CHAPTER ONE

“Who are we? where are we?”
Self and Place in Dialogue

I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one,—that my body might,—but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?

Henry David Thoreau

Where Are We?: Locating the Study of Autobiography

Autobiography, memoir, personal narrative, self-life writing: the labels multiply and the distinctions blur as more, and more various, lives find literary expression. In autobiographical writing the literary subject is a paradox, a double entendre of seeing and being. It is the self-in-process, the “I” arranging its past to suit an ever-shifting present, the retrospective imposition of order and an arc of meaning onto lived experience; it is the dizzying intersection of multiple selves and multiple genres. At once open to divergent perspectives and immune to prescriptive definition, autobiography beguiles us with its assumptions and promises, invites us to confront its contradictions, and eludes our best attempts to declare, finally, that here is the self made text. Inescapably, autobiographical subjects are also the subjects of history, and the study of autobiography, “by its own definition a referential art, necessarily involves the study of culture” (Eakin 11). The dance of self and culture that is the heart of this “referential art” courts a
wide array of interests and ideologies as it spins out lives to be read and scholarly attempts to read them systematically. Whether as an expression of the individual or as a literature that reflects and constitutes culture, autobiography participates in wider conversations about the purpose and potential of human endeavors. Wearing both public and private faces, autobiographers speak in one breath to our beliefs in equality and in singularity, to our common humanity and to our unmistakable individuality.

Such lively ambiguity has lead to renewed interest in autobiography and autobiography studies, prompting Albert Stone to remark that

one of the notable cultural developments in recent decades is the remarkable flowering of American autobiography, not only as a major mode of literary self-expression, but also as a widely popular form of reading and an important new field for scholars and critics. (1)

As Stone indicates, autobiography has only recently received sustained critical attention, and the academic discourse has long failed to reflect the popularity of the genre. The reasons for the relative indifference of scholars to autobiography studies range from elitism to generic bewilderment. Paul John Eakin attributes much of autobiography’s status “as a kind of poor relation” to its resistance to “any single, unifying definition” (3, 16). But Eakin also suggests that the relatively recent appearance of autobiography “in our departments of language and literature […] may be just as well, for our thinking about this late arrival stands a chance of escaping some of the shortcomings of our traditional conception of American literature as a whole” (4). Eakin alludes to the ongoing questioning of what counts in American literature, what defines “literariness,” and who gains entry to the carefully guarded library of canonical masterworks. One irony of recent academic and literary “discoveries” of autobiography is that the same attributes which spawned earlier critical dismissals now feed the passion with which contemporary scholars attend to autobiography studies. The same challenges of pluralism and generic indeterminacy which kept autobiography out of serious conversations about literature now provide the starting points for many of the most important discussions of autobiographical writing. Even works which have long held central places in American literary studies—like Walden and “Song of Myself”—are being rediscovered and reread as autobiography (Eakin 3).

As a descriptive term, “American autobiography” encompasses an uncommonly rich and diverse body of works, and the increased interest in this
corpus has expanded the canon to include forms and faces too long neglected. Perhaps it is the case, as Robert Sayre insists, that “autobiographies, in all their bewildering number and variety, offer the student in American studies a broader and more direct contact with American experience than any other kind of writing” (11). Sayre’s comments reflect a growing enthusiasm for the potential of autobiography studies even as they reinforce some of its most foundational assumptions. His assessment is telling both for its conception of autobiography as a means of “direct contact” with real experience, and for its emphasis on the relationship between American literature and autobiography. For many commentators, autobiography and American literature are uniquely intertwined, and autobiography is perceived as a genre particularly suited to American writers and the American experience. According to this perspective, autobiography is a democratic, individualistic, and capitalistic enterprise attuned to the meritocratic potential of American society. It is a form to match the most cherished versions of the American Dream of individual opportunity.

Responding to this view in his introduction to Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*, Kenneth Silverman writes that “the *Autobiography* owes much of its vast fame to the fact that in tracing his development Franklin gave classic expression to three powerful ingredients of the American Dream: the ideals of material success, moral regeneration, and of social progress” (ix). Silverman also notes that it is not necessary to have read the book to know something of Franklin’s rise to riches and fame. Franklin’s *Autobiography* has achieved such archetypal status that one might think of Silverman’s comment as a broad description of the aspirations of all American autobiography. Of course, very few lives or texts can approach the standards set by Franklin, and as the narrative of an exemplary life, Franklin’s autobiography puts forth an image of American success that is, for most, unattainable if not unthinkable. For D.H. Lawrence, it is equally undesirable:

> The ideal self! Oh, but I have a strange and fugitive self shut out and howling like a wolf or a coyote under the ideal windows. […]
>
> The perfectibility of man, dear God! When every man as long as he remains alive is in himself a multitude of conflicting men. Which of these do you choose to perfect, at the expense of every other?
>
> Old Daddy Franklin will tell you. He’ll rig him up for you, the pattern American. Oh, Franklin was the first downright American. (20)
The trouble lies in our tendency to conflate the archetype with the “American experience,” all the while neglecting the “bewildering number and variety” of lives that Sayre rightly emphasizes. We fortify the idealized self, dressing our “ideal windows” with bars to keep out the conflicting multitudes, seeking safe-as-houses perfection in what Lawrence calls “the dummy American.” Or, to borrow Franklin’s metaphor, we grind the “speckled Ax” into oblivion rather than accept its valuable discolorations and idiosyncrasies (Franklin 99). This tendency, and the perception that autobiography should reflect an ideal of Americanness, has significantly impacted the production, reception, and study of autobiography in the United States. Yet insofar as American autobiography lays claim to the essential attributes of the American Dream, it participates in an experience of Americanness that is perhaps less broad, less welcoming and representative, than the “bewildering number and variety” of American autobiographies might lead us to believe.

The recent “flowering” of American autobiography scholarship represents a growing dissatisfaction with the limitations of reading American autobiography through the increasingly suspect lens of the American Dream. The resulting push to identify a literature that reflects the depth and complexity of American experience has led to both taxonomic and theoretical innovations in autobiography studies. As autobiography grows in popularity it remains a notoriously difficult genre to define, and the field of autobiography criticism continues to be contested terrain. Current critical trends take advantage of the popularity of life writing to question the status of and assumptions surrounding autobiography, and many critics, like Sayre and Philippe Lejeune, are returning to their earlier analyses with new eyes and broadened perspectives on the possibilities of the genre. In revisiting the definition of autobiography from his foundational study, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Lejeune addresses both the “oblig[ation] to confront the problem of definition” and the subjective limitations of such attempts to cut “the Gordian knot” of genre study (*On Autobiography* 121). By his own admission, his 1973 definition has a “dogmatic appearance”:

> Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality. (4, 120)

In fleshing out this definition, Lejeune identifies four criteria required of true autobiography: form (prose narrative), subject (individual life), situation of author (named, real person identical to narrator), and position of narrator
This positivist approach quickly eliminates such unruly forms as journals and diaries, collaborations, autobiographical novels or poems, and anonymously authored texts in favor of the fully realized and recognizably authored/authorized life. Over time Lejeune acquired a more catholic taste, warming to the mongrel forms with their occasionally unsavory practitioners that comprised the “real trash!” that is autobiography’s treasure (Moi 257–58). As his interests evolved so did his desire for a more responsive and flexible approach to the literature, one that would serve him well as he rummaged through the precious refuse of the commonplace. Thus, in his 1982 self-analysis, “The Autobiographical Pact (bis),” Lejeune reconfigures the definition seeker as one embedded in rather than speculating on his subject of study:

By his gesture [of definition], the seeker achieves the construction of an object that was in reality only one of the possible objects to construct. His problem is less to outline limits than to identify a center. Also it is necessary that he keep in mind that with another choice of center the limits would be displaced. He “brings into focus” his perception of the literary field by adjusting it according to a particular organizing element, with the risks that this includes […]. (121)

Certainly, we hear in this description of the critic a description of the autobiographer as well. Their task of imposing or discovering coherence within their field of study is similar, and for both there is a powerful temptation to control meaning by establishing a kind of objective, anthropological distance on their subject. The power of Lejeune’s subjective approach lies in its emphasis on a provisional center which implicitly acknowledges other intersecting, overlapping, or conflicting interests. Instead of monoliths and metanarratives, we encounter layers of storied lives emerging and receding according to the shifting focus of the seeker. Of course, the vulnerability and indeterminacy of such situated perspectives can be difficult to embrace. In confronting the pitfalls of generic ambiguity and the sacrifice of control, however, we stand to discover a vastly enriched territory as we move away from a dogmatic insistence on Truth toward an awareness of subjective interests.

Every autobiography is a rich tangle of recollecting, documenting, ordering, and storying. Responding to these myriad threads requires a degree of openness, and for the present study Lejeune’s revised definition is far more suitable than his earlier insistence on the “retrospective,” “real,” (male)
“individual.” Routinely, autobiography scholars are abandoning outmoded distinctions between autobiographical fact and fictional narrative in their attempts at genre definition, preferring the “adjectival to the nominal—autobiographical to autobiography” (Taylor xv). Jay Parini, editor of The Norton Anthology of American Autobiography, reminds us that “fiction, as it were, means ‘shaping,’ from the Latin fictio […] The autobiographer cancels in order to clarify, shaping experience to make it readable, using techniques normally found in fiction” (12). The critic must respond to this “shaping” in kind, molding her responses to the life formed by the text. At one extreme, James Olney’s selection of Richard Wright, Paul Valéry, and W.B. Yeats to illustrate his theoretical position is intended to “suggest the impossibility of making any prescriptive definition for autobiography or placing any generic limitations on it at all” (“Some Versions” 237). In Olney’s view, autobiographical acts are far more revealing and reliable than autobiographical facts, and almost any text can be read autobiographically. In a related if less libertine vein, Georges Gusdorf writes that “every autobiography is a work of art and at the same time a work of enlightenmennt; it does not show us the individual seen from outside in his visible actions but the person in his inner privacy, not as he was, not as he is, but as he believes and wishes himself to be and to have been” (45). These oscillations between prescriptive definition and generic meaninglessness threaten to make autobiography studies an impossibly unstable field, unless we assume something like Lejeune’s revised approach. In this way, generic limits and theoretical positions are determined reciprocally, and the tensions between life as record and life as story are foregrounded. This is especially pertinent when reading autobiographical narratives in which the author is explicitly concerned with autobiography’s theoretical and generic status. Regardless of the perspective of the autobiographer, critical attention to the mediations between the external and the internal, past event and present interpretation, enables a multifaceted approach to many of the most confounding questions of generic definition: How do we approach a genre that relies heavily on often tenuous assumptions about self-disclosure, truth, historicity, and nonfiction? How do we discuss a literature that seems to be suspicious of the literary? What counts as autobiography, who is writing it, and why should we read it?

Both in choosing a central focus for reading autobiographies and in identifying “organizing elements” in particular works, I am attempting to define limits which will remain open to revision by the works themselves. In this sense, my analysis joins with an ongoing effort to open up the field of autobi-
ography studies to multiple interests and perspectives. Indeed, this idea of an organizing center with mutable limits—a field of vision representative of a set of choices rather than truths—is central to the discussion that follows. Still, while the horizons of autobiography studies are expanding, many of the assumptions that inform more traditional definitions of autobiography still hold sway. Challenging those assumptions is vital work that promises to enrich our experiences of reading, writing about, and teaching autobiographical literature. This is not to say that there is nothing valuable or instructive in conceiving of autobiography as the solitary individual’s retrospective account of the real events of his life. But as a normative and programmatic description, it enforces a debilitating blindness that is simply insupportable in the presence of so many contrapuntal voices and lives.

Ideals of transparency and autobiographical pacts demanding unity between authors, narrators, and protagonists are giving way to generic transgressions and narrative innovations, as well as theoretical perspectives that privilege instability and partiality over control and certitude. This movement continues to generate more adaptable and inclusive reading strategies, and in this respect the “flowering” of literary self-expression and the resulting critical attention has had a liberatory effect. Assessing the influence of these shifts, the editors of Writing Lives: American Biography and Autobiography argue that dividing lines of form and genre (biography, autobiography, fiction) have become increasingly blurred and untenable: “writing lives”—of the self or of others—has become a hybrid and porous genre, yielding a rich fluidity of forms. The self, however mediated, adopts a kaleidoscopic multiplicity of (dis)guises and strategies of self-representation. (Bak and Krabbendam 1)

There is a celebratory quality to this description of “kaleidoscopic multiplicity,” and the value of such a broadened approach is undeniable. One need only consider the formal innovations and identity questioning present in works like Mary McCarthy’s Memories of a Catholic Girlhood, Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera, or Maxine Hong Kingston’s Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts to recognize that rigid generic walls are built to crumble. A growing number of autobiographers like those mentioned above are committed to questioning received histories and identities, and through their self-narratives they comment on the inadequacy of traditional models of autobiography and the autobiographical self. For many contemporary autobiographers, finding voice and form to express the self requires a departure from the narrowly circumscribed territory of classical American
autobiography. Take Wallace Stegner, a major contributor to the growth of western American regional literature and for some a troublingly canonical and even “Victorian” figure in American letters. Stegner’s literary career reflects the complex evolution of culture and literature beyond the hundredth meridian. Even in his most nostalgic moments, Stegner chafes against the dominant archetypes of western American landscape and identity; his novels, essays, literary histories, and personal narratives illustrate his belief that creating a form to reflect both place and self often demands experimentation. In his memoir, *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier*, Stegner challenges formal distinctions in an attempt to render a richer literary experience of the self in place and history. As the subtitle suggests, *Wolf Willow* is the kind of hybrid text which contemporary critics of autobiography find particularly provocative. Consider Stegner’s transitional paragraph as he moves from personal history to a fictional narrative of range life, all within the text of *Wolf Willow*:

> If we want to know what it was like on the Whitemud River range during the winter when the hopes of a cattle empire died, we had better see it through the eyes of some tenderfoot, perhaps someone fresh from the old country, a boy without the wonder rubbed off him and with something to prove about himself. If in inventing this individual I put into him a little of Corky Jones, and some of the boy Rusty whose mouth organ used to sweeten the dusty summer shade of the Lazy-S bunkhouse, let it be admitted that I have also put into him something of myself, the me who sat on a corral bar wetting with spit my smarting skinned places, and wishing I was as tough as Spot Orullian. (124)

Stegner’s self-conscious genre-blending foregrounds the revisionist and constructed nature of the autobiographical self and troubles the boundaries between fiction and history. By inserting a novella into his personal and regional history, he draws our attention to the tenuous distinctions that allow us to differentiate between self-description and self-creation. His nostalgic vision of the passage to manhood on a waning frontier places us in familiar territory and establishes clear and clichéd expectations. At the same time, the intersection of formal innovation and western romance creates the kind of “porous” and “blurred” text that both reproduces and challenges traditional expectations for autobiography. *Wolf Willow* puts forth progressive revisionist history as well as reactionary western regionalism, and it offers us strategies for reading against the grain of frontier history while relying on many of that history’s most deeply held myths to construct identity.