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Autobiography as genre: A critical study

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Abstract
Autobiography holds a position of priority, indeed many would say preeminence, among the narrative traditions of black America black autobiography is a powerful force in and a characteristic form of contemporary culture, it has attracted a growing number of critics and commentators. These come at the subject from several perspectives, historical and ideological, literary and philosophical, sociological and psychological. This diversity attests to the genre's complexity, the difficulties in defining its varieties, and the mines of information and insight contained.

Keywords: Autobiography, contemporary culture, perspectives

Introduction

Man knows himself only insofar as he knows the world, and becomes aware of the world only in himself, and of himself only in it. Every new object, well observed, opens a new organ in ourselves. - Goethe, Maximen and Reflexionen.

The French word genre means a classification of literary works according to type—lyric, narrative, dramatic – which are further divided into novel, short story, epic poem, tragedy, and so forth. According to Meyer H. Abrams, genre is of use to the reader because it "creates a set of expectations which enable the reader to make the work intelligible" (1993: 77).

In other words, if the reader knows for a fact that Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings is an autobiography, then the reader also expects the sequel, Gather Together in My Name, to have understandable characteristics of the genre, such as first-person narration, a chronological order, and an emphasis on the self. Since 1945, autobiography is one of the richest, most revealing modes of black expression in present-day America. The date refers, of course, to the publication of Black Boy. Its distribution to over 325,000 members of the Book- of-the-Month Club and its enthusiastic critical reception were a landmark in literary history. Even more powerfully than with Native Son, Wright caught the consciousness of America at the war's end, compelling it to experience through his memory and imagination the pain, deprivation, and triumph of will of his young Mississippi self. One of his severer critics, however, was W.E.B. Du Bois, whose very different notions of autobiography had been expressed five years earlier in Dusk of Dawn. Both books have revealing subtitles. An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept reflects Du Bois' willing surrender of a purely personal chronicle, Just as A Record of Childhood and Youth reminds Wrights readers that Black Boy is not, after all, a novel but a version of actual events. By example and precept, Du Bois and Wright have helped to define the nature of black autobiography which in the last forty-odd years has come to mirror, criticize, and create wider and wider areas of black life and culture.

In the generations since these epochal works, nearly every segment of black life has found a voice through the art of personal history. Male and female, the young and the very old, educated and illiterate, revolutionary and conformist, novelist and singer, scholar and sharecropper, expatriate and ghetto dweller, have sought, like Du Bois, to repossess their social and historical identities or, like Wright, to dramatize by fictional techniques the truth of their recreated lives. As both history and literature, autobiography has served the expressive aims of many diverse talents. The result is a cultural achievement vastly extending and enriching the tradition Du Bois and Wright themselves inherited from Langston Hughes, Ida Wells Barnett, James Weldon Johnson, Booker T. Washington, and the nineteenth-century slave narrators. The sixties and seventies masterworks of this outpouring are well known, for they have found their way via paperback into the libraries and classrooms, the drugstores and supermarkets of the nation. In the struggle for personal, political, and cultural independence, these and other autobiographies are playing a major role in the communications network linking the black writer to his other audiences. These narratives also articulate emerging forms of personal identity which pose important new

issues for social scientists and philosophers of personality, race, and culture. Because black autobiography is a powerful force in and a characteristic form of contemporary culture, it has attracted a growing number of critics and commentators.

These come at the subject from several perspectives, historical and ideological, literary and philosophical, sociological and psychological. This diversity attests to the genre's complexity, the difficulties in defining its varieties, and the mines of information and insight contained. Historians, black and white, have perhaps been slower than others to extend their investigations of contemporary black life through autobiography as C.H. Nichols and John Blassingame have done with slavery and slave narratives. The necessity of checking generalizations about black history against the recorded experiences of individual men and women should now be plain, given the controversial examples of Ulrich Phillips, Stanley Elkins, and Daniel Moyaniham. Yet even sensitive scientists like E. Franklin Frazier, St. Clair Drake, and Lee Rainwater and historians like John Hope Franklin and Kenneth Stampp either shied away from autobiographies or treated them in terms of explicit content, without adequate consideration of language, style, or the psychological aspects of these intimate documents. All autobiography, in fact, communicates on several levels at once; it is simultaneously private history, artful story, and rich outpouring of psychic energies. Perhaps understandably, the literary approach to black lives has provided to date more perceptive readings, since close attention to style and language often alerts the literary critic to basic attributes the historian might miss. Confirmation of this may be found in two recent full-length studies by Sidonie Smith and Stephen Butterfield, both of which greatly extend and update Rebecca Chalmers Barton's pioneer work. Shorter general essays by John Blassingame, Michael G. Cooke, and Roger Rosenblatt, as well as specific studies of authors and texts by Houston A. Baker, Warner Berthoff, George E. Kent, David Levin, and Carol Ohmann, among others, illuminate from various angles a burgeoning literature. The sons and daughters of Du Bois and Wright are beginning to receive the careful appreciation their works demand as deliberate creations. By its protean nature autobiography escapes formal assumptions and prescriptions, for as James Olney has pointed out, each self and hence each life-history reflects "an unrepeated and unrepeatable being" (1972: 21). Autobiography holds a position of priority, indeed many would say preeminence, among the narrative traditions of black America. African Americans had been dictating and writing first-person accounts of their lives for almost a century before the first black American novel appeared in 1853. It is significant that this novel, William Wells Brown's Clotel, was subtitled A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States and was authored by a man who had made his initial literary fame as a fugitive salve autobiographer. Ever since, the history of African American narrative has been informed by a call-and response relationship between autobiography and its successor, the novel. Not until the modern era would the African American novel begin to match the rhetorical sophistication and social impact of autobiography. The number of important twentieth century African American novels that read like or are presented as autobiographies confirms a recent black critic's contention that "ours is an extraordinarily self-reflexive tradition" (1993: 1). The idea of the African American narrative tradition as patterned by a call-and-response formula is set forth in Robert B. Stepto, From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has emphasized the self-reflexivity of African American literature in both Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the "Racial" Self (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), and The Signifying Monkey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). It was the eighteenth-century slave narrator who first sang into print the "Long black song" (Houston A. Baker, 1972) of black America's quest for freedom. Since then African American autobiography has testified to the ceaseless commitment of people of colour to realise the promise of their American birthright and to articulate their achievements as individuals and as persons of African descent. Perhaps more than any other literary form in black American letters, autobiography has been recognised and celebrated since its inception as a powerful means of addressing and altering socio-political as well as cultural realities in the United States.

Nineteenth century abolitionists sponsored the publication of the narratives of escaped slaves out of a conviction that first-person accounts of those victimised by and yet triumphant over slavery would mobilise white readers more profoundly than any other kind of antislavery discourse. A similar belief in modern black American autobiography's potential to liberate white readers from racial prejudice, ignorance, and fear led Rebecca Chalmers Barton to publish Witnesses for Freedom: Negro Americans in Autobiography in 1948, the first book- length scholarly study of African American (or for that matter any form of American) autobiography. It was the narratives of self-styled black revolutionaries in the 1960s and early 1970s that compelled the American academy to reconsider widespread assumptions about literature's transcendent relationship to social struggle. Since then, the fact that the antebellum slave narrative still receives more critical attention than any other subgenre of American autobiography points up the persistence of the conviction that black life-writing speaks powerfully to America's need to confront its history if it is ever to change it. Since Barton's pioneering book, students and critics of African American autobiography have argued, with increasing emphasis and sophistication in the past twenty years that this genre deserves to be regarded as a phenomenon of literary significance in its own right, in addition to its import as a social document. Described in terms of the three constituent elements of the word autobiography-autos (self), bios (life) and graphe (writing)-the recent history of readerly and scholarly interest in African American autobiography pivots on a shift from a traditional focus on the bios of the author, from whose example valuable insights about history and personal conduct might be gleaned, to investigations of the autos and graphe represented in and by the text. No doubt the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which posed profound questions about the kind of identity African Americans wished to create for themselves in the postcolonial era, spurred the concern with selfhood and modes of identification that reoriented so much African American autobiography criticism in the 1970s. The realization that selfhood is itself constituted by language, along with a post-structuralist wariness of granting any text-especially autobiography-the authority of an unmediated

representation of a lifeor a self, has contributed to the insistence in the 1980s and 1990s on an interrogation of the modes of writing adopted by black autobiographers. To comprehend the rhetorical choices and dilemmas that have faced black autobiographers, scholars and critics have recently begun the most extensive excavation of the history of the genre ever attempted. A notable result of this effort has been the creation of new editions of texts that had been long forgotten or facilely dismissed as inauthentic or sub literary. The recovery and republication of such texts as Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl and Zora Neale Hurston's Dust Tracks on a Road enable readers to reexamine what black writers actually wrote in a context informed by the best biographical, historical and critical scholarship that has ever been brought to bear on African American autobiography. It may well be that criticism's determination to reclaim the words of black autobiographers will lead in turn to enhanced study of their lives, their times, and their sense of themselves. Along with this wide-ranging intellectual reconnaissance of their field, scholars and critics of African American autobiography have become increasingly engaged in rethinking the methods by which they do criticism. More than a little effort has gone into the task of demonstrating that autobiographies such as the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass and Richard Wright's Black Boy are works deserving of a high rank in the canon of American literature. But a countervailing trend in criticism has raised questions about the wisdom of evaluating black American autobiographies according to standard assumptions about how life, self, and writing interact in the tradition of Western autobiography.

Much of the criticism of African American autobiography has thus been devoted to fashioning new, culturally specific ways of analyzing and judging texts. As a consequence, this criticism has not only reconstructed the viability of the study of black American autobiography as a discipline in and of itself but also has played a leading role in the deconstruction of myths that assume a universal Western standard by which all autobiographies could be measured. The doors opened by scholars and critics of African American autobiography have seen the arrival of students of women's Native American, Hispanic, and Third World life-writing, each with a significant contribution to the burgeoning field of autobiography studies. Given these developments in African American autobiography study, it seems useful to reflect on Black women's contribution to the genre.

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