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# **BUILDING A BRIDGE OF WORDS: THE LITERARY AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS HISTORICAL SOURCE MATERIAL**

JENNIFER JENSEN WALLACH

Autobiography is a peculiar genre, which purports to be both literature and history but is not entirely one or the other. As James Olney has observed, once upon a time autobiography was “a kind of stepchild of history and literature, with neither of those disciplines granting it full recognition” (xiii). The marginalization of the genre began to end with the appearance of Georges Gusdorf’s seminal 1956 essay, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” and scholarly interest in the subject has scarcely abated since. Most—although certainly not all—of the impetus behind the field of autobiography studies has emanated from literary critics. Few students of autobiography have been interested in what the genre can reveal to us about a knowable past. Conversely, although historians have continuously utilized memoirs as historical source material, they have done so without the benefit of a coherent theoretical framework, treating autobiography as if it were just another primary source.

Life writing has the potential to enrich our historical understanding in ways that cannot be replicated in any other single source material. But to understand the kind of impact that autobiography can have, we must complicate our thinking about the nature of historical understanding. Further, we must pay careful attention to issues of literary style, for there are certain aspects of historical reality that can best be captured by artfully wrought literary memoirs. Skillful autobiographers are uniquely equipped to describe the entire universe as it appeared from an acknowledged perspective, as well-written life writing has the ability to portray the complicated interplay between the thoughts and emotions of a historical actor.

Individual experiences almost always complicate broad historical generalizations. Therefore, a certain amount of tension will always exist between

historical monographs, which claim to describe objectively a particular time period, and autobiographies, which can only meaningfully claim to document the peculiarities of one life. Traditionalist historians have sometimes been suspicious about the value of the unabashedly subjective memoir as a historical resource. A. J. P. Taylor, for instance, once claimed that “written memoirs are a form of oral history set down to mislead historians,” and are “useless except for atmosphere” (qtd. in Thompson 104). While acknowledging that “Autobiography may sometimes seem like history,” Jeremy D. Popkin, one of the few historians to explore the similarities between the genres, attributes the misgivings of Taylor and others to the emotionally charged relationships autobiographers have to their texts,

that make it impossible to maintain the pretense that an autobiography can achieve scholarly objectivity. Historians have long recognized this fact when using other people’s autobiographies as historical resources. Standard manuals for students caution them against reliance on these “least convincing of all personal records.”<sup>1</sup> (726)

However, it is an error to begin with the premise that we can understand the past in objective terms. Instead, we must see that history can only be understood subjectively, through the thoughts and experiences of individual historical agents. Philosopher of history R. G. Collingwood describes historical reality in terms of individual historical actors, claiming that historical events have an inside and an outside. The outside of a historical event consists of the placement and movement of bodies in a given historical moment—“what actually happened” in the past. The inside component consists of the thoughts of historical agents.

According to Collingwood, “all history is the history of thought” (215). True historical understanding is the understanding of the inside of a historical event, and comes as a result of re-enacting past thought. The historian must actively and critically attempt to re-think the thoughts of a historical agent to understand that agent’s motivations and justifications for acting in a certain way. Because we cannot directly interact with historical subjects who are no longer living, we must relate to them imaginatively, by re-enacting their thoughts, or more colloquially, by putting ourselves in their shoes. To apprehend past reality, the historian must draw on similarities between herself and the historical subject. However, these human similarities transcend the shared capability for rational thought, which Collingwood emphasized. In his formulation, true historical knowledge is only possible when historical actors behaved in a rational manner and were motivated by conscious thought processes—which can be re-thought—rather than by unconscious motivations such as passions.

Collingwood is not alone in this emphasis on rationality. Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis have observed that "Professional historians' epistemology, their underlying assumptions about knowledge and the way it is acquired, has often turned into a set of assumptions about the way people live. . . . [H]istorians have implied that most people in the past have been more or less rational" (1). This epistemological bent has resulted in the devaluing of the emotional aspects of historical experience, but human behavior, and thus the inside of a historical event, is not only cognitive but affective. Humans do not always behave in a rational manner, and are not always conscious of what motivates them. Autobiography, however, can give us a unique window into the interplay of thoughts and feelings, into how the universe felt from one particular point of view. Using the techniques of literary art, a memoirist finds ways to capture the relationship between purpose, affect, and perceptions, and to present his or her own thoughts and feelings about a historical moment in relation to other persons in the same social scene. Particularly when viewed in isolation, archival materials, which are not works of literature, frequently cannot capture this complex reality. Historians using archival materials may indeed hypothesize about the inside of a historical event, but such interpretations are highly speculative. When studying history without the benefit of literary memoirs, the historian must project herself into a situation and imagine how she would have felt, what she would have thought, and thus how she would have acted. Where memoirs exist, this kind of speculation is not necessary, for the memoirist herself guides us. The well-crafted memoir enables us, in a way that no other single historical resource can, to re-experience the affective and cognitive inside of a historical moment.

In our attempts to recreate the past on the basis of the clues that we can access in the present, we err when we distance ourselves emotionally from the subject of our historical inquiry, and content ourselves with unraveling the "What happened in the past?" question without tackling the more evasive but equally intriguing question "How did it feel?" By daring to ask the second question, we come closer to the historian's goal of understanding the past on its own terms. We must embrace Jacques Barzun's inclusive definition of history as "vicarious experience." According to Barzun, "Knowledge of history is like a second life extended indefinitely . . . backward" (40). Unlike any other genre of historical writing, the memoir is uniquely poised to give its readers the chance to live vicariously, and however briefly, to indeed experience "a second life," which is acted out in the interplay between the written word and the reader's historical imagination.

If we conceptualize history as Barzun does as "vicarious experience," we can expand Collingwood's doctrine of re-enactment beyond the realm of

rational thought, and “re-feel” what historical actors felt. In order to “re-feel,” the historian should actually draw on her own life experiences and embrace her shared humanity with the object of her inquiry. Because the historian has experienced hope, sorrow, anxiety, and the rest of the spectrum of human emotions, it is possible for her to project her own understanding of those emotions onto the historical subject she is studying. Because the historian too is capable of thinking and feeling, not only can she identify with the cognitive and affective aspects of historical subjects, but she is also aware of the way that thoughts and emotions intermingle, sometimes contradict each other, and frequently take on a different significance when transferred from the realm of direct experience into that of memory.

Empathetically re-feeling a past moment should not be confused with sympathetically identifying with the experiences of a historical agent. There are times when empathetic understanding is difficult or even impossible to achieve. Students of history may have difficulty projecting aspects of themselves into an understanding of the actions of notorious or violent historical characters. Indeed, it may be too frightening an exercise even to attempt to identify, no matter how imaginary and tenuous the connection, with the thoughts and emotions of someone like Adolf Hitler. However, it also might be easier to empathize with the thoughts and feelings of evildoers than we would like to think, and in the empathetic identification with people whom we have come to identify as depraved, we might discover darker recesses of ourselves. Nonetheless, attempting to see the world from the perspective of a particular historical actor should not be confused with a justification or wholehearted embrace of his or her thoughts and values. In trying to understand how it felt to be living at a particular time in history, and how the universe looked from a specific viewpoint, the historian is not endorsing or adopting another person’s worldview. Empathetic reconstruction can be replayed again and again from the perspective of different historical actors. Such identifications are only temporary, and are necessarily moderated by the historian’s own ethical concerns and present-minded worldview.

Empathetic reconstruction or re-feeling, then, is not purely instinctual, nor is it uncritical. Re-feeling the emotions of historical agents does not mean that we dispense with the rational elements of historical understanding. David Stockley insists that “Empathetic reconstruction may well be an imaginary act, but it is also an analytical one and one that must be prepared for” (58). To “live vicariously” another life in the past, even for just a moment, requires immersion in historical material about a given time period. Individual memoirs should not be read in isolation, but along with secondary scholarship about the time period in question.

This emphasis on empathetic reconstruction of the thoughts and feelings of individual historical agents reminds us that history contains a multiplicity of perspectives. Each memoirist is herself a center of consciousness who interacts with other centers of consciousness, each of whom perceives the reality of her life differently, and *historical reality* is comprised of the sum total of these individuals' varied experiences. It is thus inherently perspectival, and the memoir is uniquely poised to capture the entire universe as it existed from different acknowledged perspectives. That being said, memoirs are not necessarily the best source for literal, historical truth. If ascertaining "what really happened" in the past is our primary goal, autobiography can mislead even as it reveals. Frequently, autobiographers misremember or deliberately deceive. However, a complicated understanding of historical truth shows that misrepresentations can be revelatory. As Luise White points out, "for historians, the invented account is at least as good as the accurate one, because dissembling is perhaps the most pointed telling we have. . . . [A] lie, a cover story, not only camouflages but explains" (14).

If the testimony of a historical witness is contradictory, or does not align itself with other historical evidence, the historian may wonder why the informant would tell stories that ring false. In analyzing autobiographies with dubious literal truth value, the historian might learn a great deal about how an individual perceived herself and her times (if the witness's misrepresentation is honest), or about how she would like to be remembered (if her lies are more calculated). Cover stories, lies, and distorted truths are often crafted deliberately, and the discovered intention to deceive makes "certain information so charged that its value and importance is unlike other information" (White 15). An uncovered lie might function as a red flag, alerting a historian to an area where she should dig a little deeper. For example, in his autobiography a slave owner might describe himself as a benevolent, paternalistic master, while plantation records demonstrate that his slaves were malnourished and beaten cruelly. Although the slave owner's testimony is at odds with the documentary evidence, his pretence of paternalism reveals a great deal about his perception of himself, and about the ethos of his community of slaveholders.

Even regardless of their literal truth value, however, not all autobiographies are equally historically revealing. Well-crafted literary memoirs—those written, to borrow Susanna Egan's phrase, by "artists—not writers by happenstance"—are particularly adept at describing a complex historical reality (30). The artful use of literary language, and the use of literary devices like irony and metaphor, not only make literary memoir more interesting to read, but actually heighten the author's ability to represent lived experience. The

complexity of felt experience simply cannot be as accurately described with literal, non-literary prose.

How then is literary language different—more historically revealing—than the language used in non-literary memoirs? Unlike popular autobiography, with its titillating claims to “reveal all,” and its unabashed allegiance to the market place, literary memoirs intend to be works of art as well as chronicles of lives. To this end, they use language distinctly different from that employed in popular, often ghostwritten or collaboratively written, autobiographies by entertainers, CEOs, politicians, and others who are not skilled, creative writers. However, we cannot distinguish between literary and non-literary memoirs purely by appealing to the authors’ motivations alone. After all, authors may set out to create works of art but write critical failures nonetheless. How do some memoirs become works of art while others do not? Why should something like Vladimir Nabokov’s memoir *Speak, Memory* be considered literature, while Lee Iacocca’s co-authored autobiography should not?

According to Terry Eagleton, “Literary discourse estranges or alienates ordinary speech, but in doing so, paradoxically, brings us into a fuller, more intimate possession of experience” (4). How does literary language perform such a remarkable feat? It does so, in part, merely by drawing attention to itself as literary language, causing the reader to pause, to reflect, and to analyze the content of what she is reading. Merely to say that literature causes us to think more carefully about what we read seems at first a fairly unremarkable claim. However, the endeavor to both “re-think” and “re-feel” the thoughts of historical agents is a slow and deliberate process. The more involved we become in analyzing a text, the closer we come to understanding what the text’s author thought and how she felt. Autobiographical texts that do not demand intensive reading or inspire interpretive quandaries simply do not allow the reader to identify as closely with the authors of the texts. A literal text may be read quickly and put aside, but a literary text requires the kind of ongoing interaction between author, reader, and text that helps facilitate empathetic reconstruction of past events in the present.

Eagleton’s claim that literary language “estranges” everyday speech relies on the assumption that we have a consensus on how ordinary language looks and sounds. For how can something be considered strange without a standardized basis for comparison? But because judgments about what makes language “strange” vary chronologically as well as culturally, we cannot have a set basis for comparison. Categorizing literature by the extent to which it “alienates ordinary speech” is thus not a foolproof identifier, but it is frequently useful nonetheless. For if we compare two representative samples of

the same genre, we can frequently recognize significant differences in the way language is used. Take, for example, Iacocca's and Nabokov's autobiographies.

Iacocca's autobiography begins almost conversationally, as if he were answering the question "Where did your family come from?" His answer: "Nicola Iacocca, my father, came to this country in 1902 at the age of twelve—poor, alone, and scared" (3). Because adjective series are more characteristic of written than of spoken language, the usage of "poor, alone, and scared" draws attention to the fact that he is writing, rather than speaking. The adjectives themselves, however, are unimaginative, and as such neither particularly descriptive nor very literary, conforming to clichéd linguistic expectations rather than subverting them. It is also immediately clear that the text we are about to read will follow a formula. Iacocca's autobiography is one of many variations on *the* American story: the child of immigrants makes good, pulls himself up by his bootstraps, rises from rags to riches, and so forth. We know the basic plot in its entirety from the very first sentence. Even without possessing the specific details, the substance of this life story is quickly foretold in all the complexity it will ever assume.

Contrast this formulaic stab at autobiographical writing with the first sentence of Nabokov's memoir: "The cradle rocks above the abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities and darkness" (19). Without a quickly recognizable formula, we are caught off guard. Already, from the very first sentence, we know that Nabokov's conception of himself and of the autobiographical act is more complicated than a long list of his accomplishments. We are already told to be aware of the relationship of one individual life to eternity. Quickly we are confronted with what we intuitively know: that from the moment of birth, life is uncertain. Unlike Iacocca, Nabokov captures something of the experiential aspects of living with that uncertainty. While the trajectory of Iacocca's life is already clear from the first sentence, we do not immediately know all the plot elements that will comprise Nabokov's story. His cradle precariously "rocks above an abyss."

It is immediately obvious, then, that Nabokov's autobiography poses a greater interpretive challenge than Iacocca's, and that our greater efforts to understand Nabokov's story will pay off in the form of a richer, more nuanced reconstruction of his life. But how can we describe our initial, unreflective understanding that due to the literary techniques it utilizes, *Speak, Memory* somehow has more to offer us in our endeavor to understand human nature and to gain insight into the inner workings of one particular life than does Iacocca's autobiography? Eagleton compares language to the air we breathe.



Most of the time we are unaware of it. However, “if the air is suddenly thickened or infected we are forced to attend to our breathing with new vigilance, and the effect of this may be a heightened experience of our bodily life” (4). The same thing is true of language: we suddenly become aware of it when it ceases to function merely to communicate information, but is instead transformed into art. On a fairly superficial level, Nabokov’s text has a greater impact on some of us than Iacocca’s simply because it succeeds in getting our undivided attention. As we shall see, once the skilled memoirist has our attention, she has at her disposal various literary techniques that can provide a complex glimpse of the historical reality of her life.

When we read Iacocca’s autobiography, we are not fully aware of the particular language that he is using because it is unremarkable. We might read his story absentmindedly on the beach or on an airplane because we are interested in finding out the skeletal facts of his life: his educational background, his tenure at Ford, the business decisions he made while managing Chrysler. We might perhaps initially open Nabokov’s memoir with similar motivations in mind, but the language he uses is so evocative, so sensory, and so strange that the atmosphere changes. No longer halfheartedly leafing through the story, we are, if we allow it, transported into another realm, where we can enjoy the thrill of “vicarious experience” that Barzun claims draws people to history. This changed atmosphere is due to the literary characteristics of the text. Necessarily we read a literary text with a higher state of awareness than a newspaper or a recipe—or a non-literary memoir. Literature simply demands more from its reader, and the reader who actively engages with it receives more for her efforts.

So what techniques enable literary artists to capture in their texts a layered and complicated past reality? When describing the difference between reading literature and non-literary writing, Eagleton gives us a clue. His use of a simile—“language is like air”—demonstrates one of the many techniques of literary writing that enable it to describe a complex social reality better than literal prose. Faced with the difficult task of contrasting literary and non-literary language, Eagleton chooses to describe the difference through an effective comparison. Even if his readers have never drawn this distinction before, Eagleton knows they will know what it would feel like to be suddenly blasted with humid air, or to breathe in smoke or smog. When the air quality is altered, breathing can no longer be taken for granted. And just as we do not notice the quality of air unless it changes, he tells us, we generally do not notice language unless its quality changes too.

Through metaphoric language, authors describe one thing in terms of another. Sometimes, as with Eagleton’s comparison of literary language to

infected air, a metaphor lets an author explain a difficult concept in terms of a more familiar one. This basic definition, however, does not do justice to the power that metaphorical images can have. By grouping often seemingly unrelated objects or concepts, a metaphor can inspire a reconceptualization of the object under comparison. The metaphor “A mighty fortress is our God,” for example, conjures up one image of the nature of God, while other metaphors might highlight different, even contradictory aspects, such as “God is a consuming fire,” or the more benign “God as the baby infant Jesus.” Each metaphor will have a different rhetorical effect, and will therefore lead the reader to conceptualize God differently. By causing the reader or listener to juxtapose different images, and to engage actively in interpretation, metaphor can thus reveal things that literal language cannot.

To see how figurative language is more evocative than literal language, let’s look at the concluding paragraph of *Black Boy*, Richard Wright’s memoir about growing up in the segregated American south. At the conclusion of this autobiography, Wright has decided to leave the Communist Party and to continue fighting against racial injustice as a politically independent writer. His first move will be to write his own life story. If he had chosen to write in straightforward, non-literary prose, Wright might have written a sentence similar to what I just have. Or he might say, “I will write my autobiography and examine the question of racial injustice in the process.” Instead, he writes:

I wanted to try to build a bridge of words between me and the world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal.

I would hurl words into the darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human. (384)

Because of the literary language he chooses, the impact of Wright’s closing lines is much greater than it would have been if the same information had been conveyed in summary or non-literary fashion. In fact, the disparity between the non-literary summary, “I will write an autobiography that expresses what it is to be human,” and what Wright actually says, suggests that Wright’s feelings can only be conveyed using the techniques of literary art. For Wright not only communicates the basic information that he has decided to devote his life to writing, but also sheds light on the hardships inherent in that writing life. Since he is aware of the difficulties of using language to represent the reality of his life, he compares writing to building a bridge. He is aware of the distance between his lived experience and its

retelling in the pages of an autobiography. As a result, although his goal is to paint so vivid a picture of life in the Jim Crow south that his readers will be forced to experience it vicariously, with or without their consent, he knows that there is necessarily a gulf between reality and representations of it. By coming clean with the problem of representation, he is asking his readers to collaborate with him in bridging the gaps between their present and Wright's past reality, with the language Wright enlists to describe it.

He makes a startling language choice when he tells us that he will "hurl" words into a potentially unfriendly world. This potentially violent imagery stands in direct contrast to images of a cloistered intellectual stolidly writing in an isolated corner of a library. He personifies, then deputizes language, ordering it "to tell, to march, to fight." The description of words as soldiers quickly and economically conveys a great deal. It shows how difficult the life of the writer, any writer, is—a lot like warfare. Even more significantly, Wright's description of words as soldiers also reminds us of the brutal realities of the Jim Crow south. In giving voice to nameless "black boys" throughout the south, in asserting their humanity, Wright is fighting an uphill battle. He is not writing to a receptive or even a disinterested audience; he is writing to a nation steeped in institutionalized and legalized racism, and a large portion of his audience is hostile to his autobiographical efforts before the first sentence has been read. He will indeed have to "hurl" language at people who would rather not listen.

None of this complexity could have been conveyed had he chosen to write straightforward, literal prose. He might have painstakingly and long-windedly written a treatise on representation and the craft of writing fiction. He might also have inserted one final denouncement of racism. Instead, he leaves us with the image of words as soldiers, and in so doing captures the difficulties of his undertaking at the same time he reminds us of the precarious position he is in. As a black writer he does not have the luxury of being only a writer. He must also be a soldier, with his words his weapons.

In addition to metaphor, literary artists have at their disposal the tool of irony, which can be used to convey many levels of meaning. Consider the wedding scene in Carolyn Briggs's memoir about leaving a fundamentalist Christian church, *This Dark World: A Memoir of Salvation Found and Lost*. Briggs is describing her wedding. She is eighteen and pregnant. Out of obligation and necessity, she is marrying her first boyfriend, an awkward nineteen year old with no real job prospects, and is pushing aside dreams of college to take up a life of poverty and motherhood in a tiny trailer park in the middle of Iowa. And yet, despite the unhappiness surrounding the event, all the trappings of a happy wedding are present: flowers, expensive new clothes,

cake, and punch. Briggs describes how “my father in cowboy boots and I in my dotted swiss approached the altar. My bridesmaids, Lisa and Katherine, waited tearfully for me, wearing lavender dresses and carrying yellow roses” (76). From the perspectives of Lisa and Katherine, the tears they were crying were tears of happiness. They were caught up in the appearances of a happy wedding, and not in tune with the grim significance this ceremony had in the life of their friend. Briggs, her parents, and the readers of the memoir therefore constitute its true audience, one not fooled by the yellow roses and the silk dresses. For this group, the wedding was an unhappy occasion; the bridesmaids’ tears are tears of sadness. Here appearance and reality are at odds. Weddings should be happy, and bridesmaids, if they cry at all, should cry tears of joy. Confronted with the carefully constructed artifice of a joyful union, Briggs is still able to provide a glimpse of what her wedding day *should* have been like, and to compare that vision to her present situation. If Briggs had not chosen to highlight the irony of an unhappy wedding, she could not have as accurately conveyed what it felt like to be an eighteen-year-old pregnant bride embarking on a life she did not choose.

Robert Paul Wolff provocatively argues that certain concepts can only be conveyed ironically. He uses the example of a lapsed Catholic who now considers herself an atheist. How should this person answer if asked whether or not she presently believes in God? The answer “yes” is obviously inaccurate, since she now considers herself an atheist. “No,” however, does not accurately convey her true convictions either, if she, like many formerly religious people, still maintains in one part of herself a shred of superstition that indeed there is a God. To answer, “I once believed in God, but I do not now” would also be an inaccurate answer that would deny part of her true feelings, and would also dismiss the profound impact her Catholicism and her one-time belief in God have had on the person she presently is. To describe her true feelings succinctly, Wolff suggests she might “reply—employing, ever so faintly exaggeratedly, the singsong tone of the Apostle’s Creed—‘I believe in God the Father almighty Creator of Heaven and Earth and in Jesus Christ. . . .’” This ironic voice would convey to a true audience that she grew up in the Catholic faith, is no longer among the faithful, but still bears the imprint of her time in the church. Wolff concludes that

if the speaking self is complex, many-layered, capable of reflection, self-deception, ambivalence, of unconscious thought processes, or projections, interjections, displacements, transferences, and all manner of ambiguities—in short, if the history of the self is directly present as part of its current nature—then only a language containing within itself the literary resources corresponding to these complexities will suffice to speak the truth. (35)

When memoirists effectively utilize irony, it therefore enhances our historical understanding of a particular era, because human interactions contain layers of meanings, some of which are competing. A literal rendering of a historical event cannot possibly convey the true complexity of the moment, precisely because different historical agents understand and experience each moment differently. These layered meanings, this disjunction between how a situation appears to different participants, can only be explained and captured ironically.

Literary memoirists also have the ability to bridge the gap between their particular historical experiences and those of readers who come to the text from completely different historical situations. Let us return to the final paragraph of *Black Boy*, where Wright attempts to universalize his experiences. Although the main goal of the memoir is to indict southern racism, he also wants to use his writing to convey “the inexpressibly human.” Like all literary memoirs, then, *Black Boy* is simultaneously particular and universal. It can be read as a historical resource that allows us to come to a greater understanding of life in the segregated south, but it is also applicable to other times and other contexts. In this sense, literary memoirs are allegorical, with more than one level of meaning.

According to cultural anthropologist James Clifford, like literature, good ethnography is also allegorical, and “A recognition of allegory emphasizes the fact that realistic portraits, to the extent that they are ‘convincing’ or ‘rich,’ are extended metaphors, patterns of associations that point to coherent (theoretical, esthetic, moral) additional meanings” (100). His understanding of ethnography as allegory allows Clifford to interpret a scene from Marjorie Shostak’s book *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* on two different levels. The passage Clifford analyzes recounts Nisa giving birth alone in the bush, but on another level Clifford reads it as “an allegory of (female) humanity” (100). Similarly, *Black Boy* can be read simultaneously as Richard Wright’s memoir, as the story of all “black boys” in the Jim Crow south, and as an allegory of all human oppression. Wright’s ability to universalize his experience makes his life story resonate with his readers. By claiming to convey “the inexpressibly human,” elevating his own experiences from the particular to the universal, he challenges the potential apathy of his readers, reminding them that his story also belongs to all of us.

Skilled creative writers also give us important clues about the shape of their conceptual worlds by repeating symbols or words. The literary memoirist might deliberately grant certain words, phrases, or images a charged significance to emphasize the significance these ideas had in her own life. As a result, whenever one of these words or phrases appears in the text, it is

designed to evoke a certain set of associations about the memoirist's own subjective experience. Because daily living is continually impacted by the way, on a symbolic level, the social world is structured, the usage of these evocative words and phrases conveys something important about lived experience. Powerful symbols often resonate through an entire culture, influencing politics, specific events, and social behavior in ways that we cannot hope to understand without comprehending the pervasiveness of these symbols.

For example, in memoirs written about life in the segregated American south, repeated references to geographical space reveal a great deal about the southern worldview. Most famously, Eudora Welty waxed poetic about the importance of a "sense of place" in all fiction writing. Harry Crews's shared fascination with geographical space is revealed in the subtitle of his memoir *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*. Sometimes this north/south opposition is accompanied by feelings of southern inferiority, with some southerners feeling marginalized as inhabitants of an intellectual backwoods—H. L. Mencken's "Sahara of the Bozart."<sup>2</sup> William Howarth claims that when people "speak of going *up* north and *down* south," they are often implying a "vertical scale of values" (4–5). Intellectual curiosity and a repugnance for institutionalized racism led Willie Morris to repudiate the south, and upon graduation from college, to head *North Toward Home*, as the title of his memoir reveals.

Regardless of the context, the contrast between north and south, and the symbolic significance of living "down south," imply a feeling of difference in southern memoirs. Sometimes these feelings take the form of regional pride; sometimes they take the shape of inferiority complexes. Whenever the north is mentioned in Jim Crow memoirs, it is accompanied by a complex set of sometimes contradictory associations. It represents freedom (both political and intellectual) to some, and tyranny to others. It is both culturally enlightened and morally bankrupt. It is everything the south is not, for good or bad. It is the yardstick that the south must measure itself by.

References to segregated spaces are also of great significance in Jim Crow memoirs. For obvious reasons particularly pervasive in African-American autobiography, these allusions are present in white memoirs as well. References to separate facilities for African-American and white southerners demonstrate not only how the nation was divided between north and south, but how the south was divided against itself. In her first memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou captures the impact of segregated spaces on her psyche by comparing herself to a "caged bird." The pervasive imagery of forbidden geographic spaces where black southerners cannot enter also highlights the anxiety southerners felt about the simultaneous distance and

propinquity of whites and blacks. Interaction between races was necessary, often mutually desirable, but in some contexts taboo. Lillian Smith shows that the metaphor of racial segregation was so pervasive that it could be used in other contexts as well. All southerners learned, Smith claims, that “parts of your body are segregated areas which you must stay away from and keep others away from. These areas you touch only when necessary. In other words, you cannot associate freely with them any more than you can associate freely with colored children” (87).

The student of history is better able to re-feel the past experiences of Smith or any other historical agent if the student can draw on her own emotions and feelings to help her. Because literary memoirs are universal as well as particular, the historian cannot help but find aspects of the lives chronicled that resonate with her own, and she can draw on those similarities to achieve a greater historical understanding. A literary memoir is a particularly valuable historical resource, because unlike the novel, it is based in fact and refers to a real past rather than to a fictional world. Because of this, the memoir can give us facts, which are literally verifiable, as well as insights into the way the historical reality it recounts was structured. Novels like the works of Dickens might give us revealing glimpses of what life was like during the historical period they are set in, but they are not intended to be literally verifiable. Despite the myriad ways that memoirs might stretch, evade, or incorrectly portray the truth, they are grounded in real people, places, and things, and thus are better suited to tell us “what really happened” than fictional texts.

Though rooted in fact, literary memoirs are, however, also free to employ the techniques of fiction. Because literary memoirists are skilled writers, they are experienced at creating fictional worlds, and rely on this when describing the real world. Because she literally writes the fictional world into being, an author of a fictional text has a god-like relationship to the text. The talented creative writer knows how to describe a fictional world in all its complexity: to capture the interpersonal relationships between characters that inhabit that world, and to describe vividly what that fictional world looks like, sounds like, and smells like. Creative writers bring this same set of skills with them when they turn to autobiography, and the result is often a description of the real world that is as detailed and revealing as that found in a finely crafted novel.

When they write autobiography, literary memoirists essentially transform themselves into characters, and then describe the world as it exists from their point of view. This is not something historians can do, for the historian must write a narrative describing a world that simply does not exist from her personal point of view. Historians write about vanished worlds. Since historians are not characters in the historical worlds they describe, they cannot be

expected to have the same kinds of insights as an inhabitant of that world. Historians cannot capture the immediacy of past experience the way a literary memoirist can. They write about fixed but arbitrary chronological divisions. Historians pick beginning and ending dates when they write histories of an era, and these dates are imbued with a great historical significance—often the beginning or ending of a war, the election of a political leader, or the start or close of economic catastrophe or unusual prosperity. Real life does not have this same kind of structure. The literary memoirist is frequently able to capture a sense of the chance, the possibility, and the arbitrariness of life in a way that a historian cannot. This is so because the memoirist is familiar with the uncertainty she felt at various stages in her life and at various points in history, while the historian always knew the outcome.

The creative writer's use of symbols, literary language, irony, metaphors, and allegory enables her more accurately to describe how a complex historical reality looked, smelled, sounded, and felt. The student of autobiography should capitalize on these evocative sense impressions to re-feel more effectively a complicated historical moment, and come to a deeper historical understanding of a complex, perspectival historical reality.

## NOTES

1. Popkin here is quoting G. Kitson Clark (67).
2. In a biting critique of southern culture, Mencken presents the region as a wasteland for the "beaux arts."

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