow’s work constitutes a “paradox” in the sense that “a seemingly realistic novel like Ragtime is...a kind of hologram” (23). Jameson also notes that the original autobiographical beginning of Ragtime was “suppressed from the published text...freeing the novel to float in some new world of past historical time whose relationship to us is problematical indeed” (22). The novel includes a range of characters from Houdini to Henry Ford, but the chief design evident to the narrator is one of perpetual change: “the world composed and recomposed itself constantly in an endless process of dissatisfaction” (99). If deconstruction is “a demonstration that [a text] has already dismantled itself,” as J. Hillis Miller suggests (341), then Doctorow’s novel is a contemporary act of fiction and criticism.

The same postmodern destabilization of the writing subject is evident in the autobiography that Roland Barthes was also writing in the mid
seventies. He too plays the fact/fiction game by asking the reader to rethink the “substance” of Roland Barthes as “totally fictive” (120). Writing an autobiography thus becomes an act of self-creation, but the “self” is very similar to the floating hologram that Jameson observed in Doctorow’s novel. The political agenda of Ragtime favors the artist who is able to “point his life along the lines of flow of American energy” (111) in contrast to the other fathers in Doctorow’s novel whose self-centered views lead to early failure and death. In this way, it is now the victory by an artist over less imaginative rivals that becomes the model for the self-creative genre of autobiography.

The first critical attempts in the 1960s to define the nature of autobiography could hardly be expected to match the art of Vonnegut or Doctorow because the study of autobiography was just emerging from its long period of neglect by professors of history and literature. In 1960, noticing that “very little has been written about how the autobiographer accomplishes his task,” Roy Pascal did not hesitate to impose his definition upon the subject: “Autobiography proper” is a retrospective account that involves a “search for the true self” (39). While useful in the short term, this prescriptive definition of autobiography was soon undermined when advances in language theory began to question the meaning of “true” and “self.” Even the title of Pascal’s work, Design and Truth in Autobiography, harks back to Goethe’s Dichtung und Warheit, and thus recalls old concerns at the very moment literary criticism was about to move through the looking glass into the new uncertainties of post-structuralism. Pascal often cites Goethe’s autobiography as an important model (46-49), and although he mentions Goethe’s skepticism about achieving self-knowledge, Pascal still uses phrases like “the deepest truth” which indicate a belief in the referential power of language (61). Despite his various admissions that motives are often corrupt and memory is flawed, he does not question the essential truth of language itself.

In 1964, however, the study of autobiography did begin to move ahead with Robert F. Sayre’s attempt to find new terms for the lives of Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams, and Henry James. Although he initially praises Pascal for having established the “qualities of unity and completeness as the indispensable conditions of true autobiography” (7), Sayre is forced before long to question the critical assumption at work in this definition. His description of change and discontinuity among the sections of Franklin’s Autobiography stands as a direct challenge to the New Critical views of unity and coherence. Sayre’s willingness to credit Franklin with a
number of “provisional identities” thus helped to liberate the study of autobiography from Pascal’s “search for the true self.”

An even greater step forward was made in 1972 by James Olney, whose *Metaphors of Self* also shifts the argument away from the history and form of autobiography in order to explore what he calls its “philosophy and psychology” (viii). Olney is less interested in defining autobiography as a literary genre, a task he dismisses as “not particularly desirable or significant” (39), than he is in establishing how and why a writer creates a self in terms of metaphor. Analyzing a writer’s motives (the psychological aspect), and discussing the nature of reality generated by self-images (the philosophical aspect), Olney goes well beyond the New Critical dogma that implied a separation of texts from ideas of intention or empowerment.

Although Olney sees a “vital impulse to order” implicit in the act of writing, and describes autobiography as “a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition” (35), for him the text is not a separate artifact that can be understood apart from the author, but rather a “monument of the self,” and the world is no longer a neutral object to be viewed scientifically, but instead something created through perception: “One creates from moment to moment and continuously the reality to which one gives a metaphoric name and shape, and that shape is one’s own shape” (34). The metaphysics inherent in this view place Olney right in the middle of the critical revolution of the 1970s that was leading Robert Scholes and Roland Barthes into theories of metafiction, and writers like Vonnegut and Doctorow to new forms of autobiographical literature.

The study of autobiography entered the 1980s with a growing need to make clear where it stood amidst the competition of new and different critical voices. William Spengemann rose to this challenge with *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (1980). He traces the forms of autobiography according to “changing ideas about the nature of self” which he sees in terms of history, philosophy, and poetry (xiii), each of which he defines as a stage in the development of the genre. First comes “historical autobiography” which assumes a kind of self-knowledge based upon a true and stable account of the past. This form, of course, predates most questions about “true” and “self” which render problematic the separation of author and history. The second form is “philosophical autobiography” which reflects a changing self determined by a mixture of present and past circumstance. The final type is “poetic autobiography” which occurs when the self can be represented only through the performance of symbolic action. The development of
autobiography thus corresponds in Spengemann's view to the way that critical theory has progressed beyond any belief in direct reference to a concern with the self-creative nature of all writing.

The critical trend toward studying autobiography in terms of symbolic action leads Spengemann to abandon any distinction between autobiography and fiction. A major chapter of his work is devoted to an analysis of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* in order to illustrate the type of "poetic autobiography" where the author is implicit in the alleged fiction. To explain the symbolic action as a self-portrait, Spengemann quotes from a Borges parable: a man who "sets himself the task of portraying the world" may spend years drawing images of "kingdoms, mountains...stars, horses, and people," only to discover shortly before his death that the "labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face" (167). Yet if Spengemann is right that "the connections between autobiography and what it appears to describe have become increasingly problematical and the differences between autobiography and other written forms have become indistinct" (188), then what also results is a self-portrait of the critic as one who merges fiction and autobiography in a labyrinth of symbolic terms.

While the study of autobiography grew in the 1980s with several monographs about different types of personal narrative, often with particular attention to race and gender, that the nature of the genre remains debatable is evident from the publication of essay collections which are designed to reflect, if not to reconcile, the differing critical views. Two volumes edited by James Olney, for example, focus on the task of rethinking the past and future of critical theory pertaining to autobiography. The first, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (1980), includes a translation of an early essay by George Gusdorf on the "conditions and limits" of autobiography, and the second, *Studies in Autobiography* (1988), has essays which explore personal narrative in terms of race, class, and gender. The contradictions and limits of autobiography are thus expanded to reflect the growth of critical trends throughout the decade.

As for the question of whether the selection and publication of certain essays produces a clear or coherent description of autobiography, one should note that while the editor of an essay collection may have some power to influence the form and direction of critical debate, the very implications of such power have recently come under closer scrutiny. The result is often an editorial decision to include as many competing voices as possible. What emerges is a new canon of critical views based upon principles of inclusion and diversity. Consider, for example, the choices made by Albert E. Stone as the editor of *The American Autobiography: A*
Collection of Critical Essays (1981). He describes autobiography as “simultaneously historical record and literary artifact, psychological case history and spiritual confession, didactic essay and ideological testament” (2). The list of claims is familiar enough, but the word “simultaneously” now has special value. Autobiography is defined as a series of paradoxes: fact and fiction, private and communal, lessons and lies.

Instead of attempting to resolve these contradictions, Stone is content to describe the genre as the sum of its many critical definitions. If the nature of self is challenged by either psychological or linguistic theory, Stone asserts that the self revealed in autobiography is “both actor and author” (2). Such a critical compromise makes a virtue of necessity, and allows Stone to argue that autobiography is relevant to “most of the compartments of public and private experience which in western cultures have been organized into the social sciences and humanities” (2). The universal claim voiced by Dilthey more than a century ago—autobiography is “the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life confronts us”—thus finds an unexpected echo in the words of a contemporary editor like Stone who embraces the contradictions in theory to form an inclusive canon for the study of autobiography.

Yet if the genre is as “stubbornly multi-dimensional” as Stone claims, what happens to the “design and truth” of autobiography so confidently set forth by Pascal only twenty years earlier? The extent to which Stone is reluctant to abandon either of these earlier claims can be seen from his observation that “the study of autobiography is a participant-observer science or art, like anthropology” (9). The ambivalence of “science or art” is typical of the questions that continue to bedevil the proliferating critical theories of autobiography. While the genre is now explored by a growing number of critics who are ready to approach it as “fictions of the self,” others still argue for the scientific “truth” element. Indeed, recent criticism often includes “objective” statements about the non-referentiality of language. This contradiction remains at the heart of contemporary efforts to define the nature of autobiography. Herbert Leibowitz uses terms like “human essence” and “literary artifice” to continue the debate in his 1989 study, Fabricating Lives: Exploration in American Autobiography. It is the deliberate ambiguity of such language that allows the study of autobiography to embrace the contradiction of art and science.

A 1989 special issue of The Journal of American History provides considerable evidence that historians are also willing to merge the contradictions of fact and fiction to look favorably on autobiography. The issue includes several different approaches to the subject of memory. Arguments from
cognitive psychology, linguistics, and other concerned fields all lead to the conclusion that memory is less a record of the past than a new fusion of image and language determined by present motives and circumstances. If memory is understood to be a creative act, then the record of experience in a memoir or autobiography is a mixture of design and truth that cannot be unraveled because the past is available only in new forms of present imagination. If language is unstable because the context for any word—"fact," "fiction," "truth," "design"—must change with every use of the word, then the field of meaning set by references among texts is unlimited. Such extreme conclusions, of course, also render themselves problematic, for when the "matter of the subject’s representation of itself comes under scrutiny" (Smith 57), the theory of autobiography, like the hologram described by Jameson, is there and not there in view and memory.

In any case, now that historians and literary critics have discovered common ground in their redefinition of memory and imagination, both are ready to accept a view of autobiography in terms of dynamic, self-reflexive action. "The origin and the end of autobiography converge in the very act of writing," argues Michael Sprinkler, "for no autobiography can take place except within the boundaries of a writing where concepts of subject, self, and author collapse into the act of producing a text" (342). Critical interest is thus focused on the power relationships involved in autobiographical practice. Today, what concerns critics are such questions as: who benefits when autobiography is written, published, and accepted by readers and scholars? how are various claims for social identity and cultural pluralism advanced by the retelling and analysis of life stories? what power is granted when examples of autobiography are nominated for the canons of literature, cultural history, and criticism? Such questions, of course, all illustrate how the growing interest in autobiographical study continues to mirror the larger convergence of history and literary criticism.

The way that power relationships are placed at the center of the present attempt to define and describe the nature of autobiography is also well-represented in a 1991 collection of essays, American Autobiography, Retrospect and Prospect, edited by Paul John Eakin. The attempt to "offer a comprehensive picture of the state of the field today" (15) results in a volume of essays with considerable emphasis upon the cultural diversity and pluralism of autobiographical practice. Separate chapters are devoted to autobiographies by women, immigrants, Afro-Americans, and Native Americans. The categories into which autobiographical criticism is grouped thus follow directly from the politics of race, class, and gender.
“One model for the history of the genre,” suggests Eakin, “might well be the ongoing interplay between dominant and marginal texts” (10). Although he admits to some “continuing uncertainty about generic definition” (4), Eakins is ready to assert that “the pluralistic nature of American culture has been decisive in the development of American autobiography” (15).

The pluralism described and valued by Eakin is analogous to the situation predicted by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*: claims of truth and reference are transformed into language games, cultural myths or meta-narratives are replaced by minority politics, and questions of self are redefined in terms of race, class, and gender. The study of autobiography in such a postmodern society is, more than ever, a mirror of critical value and method. With less worry about the rival status of fact and fiction, and less concern with formalist definitions, the critic of autobiography is empowered to be a self-reflexive, politically correct, cultural historian.

At the beginning of this century Georg Misch was almost alone in devoting his scholarly life to the study of autobiography. Now the possibilities are explored at countless universities across Europe and North America. New articles, books, and conferences on autobiography are published or scheduled at an ever increasing rate. More than that, as Nancy Miller has noted, now there is a “proliferation in literary studies of autobiographical or personal criticism” (ix). While the study of autobiography continues to mirror advances in many areas of cultural theory, the writing of literary criticism itself has become increasingly personal and autobiographical. Indeed, Miller titles her own study, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and other Autobiographical Acts*. Although she regards the current trend, her own book included, to be “one of the many symptoms of literary theory’s mid-life crisis” (x), one might wonder where the crisis lies if self-creation and critical theory have become inseparable at the end of the 20th century. Whether the study of autobiography will transcend its own mid-life crisis into a confident old age in the new century remains to be seen, but just as any single autobiography can never come to closure, the multiple theories of personal narrative are likely to mirror the larger debate of literature and history, design and truth, into the unknown future.
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