

Is *That* an Autobiography? Channeling Wittgenstein's Family Resemblances in Self-Life Writing

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Abstract

Autobiography is often construed as a loose category containing works as diverse as Montaigne's essays, Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," and Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*. While these works share certain elements, what makes a text an "autobiography" as opposed to simply an "autobiographical" text? Channeling Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblances and using three texts traditionally labeled as autobiography from three historical periods, this essay traces the features these texts share to develop an argument for a prototypical autobiography.

Essay

Writing about pornography in the plurality opinion of *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, Supreme Court Justice Potter Brown uttered his now famous words:

I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description [hard-core pornography]; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. *But I know it when I see it* (emphasis mine), and the motion picture involved in this case is not that. (*Jacobellis v. Ohio*)

Ironically, perhaps, James Olney emphasizes a similar dilemma affecting the classification of works as *autobiography*.¹ Echoing Justice Brown's frequently quoted words in his *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Olney notes, "everyone knows what autobiography is, but no two observers, no matter how assured they may be are in agreement as to how to define it" (7). Herein lies the essence of a debate about autobiography: can any text be classified as an autobiography and if so what are the characteristics of such a classification? One of the first scholars to tackle the question, "What is autobiography?," and thus to analyze the boundaries of the genre, was Roy Pascal in his seminal work *Design and Truth in Autobiography*. Long before Paul de Man² claimed that autobiography was not a genre, Pascal defined the term autobiography and catalogued works of autobiography. While the logistics of the definition were yet uncertain to Pascal, there was little doubt in his mind that autobiography was indeed a genre:

There is an autobiographical form, and indeed a convention, which one recognises [sic] and distinguishes from other literary modes; writers know roughly what they expect to do if they write autobiographies, and critics are in no great difficulty to define their subject-matter when they write autobiographies. (2)

Pascal emphasized, however, that the most troubling problem of autobiography was not the issue of genre but rather answering the question: "[D]oes the author's representation of himself [sic] as a personality correspond to what we can get to know of him through other evidence?" (188). True autobiographies, according to Pascal, contain "inner personality" and are written only by those "pledged to their innermost selves" (194, 195).

A less schematic, yet more nebulous, approach to the genre is proffered by Olney in *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*. Examining texts by Montaigne, Jung, Darwin, Newman, and T.S. Eliot among others, Olney skirts the issue of genre to some degree, noting that while autobiography is more universal than it is local, there is no specific form to trace through the ages (viii, 3). He attempts to

address the problems of genre by broadly classifying autobiography in its ideal form as a “metaphor and...in the reader’s experience that ideal psychic being and realized self...we sometimes call this act autobiography, we other times call it poetry, but it always art” (318). Olney notes specifically that these “metaphors of self” are metaphors for the readers’ lives as well, not just “symbolic images...of symbolic lives” (50).

In contrast, William Spengemann, in *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre*, asserts not only that autobiography is a genre, but claims that the genre has evolved over time from a specific archetype—St. Augustine’s *Confessions* (c.400 AD). In *Confessions*, Spengemann notes that three methods of self-presentation are established: historical self-explanation, philosophical self-analysis, and poetic self-expression (Spengemann xvi). Spengemann claims that the formal evolution of the genre reaches its conclusion in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. In this work, Spengemann asserts, Hawthorne became consciously aware that his autobiography had actually *created* the “self” it supposedly set out to expose. In other words, Hawthorne felt that the “complete being was synonymous with, and contingent upon, the creation of a complete work of art” (137). The sheer number of works that might be classified as autobiography given a definition so broad in its scope complicates Spengemann’s rather straightforward approach to the genre of autobiography.³

In *Being in the Text*, Paul Jay addresses the idea of a genre of autobiography more succinctly: “I resist the idea that the works can be categorized as ‘autobiography’ in any coherent or helpful way” (14). He notes that defining autobiography in the abstract is difficult enough in its own right, but that the real problem begins when trying to place actual texts under the umbrella of autobiography. Shunning the problematic genre label “autobiography” altogether, Jay uses the terms “self-reflexive works” and “literary self-representation” (19, 21).

American deconstructionist, Paul de Man, goes even further than Jay in *Autobiography as De-facement*, stating bluntly,

By making autobiography into a genre, one elevates it above the literary status of mere reportage, chronicle, or memoir and gives it a place, albeit a modest one, among the canonical hierarchies of the major literary genres. This does not go without some embarrassment, since compared to tragedy, or epic, or lyric poetry, autobiography always looks slightly disreputable and self-indulgent in a way that may be symptomatic of its incompatibility with the monumental dignity of aesthetic values.... Empirically as well as theoretically, autobiography lends itself poorly to generic definition; each specific instance seems to be an exception to the norm.... (919, 920)

Simply put, de Man views the subject of the autobiography as a textual production, not a form of referentiality—a necessarily fictive exercise that is rhetorical in nature, not historical. To him, autobiography is not a genre at all, but rather a “figure of reading or of understanding that occurs ... in all texts” (921).

While there is little consensus among scholars when it comes to defining autobiography as a genre or as an *anti-genre* (my term), readers of autobiography have little trouble identifying texts as “autobiographies.” According to both the readers themselves as well as the scholars who write about the audience for autobiography, the assumptions of a typical reader of autobiography can be summarized in three general ways: 1) autobiography presents a generally factual account of the subject’s life (though the subjective presentation of the details surrounding the *facts* (emphasis mine) is assumed), 2) the progression of time (the subject’s lifeline) in an autobiography is usually linear and limited to the subject’s lifetime or a significant portion thereof, and 3) the reader of autobiography expects a “story-structure” or narrative framework to give order to the events described by the author (Lejeune 13-46).⁴ These three assumptions about autobiography create what Ludwig Wittgenstein termed “family resemblances.”⁵ In short, the idea of family resemblances can be applied to autobiography by asking a relatively simple question: while not all autobiographies have all three of these elements, do not many of them share certain similarities and relations with each other? If, for example, it were possible to look at all autobiographies ever written rather than *think* about what an autobiography should entail, we would

notice that some autobiographies, but certainly not all, follow a clear progression of time. We might also notice that some, but not all, have a clear story-structure or narrative drive, or that some, but not all, present a generally factual account. Wittgenstein's family resemblances can be useful when thinking about autobiography precisely because of the scholarly complications associated with the classification of autobiography.

How then, are we to define autobiography—an autobiography that the public not only has so little trouble defining and separating from other literary genres, but also one that some scholars either eschew as "lend[ing] itself poorly to generic definition" and "disreputable and self-indulgent" (de Man 919, 920) or define so broadly and vaguely as to encompass nearly all forms and styles of self-expression?⁶ My position is not to argue for the specific characteristics of a genre called autobiography or to argue against the idea of autobiography as a genre. Clearly, the definition of autobiography is expandable and evolving. Rather, it is my hope in the following pages to identify a few commonalities (family resemblances) among three works that have been traditionally labeled as autobiographies: St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. I contend that in these three works, a symbolic representation of the author's self⁷ emerges that contains a measure of what a reader of autobiography expects—a narrative of the author's life, not entirely fictive and not quite objective, that contains factual life events with an identifiable chronological progression through the subject's life.⁸

Some⁹ have argued that with *Confessions* St. Augustine invented the modern conception of the autobiography. To be sure, Augustine did establish a pattern¹⁰ to be followed, as most autobiographers to this day are affected by his approach. However, *Confessions* was not the first autobiography. Many classical authors (Heraclitus' writings, Marcus Aurelius' *What I Have Learned* and Seneca's *Letters from a Stoic* (ca. 63-65 AD) come to mind) preceded him. Nevertheless, his autobiography is generally considered to be the first "truly and completely subjective autobiography in Western civilization..." (Padover xiv). *Confessions*, however, should not be considered a complete or entirely "honest" telling of Augustine's life. St. Augustine certainly leaves out key events that may hold significance for the reader in understanding his life story. For example, his father's death is barely discussed, and many years of his life seem overlooked or at least neglected. In fact, neither his mother nor his father, both of whom have enormous significance in his life, are specifically named until the end of Book IX (204). The form of *Confessions*, moreover, probably seems a bit disjointed to the contemporary reader. The first nine books take us through most of Augustine's life, yet Chapter X focuses on an examination of how his memory works which leads him to question the "self" that is evolving as he writes (222-223), and Chapters XI-XIII contain exposition that addresses the first chapter of the Book of Genesis.¹¹ Despite these variances, *Confessions* allows us a glimpse of two versions of St. Augustine: one version is a young man grappling to find his "truth" and a sense of spirituality, and the second version is the older Augustine, the narrator, wiser and more humble, trying to illustrate how he finally came to his acceptance of Christianity as the one true faith.

Proceeding in a fairly ordered chronological manner, Augustine begins his autobiography in Book I by relaying details of his infancy and early childhood. Almost immediately, a pattern is established. Augustine carefully chooses events that describe his path to spiritual development while continually reiterating his love for God—all other details of his life are secondary. For example, Augustine focuses in the first five chapters of Book I on the glory of God and the nature of God—not on his birth, family and hometown (21-24). Speaking directly to God, he inquires:

Do heaven and earth, then, contain the whole of you, since you fill them? Or, when once you have filled them, is some part of you left over because they are too small to hold you? If this is so, when you have filled heaven and earth, does that part of you which remains flow over into some other place? (22)

On the surface this excerpt does not appear to tell us much about the specific details of his life. However, philosophical and spiritual musings such as this example permeate the text, illustrating his acute power of observation and thought. Moreover, the praise of God infused throughout his life story serves several additional purposes: 1) it establishes a conversation between Augustine (I) and God (You)¹² crucial to

understanding St. Augustine's faith and the process of his redemption; 2) it allows the readers to reflect upon their own relationship with God; and 3) it establishes the *primary* audience of the text as God and the secondary audience as the general reader. His "confession," in this sense, is both a metaphorical confession to the reader, and a literal, Catholic sacrament to God. His decision to focus on his spiritual life reveals a "truth" Augustine is attempting to establish in the mind of the reader—the story of Augustine's return to God.

In Book II, Augustine continues his chronological push forward when he reflects upon his adolescence. While he begins by describing his budding sexuality and sins born of it in Book II, Chapters 1-3, he quickly moves from the sins of lust into an anecdote that might seem trivial at first glance to the reader but holds great significance in the telling of his life story—a theft of pears (47). Augustine details his theft of pears from a vineyard with a few of his closest friends noting that his real purpose was not to eat them but rather to take pleasure "in doing something that was forbidden" (47). While the reader might insist that Augustine's greater sins of promiscuity, adultery, pride, and vanity are not only more egregious to God but also more glaring in their effects on others, e.g., his mother (Monica), his concubine (unnamed), and his "fatherless" son (Adeodatus), Augustine makes the point that the sin committed just "do wrong for no purpose" (47) is quite different from sin committed to "live on the proceeds" (48) of the crime.

As is the case through much of *Confessions*, however, his reference to the stolen pears is doing more than simply acknowledging to both God and reader that he understands his sins on a relative level. He is establishing a metaphor, which is perhaps obvious, yet is easily overlooked. Besides the references to the Fall in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2–3), Augustine is foreshadowing his later conversion in Book VIII, Chapter 12, when he hears the child's voice saying, "Take it and read, take it and read" (177) while sitting under a fig tree in the garden. In this scene, he is in the throes of frustration with his desperate quest for certainty in his spiritual life: "I probed the hidden depths of my soul and wrung its pitiful secrets from it, and when I mustered them all before the eyes of my heart, a great storm broke within me, bringing with it a great deluge of tears" (177). He cannot yet let go of his sinful life until the precise moment of clarity when the girl's voice calls to him. Augustine then responds to her call and opens the Bible and reads from Romans 13:13–14; the passage lays to rest his fears and doubts about leaving his *old self* behind (177-179).¹³ Whether the catalyst (the young girl's voice) is "real" or not is irrelevant. By linking these "bookends" together, he connects his youthful descent into sin to his eventual salvation. His own life story becomes an allegory through which he shows his readers that even the most sinful can achieve salvation if they are open to faith beyond knowledge.

Throughout *Confessions*, Augustine makes his motivation¹⁴ for writing evident—he clearly desires to explain himself to both God and the masses. He addresses God directly, letting Him know that he is telling his own story "so that I and all who read my words may realize the depths from which we are to cry to you" (45). He also recognizes the paradox of explaining himself to an omniscient God, i.e., "you are the God who knows me...you have recognized me" (207) and thus he sets out to explain himself to himself. In doing so, he sets forth a pattern of entrusting the audience to be the measure of the truth: "[I] cannot prove to them that my confessions are true...I shall be believed by those whose ears are opened to me by charity" (208). However, it is in Book X, Chapter 5 that Augustine reveals the difficulty of telling his own story. In one of his most revealing moments, he acknowledges a problem that continues to plague autobiography to this date—the elusive nature of the self: "This much I know...*at present I am looking at a confused reflection in a mirror*" (211). In other words, Augustine understands that a true picture of the self is elusive and thus he again places his hopes in God to "not play us false" (211).

The self that Augustine presents through *Confessions* and that I describe briefly here represents a benchmark in the development of autobiography. In *Confessions*, Augustine succeeds in establishing several notable traits that have become family resemblances within works commonly labeled as autobiography. For example, Augustine develops his life story in a chronologically linear way based upon personally selected events and facts from his life from 354 A.D. to 387 A.D. More importantly, he also presents the audience with a subject that is contextualized and personalized by its narrator—an approach to autobiography that has become nearly *de facto* in nature. Beyond these easily identifiable traits, however, his autobiography reveals something more significant in the development of "self-life-writing." In Chapter X, Augustine asks the questions that still vex the contemporary autobiographer, i.e., how can one

ever know the “true” self?¹⁵ (211). Should the autobiographer move through his/her own memories and offer some conclusion about them? Should the autobiographer take on an involved or a distant persona as he/she revisits the past? Or, can an autobiographer perform “a sequence of symbolic actions through which the ineffable self can be realized?” (Spengemann 32). While a succinct characterization of St. Augustine may be impossible from *Confessions* due in part to both the complexity of his thought and his digressive expository method, *Confessions* succeeds as an attempt to provide answers to these questions that confront all of us as we seek our own “true” selves.

While St. Augustine’s *Confessions* establishes what could be considered an archetypal example of what readers have come to expect from an autobiography, Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) would seem at first glance to contradict the audience’s notion of a prototypical autobiography. At risk of stating the obvious, for example, *The Autobiography...* is anything but what its title bluntly indicates—it is the work of Stein.¹⁶ In this sense, it is not a “true” autobiography but rather a stylistic attempt by Stein to emulate the speaking style of her companion, to experiment with a unique approach to writing, and to reflect upon her own genius. However, while Stein plays with the *idea* of an autobiography, her *exercise* (emphasis mine) in writing actually conforms more than it contradicts the audience’s assumptions about autobiography. For example, *her* narrative (besides the device of Alice’s “voice,” the subject is decidedly Stein) progresses in a chronologically linear way from 1907 through 1932, the year she submitted the manuscript for publication. And, though her playful imagination and often absurd boasting clouds the audience’s perception of the events in *The Autobiography...*, the events and characters are nonetheless verifiable.¹⁷

Just as Augustine strove to create the persona of a man awoken to his own spirituality through both his own sinful philandering and the grace of God, Stein worked hard to create the “genius” that she wanted the world to see. As she writes in *The Autobiography...*, “I may say that only three times in my life have I met a genius and each time a bell within me rang and I was not mistaken ... the three geniuses of whom I wish to speak are Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso, and Alfred Whitehead” (Stein 5).¹⁸ Saying she possessed an enormous ego is, however, too easy a caricature of the complex person she was. One of the aspects that contributed to her complexity was her “Soliere” complex—her ability to see great genius before anyone else did in art (a notion that she exploited quite often), yet not to be acknowledged for her own “literary prowess.” Looking at the list of acknowledged greats that came through her atelier is bound to impress, Picasso, Matisse, Rousseau, Cézanne, et al., yet in the tradition of letters, she seemed to recoil with bitterness from those she saw as usurping her right to recognized literary greatness, particularly Hemingway and Joyce. The prominent artist, Man Ray, noted this pronounced dichotomy:

This attitude was carried to the extreme regarding other writers—they were all condemned: Hemingway, Joyce, the Dadaists, the Surrealists, with herself as the pioneer. Her bitterness really showed up when the others got universal attention before she did. (as qtd. In Simon, *Gertrude Stein Remembered* 90-91)

While she never admitted to any frustration caused by other writers’ fame, she was aware of how her failure to publish affected her: “Gertrude Stein was in those days a little bitter, all her unpublished manuscripts, and no hope of publication or serious recognition” (Stein 197). Perhaps this punctuated envy, though not completely unacknowledged, contributed to her exaggerated sense of her own importance to the twentieth-century literary tradition. But her greatness is, as time has born out, as real as it is invented—certainly not an uncommon proposition among artists of the past and present. For instance, when juxtaposed with the diverse picture created in the collage of biographical sketches by her acquaintances, her friends, and her enemies, a similar truth is exposed—whether her visitors despised her, worshipped her, feigned indifference or simply went along with the “Gertrude Stein Show,” they felt her compelling enough to write at great lengths about her.¹⁹ Accordingly, a look beyond the surface of some of Stein’s more boastful examples of self-promotion and bravado in *The Autobiography...* reveals a clear desire to reinvent herself by cloaking her past insecurities about her writing, transforming her place in the world, and promoting her *genius-recognizing* (emphasis mine) abilities.

Clearly, Stein’s frustration as a writer was paramount to understanding her both as she saw herself and as others saw her. While most who visited her knew of “her great book” (*Three Lives*) as she often

referred to it, her boasting often cloaked her frustration (Stein 56). Throughout *The Autobiography...*, she incessantly refers to both *The Making of Americans* and *Three Lives* as if trying to give the books the significance she thought was lacking. She saw herself as the harbinger of the twentieth-century moderns, and if no one else would tell the world, she would. To compensate for this inability to achieve what she felt was deserved recognition, she constantly discussed her influence, e.g., “[S]he wrote the poetry that has so greatly influenced the younger generation” and made exaggerated claims about her literary predecessors, e.g., “[T]he work of Henry James whom she considers quite definitely as her forerunner...” (Stein 78, 209). Some of the most telling moments, however, are when she attacks her past “friends:”

Hemingway was yellow ... he is ... a pupil who does it without understanding it, a weakness ... and that is Hemingway, he looks like a modern and he smells of the museums. But what a story that of the real Hem, and one he should tell himself, but alas he never will. (Stein 216-217)

Stein believed that Hemingway could imitate her style as a “pupil,” but that he did not understand it (216). Investigation of his style does point toward some commonalities between the two authors, but to the novice reader it seems clear that Hemingway’s craft is much more polished, more fluid. In the end, it was Hemingway who enjoyed the greater fame—to which Stein could only comment about how commercial Hemingway had become.

At times, however, it seems Stein realized her vulnerability to her desires. She notes in *The Autobiography...*, “I hate to look at Who’s Who in America... when I see all those insignificant people and Gertrude’s name not in” (194-195). When her fame finally arrives, Stein is clearly jubilant: “She had never seen a book of hers in a bookstore window before, except a french [sic] translation of the Ten Portraits ... This event gave Gertrude Stein a childish delight amounting almost to ecstasy” (243). To those that came to see her at her atelier, this came as no surprise. Hemingway notes that she was always a legend in her own narrative and that fame, as she chastised others for pursuing it, was an ultimate goal of hers. Hemingway mocked her literary pretensions²⁰ noting that every writer she dismissed was only dismissed for his character traits rather than his work (Hobhouse 167).

Perhaps surprisingly, she tries to portray herself as the humble observer who calmly receives visitors who offer her praise and ask for advice. At the beginning of *The Autobiography...*, Stein writes,

Miss Stein sat near the stove in a lovely high-backed one and she peacefully let her legs hang, which was a matter of habit, and when any of one of the many visitors came to ask her a question she lifted herself up out of this chair and usually replied in french [sic]...(9).

She reaffirms this image continually, stressing her nonchalant attitude towards the attention: “And everybody came and no one made any difference. Gertrude Stein sat peacefully in a chair and those who could did the same...” (124). While many of the visitors to her atelier acknowledged her intellectual and artistic capacities, as noted in Linda Simon’s *Gertrude Stein Remembered*, not once in twenty separate memoirs²¹ does anyone portray her as “peaceful,” calm and elegant. In fact, many of her prominent guests in their memoirs remarked about her cantankerous nature and her violent temper. Even Alice herself, when writing her memoirs *after* Gertrude Stein’s death, claimed, “She was a vengeful goddess and I was afraid. I did not know what had happened or what was going to happen” (Simon, *Gertrude Stein: A Composite Portrait* 28). This pronounced dichotomy (one of many) between Stein’s view of herself and the view others have of her presents three possibilities of interpretation: 1) Stein wasn’t aware that others (including her partner) saw her in this way; 2) Stein found it necessary to “correct” an image she was aware of; or 3) the others misinterpreted her demeanor and actions and were thus incorrect in their assessment of her character.

Whichever possibility is the most accurate and whatever the element(s) of Stein’s persona embraced by the reader (aspiring writer, matriarch to the Parisian artists, frustrated genius, a vacuum for attention and adulation, etc.), it seems apparent that *The Autobiography...* was successful in conveying a specific truth²² about Stein. Just as Augustine needed to be recognized as a man who has accepted his God after

much inner turmoil and external sin, Stein needed to be recognized as the discoverer of original talent, the molder of that talent, and the arbiter of a new style of writing. Herein lies a family resemblance shared among *The Autobiography...*, *Confessions* and autobiography in general. The persona of Gertrude Stein was a creation of Gertrude Stein—a symbolic representation of her “true” self. If she would not be a wife and could not be a doctor because of “boredom,” she would be a matriarch to the artists and their craft—creating fertile ground for them to flourish at 27 rue de Fleures (Stein 81). She was a frustrated author who wanted to see her book in the window; she was the story herself—part truth, part fiction, part fantasy.

In contrast to Stein's posturing, when Maya Angelou set out to write her autobiography, she did so reluctantly. A friend at a dinner party in New York City insisted that Angelou write about her childhood and adolescent experiences. Another friend called Random House to suggest that Angelou's story would make a good autobiography and fill a vacuum in the genre, i.e., the general absence of any popular autobiographies from the perspective of African-American women. The persistence of her friends, of course, paid off for Ms. Angelou with the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). An enormous commercial and critical success, *I Know...* is considered by some²³ to be a literary novel—not an autobiography. Though she acknowledges the difficulty of keeping her voice consistent with the time represented in her autobiography,²⁴ Angelou clearly disagrees with the characterization of her work as a literary-novel and considers *I Know...* to be a genuine attempt to tell the story of her childhood and adolescence. As with *Confessions* and *The Autobiography...*, *I Know...* exhibits all the family resemblances readers have come to expect, i.e., a chronologically progressive narrative based on actual events in the author's life. And while Angelou's narrative is unique, her “path” to a symbolic truth shares similarities with both Augustine and Stein.

In the first chapter of *I Know...*, Angelou introduces the reader to a girl struggling both with her looks and with her racial identity. Preparing for Easter Sunday services at church, she eyes the “once-was-purple throwaway” (2) dress that she believes will help her emerge from her black skin as a white girl. In a manner reminiscent of the theft of the pears in *Confessions*, Angelou skillfully uses this opening segment to present the audience with the beginnings of a metaphor that will be threaded through her autobiography:

I knew that once I put it on I'd look like a movie star...I was going to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right with the world...Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten?...Because I was really white (1-2).

Just as the theft of the pears reveals the depths of Augustine's distance from God and acts as metaphor referring to the fall in the Garden of Eden, so too does Angelou's Easter Sunday experience indicate the transformation she must yet undergo in relation to the story of Christ's resurrection. By placing this introductory “dress” story of her ideal, yet imaginary, physical metamorphosis in conjunction with the story of the resurrection of Christ, Angelou's wish for acceptance through physical transformation rather than spiritual and emotional transformation shows that she has yet to go through the process necessary to discover her true self—one that can only come through experience. And, like Augustine before her, she uses this metaphor early in her autobiography to foreshadow events that will occur much later in her narrative—particularly the birth of her son.

While Angelou's struggle with her identity in *I Know...* is personal, it is also consciously allegorical as is evident in her title—*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*—which clearly refers to the knowledge that she shares with those who suffer or are oppressed. It represents the plight of southern black girls in general, particularly those who are painfully aware of their predicament. Though not entirely analogous to Augustine's struggle, we are again reminded of the resemblance to his allegorical struggle in *Confessions*—a struggle we all face. Angelou positions herself metaphorically among her peers: “If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat” (3). This “unnecessary insult” (3) establishes the framework for a theme that Angelou will reiterate throughout her book. Using the image of a rusty razor at the throat of a generic black female, Angelou prepares her audience for vivid descriptions of the “tripartite” of forces (misogyny,

white prejudice, and black powerlessness) which colluded against all black women in 1930s and 1940s' America (231). In juxtaposition to these powerful forces, she offers hope through the stories of many strong black women, i.e., Momma, Vivian Baxter, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, and most importantly, herself. Her numerous difficult experiences, e.g., getting molested, being raped, being "renamed" by a white woman, moving at least eight times before the age of sixteen, and living in the junkyard, have made her feel both displaced and older than her years. These same hardships, however, have made her more determined than ever—a determination she shares with other black women whose lives are also defined by hardship.²⁵

This determination is particularly pronounced in Chapter 34. In this short chapter, she achieves a remarkable measure of success—she becomes the first black conductor on the San Francisco streetcars (229). Again, she couples her success with that of black women as a whole. Now, however, the threat of the "razor" is not quite as ominous. She comes to the realization that the powers aligned to prevent black women from moving forward are conversely (perhaps, perversely) what give black women their strength of character—in her own words, they are "survivors and deserve respect" (231). Her suffering, associated with being black and female in America, is again placed in the context of many others.

Perhaps, however, one of the most revealing, yet often overlooked, moments in *I Know...* takes place before her success as the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco. In Chapter 27, Angelou has an educational and emotional experience that opens her mind. Attending George Washington High School in San Francisco, she is enrolled in a "real school" where she meets a "rare educator" (Miss Kirwin) who is in "love with information" (182). Used to adults (black and white) who condescend to children, Angelou is shocked when Miss Kirwin, who is white, greets each class with "Good day, ladies and gentlemen" and refers to her as "Miss Johnson" (183). Because Angelou has never had an experience with anyone like Miss Kirwin, she cannot understand how Miss Kirwin does not "seem to notice" that she is black. Miss Kirwin's clinical and methodical approach to learning, one devoid of sentiment or emotion, actually inspires Angelou to learn more. Reflecting on a visit to Miss Kirwin as an adult with a modicum of fame, Angelou wonders "if she knew she was the only teacher I remembered" (184). Her interaction with Miss Kirwin reveals several truths about Angelou to the reader. First, these passages allow the reader to see Angelou losing a bit of her absolute views about race in general and white people specifically. For the first time in her life, she is exposed to someone who does not call attention to her color in either a positive or a negative way. Second, this exposure leads her to embrace education on a deeper level; her interactions with Miss Kirwin serve as a catalyst stimulating her curiosity about the world and motivating her to expand her knowledge through new experiences such as drama and dance. Third, Kirwin's class shows her that she is far from "the most brilliant or even nearly the most brilliant student" (182). This harsh reality pushes her to accept this fact that she "had to be certain about all my facts before I dared to call attention to myself" (182).

The process of Angelou's spiritual and emotional growth through personal experience begun in Chapter 1 of *I Know...*, and so necessary to the development of the self she presents, culminates in Chapters 35-36. Only sixteen years old, Angelou, insecure about her sexuality and questioning her sexual orientation, determines the best way to prove to herself that she is not a lesbian—sleep with a man: "I planned a charade for seduction with surprise as my opening ploy ... I put the plan into action. I plunged, 'Would you like to have a sexual intercourse with me?'" (239). Once sex was consummated, the "brother [she] had chosen" was gone and she was pregnant.

While Angelou's description of the moments before the sexual act and the act itself present the audience with the usual humor and candor typical of much of Angelou's writing, this brief interlude serves mostly to introduce her "immaculate pregnancy" (245) and new son—seminal events that Angelou uses to offer her audience a sense of closure. In juxtaposition to her external, physical transformation at the beginning of *I Know...* on Easter Sunday, Angelou presents us with a mother-to-be going through the usual physical transformations, e.g., "I grew more buxom, and my brown skin smoothed and tight-pored, like pancakes fried on an unoiled skillet" (242), and a more self-reflective and maturing young woman, e.g., "For eons, it seemed, I had accepted my plight as the hapless, put-upon victim of fate and the Furies, but this time I had to face the fact that I had brought my new catastrophe upon myself" (241). The eventual birth of her son symbolizes her development into a young woman—she understands she can no longer be self-

absorbed and childish. She must put another human being before herself. As an autobiographical subject, she has much of her life ahead of her (she is only 16). The audience, however, has the *impression* that she is a fully-formed self at the conclusion of *I Know...* If we remind ourselves at the end that the subject is 16 and not 40, we might be left to wonder, how will this naïve and frightened young girl face the enormous task of raising another human being?

Certainly, it is tempting to forget that it is the adult version of Maya Angelou presenting us with a confident persona that has the strength to overcome difficulties and realize her full potential. The “lapse” between the present self and the self of the past, however, is no indication of the legitimacy or the illegitimacy of *I Know...* Like Augustine and Stein before her, Angelou creates her persona from the privileged position of the present tense. She editorializes, omits, exaggerates, embellishes, and sentimentalizes. And again, like Augustine and Stein before her, the symbolic self created from her imperfect memory represents a truth about the author.

Admittedly given the constraints of space, my examination of these three texts is cursory. Nonetheless, I contend that what I have begun here is sufficient to make my case—an argument for replacing my choices with “substitute” autobiographies would not weaken my position because family resemblances tend to recur throughout works labeled as autobiography. While the symbolic selves established by these three authors articulate a sense of uniqueness that sets them apart, it could also be argued that this sense of uniqueness is itself a family resemblance. Few autobiographers would claim to have written an ordinary autobiography to prove that they are just like everyone else.

Additionally, if it is possible (or necessary) to distinguish autobiography from its close, yet very distinct autobiographical *cousins*, i.e., autobiographical novels, autobiographical poems, memoirs, diaries, letters, verse-narratives, and journals, it makes sense to look carefully at how a reader might differentiate the family resemblances from among these sources. For example, in the mind of the typical reader of autobiography, *David Copperfield* is a novel by Charles Dickens—not an autobiography of Dickens’ life.²⁶ It may contain a few elements that are autobiographical, e.g., the protagonist (subject), David, is a novelist who started out as a political reporter as did Dickens, yet these “truthful” elements can easily be juxtaposed with the larger fictive creation, e.g., David is a naïve, orphaned village boy, while Charles Dickens spent his childhood with his natural parents in the seaside towns of Portsmouth and Chatham (coastal towns), which were comparatively cosmopolitan (Dickens 12). If *David Copperfield* were in fact *The Autobiography of Charles Dickens*, the typical audience for autobiography would not expect (nor appreciate) the author taking such liberties in the telling of his life.

Moreover, if given a copy of *Song of Myself*²⁷ to peruse, the typical reader of autobiography might quickly notice the title and the verse of the poem and focus particularly on the repetitive use of the first person and specific information on Whitman, e.g., “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs...” (48). It would be, however, nearly impossible for anyone to suggest that the expansive persona created by the poem, one that has arguably demolished conventional notions of the self, is the straightforward autobiography of Walt Whitman’s life. When Whitman’s persona notes that he is “not contained between my hat and boots” (31) and that he is “large...I contain multitudes,” (85) the audience is aware that the “subject” portrayed in the *Song of Myself* goes far beyond Walt Whitman, printer’s devil, journeyman compositor, and editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*.

It is also important to consider what publishers classify as autobiography as determined by the public’s expectations. As publishing is primarily a business enterprise and not an intellectual one, publishers choose their selections carefully based upon demographic and marketing data which indicate which texts the public prefers. While the large bookstore chains which carry the publishers’ catalogues would not place *Song of Myself* or *David Copperfield*²⁸ under the subject heading “Autobiography,” they *might* place St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* under the subject heading of “Autobiography” or under the subject headings of “Religious,” “Literature/ Fiction,” and “African-American Literature” respectively. This seems to indicate that the publishers understand that certain characteristics of autobiography are clearly recognizable, yet the works are not completely defined by these characteristics.

Ultimately, the answer to the question, *what makes a text an "autobiography?"* may simply be to ask more questions.²⁹ Is autobiography simply "A rose by any other name"?³⁰ Is not parsing over minutia in search of definitive characteristics of a genre (or an *anti-genre* for that matter) of autobiography ultimately futile? What would a definitive genre tell us? If as Olney suggests, "all writing" is autobiographical in some sense (*Autobiography* 4), and history itself can be seen as autobiography "writ large" (*Metaphors of Self* 49) then why trouble about these distinctions at all? If we are indeed "stuck" with Olney's paraphrase of Justice Potter's words as our best explanation of what an autobiography is, then perhaps an "elephant test"³¹ is indeed the best we can do.

Then again, at this moment in history when not just autobiography *but the text itself* is undergoing a radical transformation, reconsidering the essence of autobiography seems an urgent task indeed. Taking into consideration the proliferation of autobiographical websites, particularly the fanatical popularity of "network" sites such as MySpace, Friendster, and Facebook,³² we may need to ask new and different questions about autobiography. And, it may be possible to use the previously mentioned assumptions of the audience as a base from which to formulate these questions. For example, in the emerging world of hypertext autobiography, how important is a linear chronology to understanding the life of the subject? In the desultory world of the web, how essential is a clear, successive narrative drive? For that matter, does the audience assume hypertext "self-life-writing" to be truthful in a *literal* sense with all the technological possibilities of rendering a fictive self? These questions, though admittedly still in a basic evolutionary phase, are a start at examining what role the medium of the Internet might play. If the family resemblances that are identifiable in these three autobiographies are no longer evident in hypertext autobiography, perhaps new resemblances will become apparent.

Notes

¹ The term “autobiography” comes from the Greek terms: *auto*, *bios* and *graphe*. Respectively, these words can be translated as *self*, *life* and *writing*. According to Karl Weintraub, author of *Autobiography and Historical Consciousness*, autobiography “assumes a significant cultural function around AD 1800” (821). The word also appears in *The Oxford English Dictionary* in 1809. See James Olney’s “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical, and Bibliographic Introduction” (1980) for both a thorough genealogy of the word autobiography and an excellent summary of divergent theories about the meaning of autobiography.

² For a discussion of Paul de Man’s *Autobiography as De-facement* (1979), see page 4.

³ Spengemann is aware of this problem as well when he notes, “To call any modernist work ‘autobiographical’ is merely to utter a tautology” (168).

⁴ In addition to Phillip Lejeune’s description of what the readers of autobiography expect in *Le pacte autobiographique* (1975), James Olney addresses the issue of readers’ expectations in *Autobiography and the Cultural Moment* (1980). He notes, “[T]here had been a rather naïve threefold assumption about the writing of an autobiography: first, that the *bios* of autobiography could only signify ‘the course of a lifetime’... second, that the autobiographer could narrate his life in a manner at least approaching an objective historical account...and third, that there was nothing problematic about the *autos*, no agonizing questions of identity, self-definition, self-existence, or self-deception—at least none the reader needed to attend to....” (20). In “Not Quite Fiction: The Challenges of Poststructuralism to the Reading of Contemporary Autobiography,” Judith Coullie also addresses a “contract” between the autobiographer and the reader: “Autobiography usually expressly invokes a contractual agreement with the reader: the reader reads the references as true, and the text undertakes to refer to people, places, and events which had material existence” (226). Among the public blogs, definitions of and debate about autobiography can be found at The Off Ramp <http://www.publicradio.org/columns/kpcc/theofframp/2006/02/john_hope_frank.html> and The Autobiography Project <http://benfranklin300.org/autobiographyproject/05_autobiographies/autobiographies01.php>.

⁵ In his treatise, *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein states, “I can think of no better expression... for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour [sic] of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way” (67). In other words, there is may not be one common feature among the family, yet they all *resemble* (emphasis mine) each other.

⁶ Cf. Spengemann’s *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (1980).

⁷ Cf. James Olney’s *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (1972).

⁸ I will not spend much time discussing the three assumptions (family resemblances) of the readers of autobiography noted on page 4—they are easily identifiable and not in question. My attention in this essay (as I note above) will instead focus primarily on the symbolic truth that reveals itself through each author’s narrative. Since I do not have the space here to examine the entire text of these three autobiographies, I will instead focus on 3-4 seminal life events which I hope will establish a picture of the symbolic life of the subject.

⁹ See Pascal. *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (21), Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (44-45) and Spengemann, *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (50-74).

¹⁰ I elaborate on this pattern beginning on page 8.

¹¹ There is a bit of disagreement as to why Augustine includes these last three chapters. Some maintain that the first chapters (I-IX) address Augustine’s quest for truth and the last three chapters (XI-XIII) focus on his thoughts upon truth’s meaning. Others (see Pierre Courcelle’s *Recherches sur les Confessions de*

Saint Augustin) maintain that Augustine planned to write a complete exposition of the texts in the Bible, but he found this plan to be too exhaustive and gave it up after the first chapter of Genesis.

¹² The original translation is “Thou,” but was changed to you.

¹³ To make the importance of this event clear to the reader, he likens his situation to St. Antony’s conversion upon hearing Matthew 19:21—St. Antony is immediately convinced to give up his worldly career and devote himself to God.

¹⁴ In keeping with the focus of this essay on the creation of the symbolic self, I have chosen to avoid delving too deeply into the complex belief system of the Manichees, though they are a motivating factor for Augustine. In order to properly discuss the implication of the Manichees on Augustine’s thought, it would be necessary to consider the historical context of *Confessions*. Because Western thought has long been influenced by Christian ideology, it is difficult from a contemporary mindset to imagine a world where Christianity was simply one of many fledgling religions competing for dominance. Augustine spends the greater part of Books III, V, VI, and VII discussing how he accepted, challenged and then broke with the Manichean doctrine. His impetus to convince his readers of the one true Christian faith is manifest in his thoughts on the Manichees.

¹⁵ Augustine attempts to address what he knows are gaps in his life story: “I shall therefore confess both what I know of myself and what I do not know” (211).

¹⁶ It seems unlikely that anyone might think otherwise since Stein even notes this point herself at the end of the text: “About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you...And she has and this is it” (252).

¹⁷ Cf. Janet Hobhouse, *Everybody Who Was Anybody*. (1975) and Linda Simon, ed. *Gertrude Stein: A Composite Portrait* (1974).

¹⁸ To some degree, Stein is being facetious when she says this. And, to some extent, she takes a “tongue-in-cheek” approach to the act of writing an autobiography—in many ways this is simply a literary exercise for her. However, as is apparent in the memoirs of others who visited her during her Paris years, her *personality* clearly shows through any attempt to “coolly disguise...through the foil of Miss Toklas” (Simon, *Gertrude Stein: A Composite Portrait* 65).

¹⁹ Cf., Linda Simon., ed. *Gertrude Stein: A Composite Portrait*. (1974).

²⁰ Hemingway writes in *A Moveable Feast*, “She had such a personality that when she wished to win anyone over to her side she would not be resisted, and critics who met her and saw her pictures took on trust writing of hers that they could not understand because of their enthusiasm for her as a person... a more conscientious and less lazy writer would have put much of her work in the waste basket” (as qtd. in Simon, *Gertrude Stein Remembered* 83).

²¹ Cf., Linda Simon., ed. *Gertrude Stein Remembered*. (1994); includes a collection of memoirs by twenty people. Among the memoirists are novelists Sherwood Anderson and Thornton Wilder, bookseller Sylvia Beach, Russian painter Pavel Tchelitchew, journalists T. S. Matthews, Therese Bonney, and Eric Sevareid, and photographers Carl Van Vechten and Cecil Beaton.

²² Notably, Stein’s “truth” is confirmed by her contemporaries. Most of the memoirists included in Linda Simon’s *Gertrude Stein Remembered*. (1994) note several consistencies—she was a struggling writer who longed for fame, she was a friend if you sang her praises and incorrigible if you contradicted her, and she wanted to be part of “the story” as she said in *The Autobiography...*, “She always liked knowing a lot of people and being mixed up in a lot of stories...” (81).

²³ In *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, Selwyn Cudjoe questions the authenticity of the author's point of view. Cudjoe notes that Angelou seems to conflate the adult consciousness with childhood perceptions.

²⁴ Cf., Carol E. Neubauer "An Interview with Maya Angelou" (1987).

²⁵ In this sense, Angelou differs with Stein. As a lesbian, a Jew, a woman, and an expatriate, Stein was clearly an outsider. Yet Stein makes no mention in *The Autobiography...* of any affinity for or with others who share her demographic background(s). One could speculate that because Stein came from a tight-knit, upper-middle class East Coast family that she experienced an adolescence that grounded her in ways Angelou would not have known coming from a broken and lower class family. Moreover, one could also speculate that Stein intentionally avoids these labels and their limiting tendencies. Clearly, the possibilities are numerous and entirely speculative. Whatever her motive or lack thereof, Stein was clearly not interested in using "her" autobiography to identify or sympathize with the oppressed in the way Angelou does in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

²⁶ Dickens notes in the preface to *David Copperfield*: "It will be easily believed that I am a fond parent to every child of my fancy, and that no one can ever love that family as dearly as I love them. But, like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is David Copperfield" (2).

²⁷ Interestingly, the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, in which *Song of Myself* was published, included no titles for any of the twelve poems included. *Song of Myself* was later mistakenly titled based upon the first line in the poem and its subsequent content (Cowley x).

²⁸ To test this theory, I went to the websites of the three largest book sellers (Borders <www.borders.com>, Barnes and Nobles <www.barnesandnoble.com>, and Amazon <www.amazon.com>) on 1/24/07.

²⁹ In *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*, James Olney notes a similar conundrum: "[T]he subject of autobiography produces more questions than answers, more doubts by far (even of its existence) than certainties" (5).

³⁰ From Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Scene II, Act ii, Lines 43-44.

³¹ From the poem, "The Blindmen and the Elephant," written by John Godfrey Saxe. In this poem, six blind men feel only one part of an elephant and come to argue that it is similar to a wall, a spear, a snake, a tree, a fan, and a rope, respectively. In other words, each man comes to a completely different conclusion of what an elephant is like.

³² In my answer to preliminary examination question 1, I discuss the nature of these sites at great length.

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