

Paul John Eakin
Department of English
Indiana University

Narrative, Self, and the Future of Autobiography

Critics persist in announcing the death of the self and the end of autobiography, yet the genre continues to flourish- -and we attend conferences like this one¹. What we face in the case of autobiography is the disjunction between theory and experience: although we maintain certain skeptical postures about the nature of the self and the referential possibilities of language, we continue nevertheless to affirm in patently self-referential texts the existence of the identities by which we live². Shifting from skepticism about the whole generic project of autobiography, I want to focus more specifically on doubts and resistances to the two leading features of autobiographical discourse, narrative and the self. In the discussion that follows, I will treat self and narrative together, for I see them as intimately, indeed inextricably, linked. I concur with Oliver Sacks when he proposes narrative as the defining constituent of selfhood:

We have, each of us – he writes – a life-story, an inner narrative- -whose continuity, whose sense, is our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a „narrative”, and that this narrative is, our identities (110)³.

I want to begin by identifying the motives for resistance to self and narrative in autobiography. Then, in order to investigate the persistence of self and narrative as the key, mutually-interdependent elements that structure autobiographical discourse, I want to look at

two recent texts by „resisting” autobiographers. In the first of these, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, published in 1986, British historian Carolyn Kay Steedman writes

about lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretative devices of the culture don't quite work (5).

In order to represent the hitherto silenced subjectivity of workingclass women, she creates new versions of self and narrative. The second text, *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language*, published in 1989, is by Eva Hoffman, a Polish-American literary critic whose transcultural journey from Cracow to Vancouver to New York plunges her into a radical experience of deracination. Hoffman's quest for assimilation leads her to deconstruct received models of self and narrative, yet she is drawn eventually to embrace them once more in a chastened, provisional way. In both cases these autobiographers are obliged to confront the nature of self and narrative because of the difficulties each encounters in representing her story. Hoffman renews a traditional form of life-writing, while Steedman explores a new one: both demonstrate the vitality of autobiography today.

I.

Before we look at Steedman and Hoffman, I want to review the kinds of reservations that are characteristically advanced about the place of self and narrative in autobiography. At a time when **self** as a term has achieved new respectability in such fields as psychology, psychoanalysis, and anthropology⁴, its place in autobiography studies remains controversial, with many preferring to use **subject** and **subject-position** in place of the more traditional „s”-word. This shift in usage was initially motivated by critics' desire to dissociate themselves from oldfashioned, essentialist notions of selfhood. Now it also signals a feminist sensitivity to the issue of gender: the isolate, individualist, masculine self is out; the relational self or subject, held to be more consonant with the reality of feminine experience, is in. In addition, the issue of class contributes to the clouded reputation

of the concept of self, for prominent features of bourgeois culture (privacy, domesticity, individualism, and so forth⁵) have promoted selfhood as a value, and historians of autobiography have frequently interpreted the rise of autobiography as a distinctly bourgeois phenomenon⁶. Are the self, and autobiography along with it, to be dismissed as decadent products of late capitalism? Such a question is too large to be answered here today, but I can at least challenge the easy assumptions about the relation between autobiography on the one hand and factors of gender and class on the other. We ought to stop identifying the genre as the exclusive province of a bourgeois, masculinist individualism. Whether or not such an account accurately describes autobiography in the past, it certainly does not do justice to the complex reality of self-life-writing today.

As to resistance to narrative in autobiography, the fundamental issue has been whether narrative adequately represents the experience of subjectivity. A number of years ago chronological narrative in autobiography was attacked as a grossly oversimplified model of the life of subjectivity, and Philippe Lejeune, John Sturrock, and others championed a free-associationist model of life-writing, citing Michel Leiris's multi-volume autobiography as premier example⁷. More recently, feminists have opposed linear narrative as a distinctly masculine paradigm, and have advocated alternative forms- -the diary and the confession- -to represent the supposedly fragmentary, nonlinear quality of female subjectivity⁸. Feminist opposition to narrative in autobiography, moreover, obliges us to ask whether narrative itself is gendered, distinguishing this issue from an equally interesting one concerning narratives of gender, characteristic life stories that a culture generates in constructing models of gender identity. When I observe women like Carolyn Steedman and Eva Hoffman turning to narrative to make sense out of their lives, I resist feminist arguments that seek to identify narrative as a characteristically masculine generic signature in autobiography⁹.

II. Carolyn Kay Steedman's „Landscape for a Good Woman”

The dual focus of Carolyn Steedman's title, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*, poses the issue of genre she will work to unfold. In order to tell her mother's story and her own, she creates a new hybrid form of life-writing, which is neither autobiography nor biography but an amalgam of both- -a form, moreover, that is, by turns, both expository and narrative. I will call the resulting story a **relational life**. The term describes the story of a relational model of identity, developed collaboratively with others, often family members. In such narratives **the story of the story** plays a determining role. The relational life needs to be distinguished from the traditional memoir, in which the story of the autobiographical self is subordinated to the project of presenting the story of some other of whom the self serves as privileged witness. In the relational life, by contrast, the sense of the self as constructed by the story told **of** and **by** someone else is paramount¹⁰ Thus Steedman believes that her mother's self and story are the key to her own. „Children are always episodes in someone else's narrative”, she affirms, „not their own people, but rather brought into being for particular purposes” (122). In this way, the familiar and perfunctory **incipit** of so many autobiographies, „I was born...”, acquires a new and signal importance, for Steedman argues that her dawning realization of the truth about her birth- -that she was neither a wanted nor a legitimate child - - determined the very structure of her personality. Accordingly, in order to tell her own story, she must reconstruct her mother's story, and her own developing knowledge of it as a child.

Steedman believes that her workingclass mother attempted to realize her dreams of rising in the world through the conception of children. Steedman's father had abandoned the wife and children of his first marriage, but he never married Steedman's mother. Steedman surmises that her mother hoped the birth of her children would act as a lever on the father to get him to marry her, and she sees this hope as coloring the first four years of her own life from her birth to that of her sister. At this point, however, the mother seems to

have realized that her strategy had failed, and Steedman relates that from that point on her mother made her feel that her very existence- -and her sister's- -was to blame for the failure of the mother's life: „'If it wasn't for you two', my mother told us, 'I could be off somewhere else'” (39). The reason for Steedman's decision to cast her autobiography in the form of the relational life becomes increasingly clear: she is making a case that the key events of her mother's life and personality shaped the design of her own in the most direct and lasting fashion.

Steedman argues, moreover, that this process of identity formation is understood **by children themselves** as operating in a field of economic forces, in which selves function as commodities, „items of expenditure, investments, ... objects of exchange” (69): you come to know that you are not quite yourself, but someone else: someone else has paid the price for you, and you have to pay it back (105). As this observation suggests, there is a distinctly deterministic strain in her conception of relational identity: „She made me believe that I was her” (141). In writing *Landscape for a Good Woman*, however, she affirms the possibility of self-determination, of appropriating her workingclass story from the dominant culture's controlling designs by interpreting it herself. Steedman's story, and others like it, should teach us that we have too readily accepted the work of certain great autobiographers, such as Augustine and Rousseau, as constituting tradition-defining norms against which all autobiographical practice is to be measured. The prominence of the relational life in contemporary autobiography suggests that the characteristic life story is not that of an isolate self but rather of an individual in relation to others, notably to family and to a larger community of some kind. The history of autobiography needs to be rewritten accordingly.

III. Eva Hoffman's „Lost in Translation”

In *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language*, Eva Hoffman attempts to bridge the gap between her adult, theoretical understanding of the self as contingent, constructed by culture, on the one

hand, and her desire on the other to possess an invariant core self, a permanent structure of identity revealed to her as a child in radiant, visionary experiences of plenitude. She begins by recording her childhood possession of a core self and its subsequent loss; by the time she has finished, however, her core self has been restored, regenerated by the redemptive power of the autobiographical act.

„Paradise”, the first section of *Lost in Translation*, offers a textbook portrait of the idealized unitary self that theorists now recognize as the hallmark of old-style „classical autobiography”¹¹. Hoffman adopts this traditional, idealizing mode quite deliberately, featuring at the center of her charming memories of childhood happiness in Cracow visionary moments of presence in which the self achieves an ecstatic knowledge of its own participation in being¹². In one such moment, playing under a spreading chestnut tree in a park in Cracow (the **Planty**), the child stumbles „into the very center of plenitude”:

everything pulsates and shimmers as if it were coursing with the blood of life. [...] I am in the center of a harmonious, vibrating transparency. For that moment, I know everything there is to know (42).

This glowing, Romantic epiphany confirms the child’s sense that she possessed a core self during the years she spent in Poland.

„Exiles”, the second section of Hoffman’s autobiography, records her identity-shattering sense of her geographical, psychological, and especially linguistic displacement when her family emigrates to Canada. Arrived in Vancouver, the immigrant teenager discovers that she is „not filled with language anymore” and suffers the painful corollary, „that, in this dark and empty state, I don’t really exist” (108). She instinctively recognizes that language is the foundation of identity and so, fleeing „the false persona [she is] being stuffed into” (119), she turns to language, to diary, only to find herself displaced once more, for Polish „is becoming a dead language ... of the untranslatable past” (120), while English, she recognizes, „is not the language of the self”: „I am unable to use the word ’I’ ” (121)¹³.

How is Hoffman to tell the story of such a troubled identity? The adult autobiographer, looking back, tests the available models for such a life story, only to find them wanting. The narrative of

nostalgia, by Vladimir Nabokov, Milan Kundera, and Czesław Miłosz, serves well enough to recreate her idyllic childhood in Cracow, but that is as far as it can take her. For Hoffman, „betwixt and between” (116), it is the narrative of assimilation that seems most relevant to her own immigrant experience, and she cites as examples the autobiographies of Alfred Kazin, Norman Podhoretz, and especially Mary Antin, whose circumstances in some ways so closely resemble her own. Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912), however, proves inapplicable to Hoffman’s experience, for the model of American identity it celebrates is obsolete. „The America of [Antin’s] time gave her certain categories within which to see herself”, she writes, but it was, comparatively speaking, a unified culture with „a central ethos”. Eighty years later, the old models of self and life story are finished, and Hoffman is left to confront „a culture that splinters, fragments, and re-forms itself as if it were a jigsaw puzzle dancing in a quantum space”. The implied model of the self is „a mosaic ... of fragments” (164).

This experience of fragmentation, of divided identity, continues in Part III of the autobiography, „The New World”, in which Hoffman records her struggle to find self and home in American culture, first as an undergraduate at Rice University in Texas, then as a graduate student in English at Harvard, and finally as a literary critic in New York. Interestingly, despite her repudiation of Mary Antin, she is inevitably, like her, the creature of transcultural circumstance, the „person trying to get across” (216), but she attempts to assimilate on her own terms, through language. Hoffman proposes translation as an alternative to the loss of core identity that she regards as a corollary to assimilation:

I have to translate myself. But if I’m to achieve this without becoming assimilated- -that is, absorbed - - by my new world, the translation has to be careful (211).

The negotiation of identity Hoffman seeks to achieve through this act of translation couldn’t be trickier, however, for although she postulates that language is the very foundation of reality, she ultimately

aspires to a use of language that would, paradoxically, return her to the prelinguistic realm of childhood plenitude:

When I write, [...] I want to re-create, from the discrete particles of words, that wholeness of a childhood language that had no words (217).

For Hoffman, then, language accomplishes the trajectory of assimilation, of moving forward into her new, adopted culture, by moving in reverse, toward childhood, first in the working through of her psychoanalysis and then in the writing of her autobiography. Hoffman's assessment of this process of „translating backward” (271) to childhood, however, is clearly ambivalent. On the one hand, she asserts that the „gap” between her Polish-language and her English-language selves can never be closed, acknowledging, in a deterministic vein, the extent to which her self has been constructed or „written” by culture- „I know to what extent I'm a script” (275). Yet, on the other hand, she affirms the possibility of self-determination of the self in autobiography: as she writes, somehow- -again, paradoxically- -she **can** „triangulate” to a prelinguistic place of „silence”, to an „unassimilable part of myself”, a „white plenitude” or substrate of the personality „before the Babel of our multiple selves is constructed”, a place that exists outside culture (275–76).

In the final passage of the narrative Hoffman goes as far toward assimilation as the autobiographical process can take her: the Americanized adult, standing in a garden in Cambridge, Massachusetts, experiences once more the radiant, identity-conferring plenitude she had known as a child in Cracow. As she learns like some new Eve the names of the flowers- -, „azalea, hyacinth, forsythia, delphinium”- -she can say for the first time: „The language of this is sufficient. I am here now” (280). To her identity-destroying experience of deracination and fragmentation, Hoffman opposes writing the self in this text, discovering at the last a language sufficient to self-expression. Yet it is clear that it is not enough for Hoffman to have a self; part of the nature of selfhood, she believes, is the possession of a deep, centered self, **the** self.

IV.

Is there a future for autobiography? These two recent examples of life-writing by Carolyn Steedman and Eva Hoffman suggest that there is. It is certainly true that whenever theorists have attempted to define autobiography, the genre begins to resemble one of those unstable elements that physicists keep discovering - - they lead a shadowy half-life and then they vanish. William Spengemann asserted in 1980 that autobiography had completed its evolution as a form by the middle of the nineteenth century, and in 1984 Paul Jay argued that autobiographical narrative would spin off centrifugally as the force field of the core, centered self lost its power. What neither Spengemann nor Jay took into account is the resistance of individual life-writers to the ostensible inevitability of these cultural tendencies. Seeking a home in language for her displaced self, Eva Hoffman takes a familiar form, the immigrant story of assimilation, and makes it new, while Carolyn Steedman, shunning the constraint of familiar forms, invents a new, hybrid form, the relational life, to fit the story she seeks to tell of her relational sense of self. In both cases we observe the struggle of the individual to reconcile the received categories of representation and models of identity with the psychological reality of her own experience of subjectivity. Nearly twenty years ago, at the very beginning of the modern study of autobiography, Elizabeth Bruss predicted that

autobiography could simply become obsolete if its defining features, such as individual identity, cease to be important for a particular culture (*Acts* 15).

As the work of Steedman and Hoffman- -and indeed our very presence here today- -suggests, that time hasn't happened yet.

Notes

¹ E.g., see Nancy K. Miller, who writes in a recent essay on the slippery nature of truth in autobiographical discourse, „If there is anyone more dead than the author of fiction, who classically was said to authorize his text by inscribing his intentions for future generations, it would have to be the author of autobio-

graphy. For of the three defining terms of autobiography- -the self, the life, the writing- -only the writing has survived the poststructuralist and postmodern housecleaning of antiquated beliefs” (10).

² What Kermode had to say about employment in the novel holds true for identity in autobiography today: we still want the old pleasures and satisfactions but we cannot have them in the same way.

³ For a parallel view developed by phenomenologically inspired historians, see my discussion of David Carr, P. Ricoeur, and others in *Touching*, Chapter 5, part 2, „Narrative, Time, and the Constitution of Identity” (190–201).

⁴ See Eakin, *Touching*, 74–77.

⁵ See, e.g., Rybczynski.

⁶ See, e.g., Lejeune, *Autobiographie en France*, 63–66.

⁷ See Eakin, *Fictions* (166–75) and *Touching* (191–93).

⁸ For the diary as a characteristic form of woman’s autobiographical writing, see Jelinek and Juhasz; for the confession, see Heilbrun. For feminist commentary on narrative in autobiography, see, e.g., Friedman, Hooten, Nussbaum, and Smith.

⁹ See Abbott for an important treatment of the question whether narrative is gendered.

¹⁰ For a related view of the significance of the other for the life of the self, see Miller on the familial memoir (14, n. 5).

¹¹ For a useful formulation of the assumptions of classical autobiography, see Bruss, *Eye for I*.

¹² Spiegelberg identifies such moments as characteristic examples of a widespread and normative category of experience in childhood development.

¹³ For a parallel example of identity dislocation registered in an inability to use the first person, see Kingston, 193–94.

Works Cited

- H.P. Abbott, *Writing and Conversion: Conrad’s Modernist Autography*, *Yale Journal of Criticism* 5 (1992), 135–63
- E. Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1976
- —, *Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film*, [in:] *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. J. Olney, Princeton: Princeton U P, 1980, 296–320
- P.J. Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*, Princeton: Princeton U P, 1985
- —, *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography*, Princeton: Princeton U P, 1992

- S.S. Friedman, *Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice*, [in:] *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Sh. Benstock, Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988, 34–62
- C.G. Heilbrun, *Women's Autobiographical Writings: New Forms*, [in:] *Modern Selves: Essays on Modern British and American Autobiography*, ed. Ph. Dodd, London: Frank Cass, 1986, 14–28
- E. Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language*, 1989, London: Mandarin Minerva, 1991
- J. Hooten, *Stories of Herself When Young: Autobiographies of Childhood by Australian Women*, Melbourne: Oxford U P, 1990
- P. Jay, *Being in the Text Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes*, Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1984
- E.C. Jelinek, *Introduction: Women's Autobiography and the Male Tradition*, [in:] *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, ed. E.C. Jelinek, Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1980, 1–20
- S. Juhasz, *Towards a Theory of Form in Feminist Autobiography: Kate Millet's „Flying” and „Sita”, Maxine Hong Kingston's „The Woman Warrior”*, [in:] *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, 221–37
- F. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, New York: Oxford U P, 1968
- M.H. Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, 1976, New York: Random, 1977
- Ph. Lejeune, *L'Autobiographie en France*, Paris: A. Colin, 1971
- N.K. Miller, *Facts, Pacts, Acts*, Profession 92 (Modern Language Association, 1992), 10–14
- F.A. Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England*, Baltimore: J. Hopkins U P, 1989
- W. Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea*, New York: Viking, 1986
- O. Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*, 1985, New York: Harper, 1987
- S. Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representations*, Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1987
- W.C. Speengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre*, New Haven: Yale U P, 1980
- H. Spiegelberg, *On the „I-am-me” Experience in Childhood and Adolescence*, *Psychologia: An International Journal of Psychology in the Orient* 4 (1961): 135–46
- C.K. Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*, 1986, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers U P, 1987