

Carolyn Steedman  
from "History and Autobiography: Different Pasts "

*The following is an excerpt of a chapter in Steedman's 1992 book, Past Tenses. Steedman investigates the differences between historical writing and autobiographical writing using a book she wrote, Landscape for a Good Woman, which is a series of life sketches. This excerpt is significant because she expresses a definite preference for how her work should be perceived: as historical, not autobiographical. Her reasoning is equally important to her conclusion, since the reasoning contains much of the delineation between these two similar types of writing.*

All of that was prolegomenon: a way of talking about the real problem, which I believe to be history itself, and here and now and particularly, the relationship of history to autobiography. The standard histories of autobiography that we possess describe a development over the last five hundred years, of a specifically historical consciousness. It is this consciousness that has provided the framework for the emergence of the autobiographical form. In many literary and critical accounts of the *genre*, it is Goethe in particular, in *Dichtung und Wahrheit* who first formalised the notion of self-formation as the result of an interplay of the self and the world around the self. This recognition, of the historical dimension of all human reality, which was made about 1800 and which followed on a century or two of various autobiographical endeavours, meant that autobiography itself assumed a significant cultural function, within the lineaments of which we still operate. In accounts like these, which I am summarising in a somewhat breathtaking fashion, autobiography is to be distinguished from such *genre* as memoir and reminiscence by the status and function of experience within it. In the form of memoir for instance, it is a series of external factors that is presented as dictating the narrative course. These factors or events may be translated into inner experience, but that inner experience - lived and felt experience - is not its focus, as it is in autobiography.

And yet that history - that historical dimension of all human reality, that historical consciousness, historicity - is a problem for the daily telling of life stories. History is an irrelevance in common understanding, though historical explanation is my mode of thinking and public presentation, and perhaps of being. I say to students, to friends: 'a hundred years ago, it wasn't like that'; and I watch the shadow of polite boredom pass over their face. Or licensed for egotism, by this Conference, by this week-end, I could ask: Why do I care? Why do I want to tell my story in this particular way? And especially, why do I insist on telling a story within a historical framework, when many people, whom I respect and admire, think that I could manage just as well without? What am I hiding through my use of history? Or (to cut the self-abnegation) what am I finding?

[There are several reasons for saying that a] book does not constitute history. One is to do with its central device, which is to claim that the life of many people in this society is not explained by the dominant forms that give expression to lived experience: novels, other literature, film, history (though we should remember the eight-year-old, telling her story with the device of the princess's farthingale, to remind ourselves of what people manage, in the cracks in between, using someone else's story). In this way then, the book refuses the path of romance. I think that people's history and oral history are romantic devices (which is not to say that they shouldn't be undertaken), and I refuse to say that my mother's story, or my father's, or mine are perfectly valid stories, existing in their own right, merely hidden from history, now revealed. I won't do this. I think that the central stories are maintained by the marginality of others, but that these marginal stories *will not do* to construct a future by. They will have to be abandoned, for they were made out of multiple poverties and real deprivations. So I have to refuse the label history to what I say about Burnley in the 1920s, about the possible way my mother was brought up, about the more certain descriptions of my own childhood - not because I don't present perfectly true and useful historical information here, but rather because my rhetorical framework would collapse if I said that this was history: the central story.

I don't ever promise that this is really how it was. It is at this point that I remember most clearly an eight-year-old in a crowded post-War South London classroom, writing a life of Queen Victoria in three volumes (three LCC exercise books): the holly pinned to the little princess's collar to make her sit up straight at meal times, the moment of destiny on the stairs when the men in frock coats fell at her feet. This story I write (dip pen, a good round hand: it's 1955) is me, but also, exactly at the same time, not-me. It will go on operating like that, the historical past will, as acceptance and denial.

I know that there is no 'really how it was' at all. But knowing about all the pretensions of the historical enterprise that seeks to conjure the past before our eyes, as it really was, does not stop me from wanting what all of history's readers want: the thing we cannot have - which is past time: the past as it really was'. The child in the 1950s South London classroom knew (she might be able to articulate this, if you asked her the right question) that

the point isn't what happened, nor how the young Victoria sat at the table, nor the hurried drive through the dark to announce ascension to the throne; the point is what the child does with that history.

Later, the child will learn the fine and delightful constraints of this particular literary endeavour - the writing of history. She will learn the pleasures of the plot shaped according to what the documents forbid, or authorise, but which they never contain in themselves. She will learn what massive authority this appeal to the evidence will give her as a story-teller. So when, thirty years on, she denies that what she is doing is writing history, then she is actually relinquishing the arena of her own authority; she does want you to know that. It is also of course, the rhetoric of denial. The way to show this is to proceed by making a contrast, between the telling of life-stories and the telling of history.

Stories come to an end when there is no more to be said, that is to say, when the listener as much as the teller knows that there is no going back on what has already been delivered up, when it's too late to change what has been said, when you can see that this point you have reached, this end, was implicit in the beginning, was there all along. Then, the story ends. In the autobiography, or in the telling of a life story in a pub, there is in operation a simple variant of this narrative rule. The person there, leaning up against the bar, or in another place, writing a book, is the embodiment of the something completed. That end, that finished place, is the human being, a body in time and space, telling a story that brings you (wherever the teller actually ends the story) to this place, here and now; this end. And written autobiography has to end in the figure of the writer (which is why you have to see that the good woman is me). I am talking about the simple physicality of writing, nothing more than that: that the story is told by someone here, now, in time. And of course, I do know that life goes on after the writing, that other tales will be told, and that there is a more permanent ending.

I wonder perhaps, if the historians who proffer a total history, and who dream of delivering up the past as it really was, do not in fact, aspire to the autobiographer's position: the all-seeing eye, the certainty of memory, of having been there, of telling a story that is completed in the figure of he or she who does the telling. But in fact, history writing represents a distinct cognitive process precisely because it is constructed around the understanding that things are not over, that the story isn't finished; that there is no end. In fact, in their day-to-day practice, historians do know and acknowledge that the story they tell isn't over, doesn't have an end. Closures have to be made, in order to finish arguments and books; but the story can't be finished because there is always the possibility that some new piece of evidence will alter the argument and the account. Historians have as their stated objective exhaustiveness (finding out again and again, more and more about some thing, event or person), and they proceed upon the path of refutation by pointing to exceptions and to the possibility of exception. The practice of historical inquiry and historical writing is a recognition of temporariness and impermanence, and in this way is a quite different literary form from that of autobiography, which presents momentarily a completeness, a completeness which lies in the figure of the writer or the teller, in the here and now, saying: that's how it was; or, that's how I believe it to have been.

By drawing these distinctions between the telling or writing of autobiography and the practice of history, I do not want to deny important similarities. History and autobiography work in the same way *as narrative*: they use the same linguistic structure, and they are both fictions, in that they present variations and manipulations of current time to the reader. These similarities are the matter of a different paper, and the topic of a different Conference. Rather, what I want to do instead, by looking at the distinctions between the two, is point to the psychological functions that autobiography and history serve - for the writer and the teller, for the listener and the reader. What I have dwelt on so far, is the *end*, the sense of completeness that a life story allows, whenever it is told, which I have suggested that history does not really allow; and the way in which the historical past, in my example, used by children, might allow them to explore possibility and denial, both at the same time. The telling of a life story is a *confirmation* of that self that stands there telling the story. History, on the other hand, might offer the chance of denying it.

I see now, that in writing *Landscape for a Good Woman*, I was most profoundly pulled between these two understandings, of autobiography and history, though I do not think I could have been clear about this at the time. The autobiographical part of the book happened - or at least - I believe that it happened, which might come to the same thing in the end. And I do not want it to have been that way. I think I hoped that history might rescue me from that bleak knowledge that it would have been better if it hadn't happened that way; hadn't happened at all. I need to pursue the bleakness just a bit further. I used a contrast in the book, between history and case-history. History, I argued, was to do with time. In doing and writing history, I said, the historian goes back through time, finds something, considers it, looks at it this way, and then that: gives it meaning. Then, with these bundles of

meaning, the journey is taken again, forward this time. Things are put in order, and it is the order that they are put in that gives them historical meaning. They are held together in a particular configuration that explains them: a causal configuration. This causal configuration is dependent upon a general understanding of time moving forward. In the book, I contrasted this chronological configuration with a *timeless* configuration, a mode of story-telling in which time does not shape the narrative: that of psychoanalytic case-study. I said that the book was constructed on this model, and that the form of narrative that Freud invented allows the dream, the wish, the fantasy, to be presented as evidence. The case-study is not concerned with what really happened, it is not told in the order of historical time; chronology makes few demands on it.

Now, this seems fine as far as it goes, and indeed, this rhetoric did allow me to present a dream as the shaping device of the book, to present my reconstruction of my mother's desire as evidence; and all the rest of it. It was useful then, this distinction. What I notice now, however, is how very little I actually said about history. I did not, for instance, explore the question of chronology, did not acknowledge that history does not have to be told in that linear fashion; that the historian can move about amid the order of things, present ends before beginnings, write thematically among the dates. But despite this, it still ends up as a story to do with time and causal connection, because that knowledge of chronology and time, that 'basic historicity' is there already, in the head of the reader. I could write it backwards indeed, and you would still know that it happened forward.

Is this what the historiographers mean, when they write of our 'basic historicity', the sense of history, historical consciousness? Historical consciousness then, is only an elaboration of what the eight-year-old knows, about a commonality, a community of cognition. It is for the potentialities of that community offered by historical consciousness I suppose, that I want what I have written to be called history, and not autobiography.

Michel Foucault  
*from "Self Writing"*

*In this piece, Foucault performs a historical analysis of the functions of writing about the self, specifically concentrating on the Greco-Roman period. The underlying hope is that by conducting an historical analysis of the changes in the ways of writing about the self, we will understand this genre more today, and understand ourselves better.*

The *Vita Antonii* of Athanasius presents the written notation of actions and thoughts as an indispensable element of the ascetic life. "Let this observation be a safeguard against sinning: let us each note and write down our actions and impulses of the soul as though we were to report them to each other; and you may rest assured that from utter shame of becoming known we shall stop sinning and entertaining sinful thoughts altogether. Who, having sinned, would not choose to lie, hoping to escape detection? Just as we would not give ourselves to lust within sight of each other, so if we were to write down our thoughts as if telling them to each other, we shall so much the more guard ourselves against foul thoughts for shame of being known. Now, then, let the written account stand for the eyes of our fellow ascetics, so that blushing at writing the same as if we were actually seen, we may never ponder evil. Molding ourselves in this way, we shall be able to bring our body into subjection, to please the Lord and to trample under foot the machinations of the Enemy." Here, writing about oneself appears clearly in its relationship of complementarity with reclusion: it palliates the dangers of solitude; it offers what one has done or thought to a possible gaze; the fact of obliging oneself to write plays the role of a companion by giving rise to the fear of disapproval and to shame. Hence, a first analogy can be put forward: what others are to the ascetic in a community, the notebook is to the recluse. But, at the same time, a second analogy is posed, one that refers to the practice of asceticism as work not just on actions but, more precisely, on thought: the constraint that the presence of others exerts in the domain of conduct, writing will exert in the domain of the inner impulses of the soul. In this sense, it has a role very close to that of

confession to the director, about which John Cassian will say, in keeping with Evagrius's spirituality, that it must reveal, without exception, all the impulses of the soul (*omnes cogitationes*). Finally, writing about inner impulses appears, also according to Athanasius's text, as a weapon in spiritual combat. While the Devil is a power who deceives and causes one to be deluded about oneself (fully half of the *Vita Antonii* is devoted to these ruses), writing constitutes a test and a kind of touchstone: by bringing to light the impulses of thought, it dispels the darkness where the enemy's plots are hatched. This text—one of the oldest that Christian literature has left us on the subject of spiritual writing—is far from exhausting all the meanings and forms the latter will take on later. But one can focus on several of its features that enable one to analyze retrospectively the role of writing in the philosophical cultivation of the self just before Christianity: its close link with companionship, its application to the impulses of thought, its role as a truth test. These diverse elements are found already in Seneca, Plutarch, Marcus Aurelius, but with very different values and following altogether different procedures.

No technique, no professional skill can be acquired without exercise; nor can the art of living, the *tekhnē tou biou*, be learned without an *askēsis* that should be understood as a training of the self by oneself. This was one of the traditional principles to which the Pythagoreans, the Socratics, the Cynics had long attached a great importance. It seems that, among all the forms taken by this training (which included abstinences, memorizations, self-examinations, meditations, silence, and listening to others), writing—the act of writing for oneself and for others—came, rather late, to play a considerable role. In any case, the texts from the imperial epoch relating to practices of the self placed a good deal of stress on writing. It is necessary to read, Seneca said, but also to write. And Epictetus, who offered an exclusively oral teaching, nonetheless emphasizes several times the role of writing as a personal exercise: one should "meditate" (*meletan*), write (*graphein*), train oneself (*gumnazein*): "May these be my thoughts, these my studies, writing or reading, when death comes upon me". Or further: "Let these thoughts be at your command [*prokheiron*] by night and day: write them, read them, talk of them, to yourself and to your neighbor ... if some so-called undesirable event should befall you, the first immediate relief to you will be that it was not unexpected". In these texts by Epictetus, writing appears regularly associated with "meditation," with that exercise of thought on itself that reactivates what it knows, calls to mind a principle, a rule, or an example, reflects on them, assimilates them, and in this manner prepares itself to face reality. Yet one also sees that writing is associated with the exercise of thought in two different ways. One takes the form of a linear "series": it goes from meditation to the activity of writing and from there to *gumnazein*, that is, to training and trial in a real situation's labor of thought, a labor through writing, a labor in reality. The other is circular: the meditation precedes the notes which enable the rereading which in turn reinitiates the meditation. In any case, whatever the cycle of exercise in which it takes place, writing constitutes an essential stage in the process to which the whole *askēsis* leads: namely, the fashioning of accepted discourses, recognized as true, into rational principles of action. As an element of self-training, writing has, to use an expression that one finds in Plutarch, an *ethopoietic* function: it is an agent of the transformation of truth into *ethos*.

William Spengeman  
*from his Introduction to The Forms of Autobiography*

*In the introductory essay to his book, Spengeman attempts to define autobiography for his readers. He divides autobiographies into three main types, taking a historical approach to the subject. His comments are interesting because he attempts to imagine how some might object to his classifications, and he addresses those objections in advance.*

The years that have slipped by since I began work on this little book have seen autobiography move from the borderlands of literary study to a place much nearer the privileged center traditionally occupied by fiction, poetry, and the drama. Had I written this introduction even five years ago, I could have begun, as was then the custom among critics of autobiography, by lamenting the scholarly neglect of this worthy literature. Now that the

genre has become critically respectable, not to say fashionable, however, prefaces like this one are obliged to open on a softer note, with some acknowledgment of the great deal that has already been said on the subject, as well as some justification for adding yet another handful of pages to the steadily mounting pile.

While the recent flurry of books and articles on autobiography has abundantly answered the old plea for more work in the field, the volume of that response has raised a new problem: the more the genre gets written about, the less agreement there seems to be on what it properly includes. Back in the days when very few people even thought about this question, those who did might quarrel over the admissibility of letters, journals, memoirs, and verse-narratives, but they generally agreed that an autobiography had to offer an at least ostensibly factual account of the writer's own life—that it had to be, in short, a self-written biography. As the number of people writing about autobiography has swelled, however, the boundaries of the genre have expanded proportionately until there is now virtually no written form that has not either been included in some study of autobiography or else been subjected to autobiographical interpretation. What was once a rather clearly demarcated territory, populated almost exclusively by such self-identifying texts as John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* and Jonathan Edwards's *Personal Narrative*, has become an unbounded sprawl, in which the poetry of T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams, the novels of Stendhal and Proust, the plays of Tennessee Williams, and even Henry James's prefaces have found a place.

These efforts to expand the boundaries of autobiography have split critical opinion into two schools of thought concerning its permissible methods. On the one side are those critics who continue to insist that autobiography must employ biographical—which is to say historical rather than fictional—materials. On the other side, there are those who assert the right of autobiographers to present themselves in whatever form they may find appropriate and necessary. Whether a particular study takes up the subject of autobiography itself, or uses autobiographies as a source of information about some other subject (the idea of individualism, for example), or simply treats some literary work as an autobiography, it will adopt, either implicitly or explicitly, one of these two theoretical positions, which will in turn condition everything else the writer has to say.

Both of these approaches to autobiography seem to me to have a good deal to recommend them. The idea of autobiography obviously cannot be separated completely from self-biography. However one chooses to define the genre, its universally recognized classics were all written in this mode, and anyone who wishes to redefine autobiography must begin by redefining the essential character of these acknowledged models. But neither can the idea of autobiography be identified with self-biography. The various poems, novels, and plays that have recently been inserted into the genre—all of which, significantly, are either modern or else particularly susceptible to modernist interpretation—do seem, despite their fictiveness, to address the same problems of self-definition that have taxed autobiographers ever since Augustine discovered that the self is a hard ground to plough. Indeed, the modernist movement away from representational discourse toward self-enacting, self-reflexive verbal structures and the critical theories that have been devised to explain this movement conspire to make the very idea of literary modernism seem synonymous with that of autobiography.

Insofar as both of these views of autobiography conform to our experience with actual texts both are right. What we need, therefore, is a theory, or rather a description, of autobiography that will recognize both its perduring relation to the self-biographical mode and its apparently increasing tendency to assume fictive forms in the modern era. Instead of identifying autobiography with self-written biography because it has usually been written in that form or denying the generic importance of that convention because autobiography has often been written in other forms, we need to understand the conditions that have led different autobiographers at different times to write about themselves in different ways. In other words, we must view autobiography historically, not as one thing that writers have done again and again, but as the pattern described by the various things they have done in response to changing ideas about the nature of the self, the ways in which the self may be apprehended, and the proper methods of reporting those apprehensions.

The evolution of autobiographical forms outlined in the following chapters begins with *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, a work that meets even the strictest formal prescriptions for the genre, and concludes with *The Scarlet Letter*, a work that retains no vestige of the self-biographical mode. My aim is to demonstrate the generic kinship between these formally diverse works by locating them both within a single evolving tradition that arose in the early Middle Ages and arrived at the conclusions of its own internal logic in the nineteenth century. Chapter one analyzes the form of Augustine's *Confessions* in some detail, partly because this work is generally acknowledged to be both a true autobiography and the first of its kind, but mainly because this seminal document employs in succession all three of the forms—historical, philosophical, and poetic—that autobiography would assume in the course of its development over the next fifteen hundred years. Following the essay on *The Confessions* are three chapters: one on the

development of historical autobiography in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, one on the transition to philosophical autobiography in the later eighteenth century, and one on the emergence of poetic autobiography in the nineteenth century. By applying the formal paradigm provided in Augustine's *Confessions* to a number of ostensibly representative, but at any rate familiar, works, these three chapters attempt to chart the formal permutations that, all together, constitute what autobiography is.

A word or two needs to be said at this point regarding my selection of texts for discussion. Although this book treats its subject historically, it does not pretend to survey the vast library of autobiographical writing. On the contrary, I have chosen for extended analysis only as many works as I needed to describe the movement of autobiography from the biographical to the fictive mode. This is not to contend that the works I have chosen are necessarily the first to do what I describe them as doing. Few of my readers will be unable to name for each formal category an autobiography written earlier than those I discuss, and fewer still will excuse my failure to acknowledge their favorites. Since I do not maintain that the formal evolution of autobiography was unilinear, proceeding directly through any particular sequence of texts, I have felt free to single out works that illustrate most clearly what seem to me the crucial episodes in the larger movement that is my subject.

Some of my readers may also feel that the evolution I am proposing does not really evolve, since the "earlier" forms, historical and philosophical autobiography, are still being written, while poetic autobiography, the "latest" stage of development, is present in Augustine's *Confessions*, at the very beginning of the movement. My response to the first part of this objection would be that no theory of evolution requires mutant forms to supplant the strains from which they arise; they simply add to the existing stock of forms available for use. Although not everything done today has always been done, it is probably fair to say that everything that has ever been done is still being done, somewhere. In any event, I take each of the three autobiographical forms to be characteristic of the period to which I have assigned it, even though it may not be the form most often used in that period. What I call historical autobiography seems to me to accord perfectly with the climate of opinion regarding the self that prevailed from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment, philosophic autobiography to reflect the changes in that climate which occurred around the turn of the nineteenth century, and poetic autobiography to express the radically altered conditions that resulted from the ideological upheavals of the nineteenth century. Only St. Augustine remains a true anomaly in this pattern, accomplishing the entire course of autobiographical change in a single work written at its very beginning. Concerning this recusant fact, I will simply observe that it is the subsequent evolution of autobiography that gives Augustine his preeminence, in retrospect. If later autobiographers like Dante, Rousseau, and Carlyle had not employed the very different forms they did, we would doubtless be unable to recognize the formal movement that makes *The Confessions* so proleptic.

And that brings me to my final word concerning the selection of texts analyzed in the chapters ahead. Although a good deal has been asserted already about the proliferation of autobiographical forms in the twentieth century, this study concludes with an analysis of *The Scarlet Letter*, my prime example of poetic autobiography. Where, the reader may well ask, do we account for the autobiographical experiments of Yeats and Proust, of T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath? Although the reader's satisfaction on this point will depend on the persuasiveness of the chapters ahead, I will say here that, however various critics have defined autobiography, their ability to recognize one has always depended on some evidence that the writer's self is either the primary subject or the principal object of the verbal action. In the former case, the self is seen to exist independent of whatever the writer says on its behalf, and the verbal action seeks either to describe that self historically, or analyze it philosophically, or express it poetically. In the latter case, the self is seen to depend for its existence upon the verbal action, which therefore describes its own poetic creation. Historical self-explanation, philosophical self-scrutiny, poetic self-expression, and poetic self-invention—these are, so far as I know, the only procedures available to autobiography, and the list was exhausted by the time Hawthorne finished *The Scarlet Letter*. Unless I am greatly mistaken in this formulation (a possibility of which I am perfectly aware), then, all subsequent autobiographies may be described in terms of one or more of these formal strategies. Although historical, philosophic, and poetic autobiographies are still being written today, the generic evolution that produced these divergent forms and so relates them to each other—the movement outlined in this book—was complete a century ago.