CHAPTER 1

Introduction
The range, limits, and potentials of the form

Adam Smyth

> I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed.[1]
>
> Christopher Isherwood

> [T]he whole matter is reduced to the papers.[2]
>
> Algernon Sidney

The twenty-nine chapters and 170,000 words that comprise *A History of English Autobiography* take as their subject autobiographical writing in England from the medieval period to the digital contemporary. The chapters represent the critical state of play in the field, and intervene in urgent ways with current thinking, often through the deployment of new research. Thus, running through several chapters is an engagement with the latest scholarly issues of debate, including, for example, the medical humanities; the materiality of texts; the history of reading; and objects and thing theory. The narrative is an English one, but it frequently engages with non-English authors (including Augustine, Rousseau, and Freud) who were important for the development of English autobiographical writing.

The book is structured chronologically, and has a spine of canonical texts: in this sense, *English Autobiography* will serve as the ideal source for a reader coming to the topic for the first time, or seeking to set their period-specific knowledge in a broader context. But alongside this robust coverage, the collection also treats 'autobiography' in ways that are expansive, imaginative, and suggestive. The collection does this in part by greatly expanding the chronological range normally given over to histories of autobiography: backwards, into the medieval and early modern, and forwards, into the contemporary world of social media, smartphones, and omnipresent digital cameras.

One of *English Autobiography*'s central contentions is that autobiography, in its widest sense, is not an exclusively modern, post-Romantic phenomenon, but a way of writing and reading that has a much richer, longer history. Standard histories of the form often discuss Augustine's *Confessions* and perhaps one early modern writer (usually either Montaigne or Bunyan), before finding a real beginning with Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782). The pre-1750 serves as a space for throat-clearing or limbering up – but this is to miss a wealth of significant texts, authors, and lives. In Part 1, 'Autobiography before "autobiography" (ca. 1300–1700)', coverage of medieval and early modern forms of autobiographical writing provides a crucial pre- or counter-history to the better-known story of autobiography's nineteenth-century origins. Early chapters demonstrate how writers in England between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries made vibrant records of their lives, in letters and visions like Julian of Norwich's *Revelations*, or, spectacularly, in the *Book* of Margery Kempe (ca. 1373–1440): an 'uneasy hybrid of an autobiographical saint's life or autohagiography', Barry Windeatt suggests in Chapter 2 (p. 22), possessed of both a mould-breaking originality and an acute awareness of tradition. These texts, and the early modern life-writings that followed them – diaries, spiritual testimonies, financial accounts – challenge us to rethink our idea of autobiography in a period of English literary history in which the modern notion of a written life as (according to one definition) 'a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular the story of his personality' (Lejeune 1989, 4) was not yet fully recognisable.

The chapters do this in part by challenging the link between self-writing and inwardness. Autobiography is so powerfully yoked in modern formulations to notions of interiority and depth that the concept of a written self, assembled through surfaces and things, seems counter-intuitive or lacking. But such a life is possible, as suggested here in discussions of seventeenth-century financial accounting, where the death of a wife might be narrated through the columns of funeral expenses in an account book, and in a chapter on eighteenth-century 'it-narratives' – that is, fictional autobiographies narrated, as Lynn Festa describes in Chapter 10, by inanimate objects (coins, canes, and clothing) and animals (birds, fleas, dogs). Autobiography may be 'the literature of subjectivity' (Marcus 1994, 231), but subjectivity has a history and can mean different things at different times.

Early autobiographies rely, too, perhaps counter-intuitively, on the overt redeployment of existing scripts: they produce a sense of self not through a process of detachment or alienation from other life-stories, but

rather through a series of alignments and overlappings. Augustine's *Confessions* provides one crucial paradigm across the full chronological range of this collection, with its emphasis on a pre-conversion spiritual wandering, a child's voice heard in a garden ('*tolle, lege; tolle, lege*': 'pick up and read; pick up and read'), and the sudden conversion on reading part of Paul's letter to the Romans (Augustine 1992, 152–3). The spiritual autobiography that flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries worked in part by redeploying already-known Biblical narratives to order and make sense of a life: thus in *The Vocacyon of Johan Bale* (1553), Bale describes a year's hardships endured by a Protestant reformer under Queen Mary I by using St Paul as a template, stretching the story of his own trials in Ireland over St Paul's last journey to Jerusalem: 'Sanct Paule also rejoyced', Bale writes; 'Whie shulde I than shrinke or be ashamed to do the lyke?' (Bale 1553, f. 5). Far from erasing Bale's story, his life is conveyed through a reworked retelling of a narrative of virtue under fire – a process that invokes the dual meaning of 'identity' as both sameness (he is St Paul) and uniqueness (he is not St Paul, he is himself). Past written lives, in Bale's conception, are 'left to us for example that we shulde do the lyke whan we fele the lyke' (Bale 1553, f. 5).

Donald Stauffer calls Bale's text the first separately printed English prose autobiography, and it may well be this (Stauffer 1964, 178, noted in Skura 2008, 49). But a language of firsts and origin points is not always the best way to talk about autobiography, not only because it can result in an arid kind of literary history concerned with the trumping of one origin point for another (d'Israeli in 1809?; Rousseau in 1782?; Augustine in 397?; the earlier stories of other Christian converts on which Augustine drew?), but also because a sense of the seminal usually works to exclude texts that fall outside of that particular and often very male genealogical line of descent, 'returning the critics to the same set of texts with the same set of demands' (Marcus 1994, 2). Moreover, the uses of convention that we see in Bale and spiritual life-writing more generally reveal a tension that is *always* at the heart of autobiography, *across all periods*: on the one hand, the writing of a life through an inherited pattern, a formal, generic, or moral duty to conform to a legible template, to produce a life that is comprehensible as a life; on the other, the writing of a life as a departure from those existing patterns, a breaking away, a sense of the inadequacy of what has been said before. It is tempting to figure this tension in terms of an opposition between constraint and liberation, and to settle on a notion of authentic self-writing as a writing away from past forms. But the earliest life-writing was always a restless tussle with the available (that is, inherited) literary

traditions, just as the newness of contemporary forms of self-accounting is often indebted to older traditions, even if an excited rhetoric of digital newness often conceals those continuities. Moreover, that separation of life as experience, and autobiography as written representation of experience – of life as the thing lived, and the written account as subsequent – can become blurred, too: an awareness of the conventions of autobiographical forms might feed back into the lived life, as Nick Hubble describes in his account of Mass Observation and its prescribed forms of self-accounting. To live knowing one will soon write about living means the present-tense life will be shaped by genres: conventions of representation (like, for example, a modernist self-reflexivity) tumble out of the text and into the world. This pressure or feedback is certainly evident in the second decade of the twenty-first century, when a sea of smartphones and tablets rise up at a pop concert or a school play.

Early forms of autobiography highlight two particular pressures that weigh heavily on much autobiographical writing across the whole of this collection. First, the relationship between the writing self and the written self is a relationship both of identity and difference: the autobiographical contract (Lejeune 1989, 4, 17) demands that these two figures are one, but the form's investment in a narrative of development or at least change requires differentiation. And second, within the autobiographical text there is a toggling between the particular and the exemplary: the detail of one day (a view from a bridge in the early morning) is amplified, by virtue of its inclusion, to suggest an aesthetic or moral pattern, but at the same time the text recoils from that condition of exemplarity by stressing its stubborn singleness. Different autobiographical texts, at different times, have different ways of negotiating these tensions, but they remain refrains across the centuries covered by this collection.

Literary histories often fall into a narcissistic pattern: an older period of foundation-laying leads to the modern complexity or radicalism that we frequently identify with our own historical period; homogeneity breaks into a diversity that we claim as our own. *English Autobiography* attempts to avoid this predictable and excluding arc of progress or sophistication. As Molly Murray notes, the word 'radical' comes from the Latin *radix*, or root: it suggests a concern with sources, as much as a growing away from them. Life-writing from all periods is frequently radical in this double sense: forward-looking, in the production of new kinds of text, and backward-looking, in the sense of being self-consciously indebted to earlier textual roots. To write a life – and indeed to write in general – means necessarily to engage with patterns, types, and conventions and, through

those engagements (and engagements can describe a range of responses, from recycling to agonistic struggle to rejection), to be aware of the overlaps and the gaps between pattern and life and to feel the twin pull of the documentary and the parable. In the words of Patricia Meyer Spacks, '[t]he crucial literary problem of autobiography is to articulate a significant form for the relative incoherence of human experience' (Spacks 1976, 434). The always-changing nature of those engagements is the subject of this volume, rather than a story of the gradual shedding of skins of convention. These engagements between autobiographical convention and text take many forms, but running throughout the chapters in the collection are three recurring modes: *negotiation* (adjusting conventions to meet new forms of experience and circumstance); *improvisation* (taking conventions sharply in surprising, unforeseen directions); and *patchwork* (gathering parts of distinct texts or conventions to produce new hybrids). Each form of engagement produces new texts which in turn become available precedents or, if repeated sufficiently, conventions for future writers.

This sense of autobiographical writing in a state of development or, more neutrally, flux, is reflected in the terminology deployed throughout this volume. Autobiography was, from its first coinage, a difficult term, a word that could more easily be pushed away than embraced. The earliest recorded use, in 1797, was a call for its rejection:

> The next dissertation concerns *Diaries, and Self-biography*. We are doubtful whether the latter word be legitimate: it is not very usual in English to employ hybrid words partly Saxon and partly Greek: yet *autobiography* would have seemed pedantic. ('autobiography', *Oxford English Dictionary*)

The term blossoms in the nineteenth century, although the alignment between word and concept is never entirely tidy: if a term comes into being to describe a practice that is already legible, then it must lag behind that practice, rather as writing can never quite keep up with experience. Nonetheless, the historical contingency of the term raises immediate questions about the applicability of the word to periods before and after its moment of coining (Davis 2006, 19–34). Contributors to this volume deploy a multiplicity of terms to describe their texts: alongside autobiography jostle (among many other descriptors) life-writing, self-accounting, self-writing, reflected autobiography, memoir, family or relational memoir, anecdote, automated biography (life narratives produced on social media often featuring branding and implied corporate loyalties), autobiografiction (Max Saunders' revival of an early-twentieth-century term to describe a relation 'between fiction and a self's autobiography' (Saunders

2010, 7–8)), autography (first-person writing which offers no 'claim to any systematic relation to documentable truth' (Spearing 2011, 7)), and even, in Joseph Brooker's discussion of Alasdair Gray's *A Life in Pictures* (2010), 'autopictography'. Moreover, as the chapters in this collection describe, autobiography might be understood not as a genre in itself but an impulse or, as Barry Windeatt puts it in Chapter 2, 'an act of self-assertion' (p. 24) that finds expression *within* literary genres as diverse as Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess* (ca. 1368) and Anne Thackeray Ritchie's novel *The Story of Elizabeth* (1863). Autobiography can be a form of writing, or it can be a presence within a form of writing (thus an 'autobiographical novel'), or it can be, as Paul de Man argues, a way of reading (de Man, 1984). Autobiography might be the unforeseen, or secondary consequence of a literary project: not the primary intention of the author but a way of understanding his or her text nonetheless.

These terms overlap but are not quite synonymous. What does this chatter of related but different terms suggest? For past critics it might be a cause of anxiety: how can we write about a kind of writing if it evades categorisation, or, to be more exact, doesn't quite conform to categorisation? But alongside an expansion of chronological range, *English Autobiography* is committed precisely to this widening of the kinds of texts that fall under the category of 'autobiography'. An instability, or variability, of forms of life-writing[3] has traditionally been seen as a problem for criticism: one account of British autobiography opens with a wish to 'frame a definition which excludes the bulk of random or incidental self-revelation scattered through seventeenth-century literature' (Delaney 1969, 1); another focuses on narrative autobiography, precisely defined, 'to clear the air by imposing limits on autobiographical emissions' (Mascuch 1997, 7). Mascuch's use of 'emissions' is a deliberately provocative word in a book published the year of the Kyoto Protocol, but a sense of generic unfixity and experimentation has always been, and continues to be, a central trait of autobiography. Questions about autobiography as a genre lead quickly and inexorably to questions about the referential stability of the text, the relationship between truth and fiction, and authorial intention – that is, they lead away from the formal properties of the text on which definitions of genre usually depend. In this sense, while Derrida is right to note that all texts have a tentative relationship to genre(s) – '[e]very text participates in one or several genres ... yet such participation never amounts to belonging' (Derrida 1980, 65) – autobiography presents particular challenges. Lejeune's influential definition identifies formal properties even if it is possible to problematise those terms (how retrospective does a retrospective prose narrative have to be; and how

can writing about an event be anything other than retrospective, occurring as it must do after experience?), but he also needs to invoke traits that reside outside the text, or that straddle both outside and inside, pointing to what he calls an autobiographical pact or contract affirming the identify between the names of author, narrator, and protagonist (Lejeune 1989, 4, 17).

But if autobiographical writing *qua* genre 'has proved very difficult to define and regulate' (Marcus 1994, 229, 1), that trickiness is not a problem that needs cordoning off, or a pollution clouding the skies: it is a condition of autobiographical writing. Max Saunders's important recent book, *Self Impression* (2010), is concerned precisely with the productive overlaps between auto/biography (that is, autobiography and/or biography) and literary modernism: indeed, and even more expansively, Saunders suggests 'one story of the novel in English is of a troubled relation between fiction and autobiography, from fictive autobiographies by Robinson Crusoe . . . to autobiographical novels like Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* or D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*' (Saunders 2010, 8). *English Autobiography* acknowledges, and tackles, this sense of shifting, evolving, various forms – taking forms, again, to mean both formal or literary properties, and the material instantiations these texts might assume. Thus in Part 2, 'Religion, gender, things (ca. 1700–1800)', chapters covering eighteenth-century materials consider spiritual autobiographies such as Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*; John Wesley's printed journals; letters; philosophical works by Locke, Berkeley, and Hume; and – in response to recent compelling theoretical work on the social lives of objects – so-called 'it-narratives'. What happens to our sense of autobiography when it is organised around an object, not a person?

English Autobiography's widening of chronology and of written forms is accompanied by an attempt to place established or dominant narratives about the history of autobiography alongside newer, revisionist conceptions of the written life. We see this clearly in Part 3, 'The many nineteenth centuries (ca. 1800–1900)'. The nineteenth century is traditionally, and to some degree rightly, regarded as the period in which a recognisably modern sense of autobiography came into being: when writers began to produce retrospective, chronological, richly interior life narratives. *English Autobiography* recognises and describes this important paradigm, and attends to vital nineteenth-century figures such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Carlyle, and John Stuart Mill. But the collection also supplements and complicates this story by offering a series of alternative conceptions of autobiography in the period. Thus, sustained attention is given to the great burgeoning of working-class autobiography (described in Chapter 12

by the pioneer in the field, David Vincent); to the variety of forms of women's life-writing, including the rich overlaps between novel and autobiography, and the generically dizzying hybrids such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's autobiography-poetry-novel-epic *Aurora Leigh* (1856); to Victorian artists' autobiographies; and to the interface between cheap print culture and written lives in penny journals like the *London Journal*: journals which achieved remarkable circulation figures, and which offered extracts from existing autobiographies for an often working-class readership.

Part 4, 'Relational lives and forms of remembering (ca. 1890–1930)', sustains this interest in the new forms autobiographical writing might assume by considering the first third of the twentieth century, and the radical (once more: both backward- and forward-looking) developments of English literary modernism. Queer lives, such as those by Wilde, Sackville-West, and Woolf, challenge an often naturalised heterosexual script that continues to shape modern expectations of autobiography; while experiments in the forms of fiction produced new possibilities for generic overlaps between the novel, letter, diary, and autobiography, as seen in the writings of Woolf, Eliot, Mansfield, Lawrence, Joyce, and Dorothy Richardson.

The twin emphasis on the urgency, and difficulty, of remembering one's life is a strain running throughout this volume. The autobiography is a combination of a drive towards the all-seeing, 'the evocation of a life as a totality' (Marcus 1994, 3), and a recognition of the impossibility of that task: the baffling challenge to fully represent the life from within the life, 'the conceptual problem of how a mind can simultaneously observe and be observed' (Marcus 1994, 5). This is, in Kathleen Lynch's words, one of the conditions of autobiography: 'a simulacrum of completion against the impossibility of the task' (Chapter 5, p. 62). This sense of struggle and adversity was amplified by the trauma of two world wars and the enormous influence of Freudian psychoanalysis, the latter leading to a new emphasis on the adventitious and the unintentional, rather than the rational and deliberate; and on the need, as Maud Ellman explores in the present volume, to find literary forms 'responsive to the dynamics of regression, deferred action, compulsive repetition, and other temporal upheavals characteristic of the primary process of the unconscious' (Chapter 22, p. 315). Life narratives determined by trauma might be narratives in which crucial shaping experiences left, as Roger Luckhurst suggests, no trace in conscious memory. Such a conception of a written life puts tremendous pressure on ideas of truthfulness and the autobiographical pact.

Part 5, 'Kinds of community (ca. 1930–contemporary)', tracks across various social groups: literary, political, and digital. Running through these

culminating chapters is an exploration of the interplay between affinity and difference that is crucial for the creation of a written self. We see this in chapters on literary writing and its relation to a life. In the poetry of the 1930s, for instance, Auden uses an 'I' to illuminate a broader social condition, while Spender's verse represents a contrasting, and uniquely constructed, self ('My parents kept me from children who were rough'), often as a means to suggest, as Michael O'Neill notes, that 'what we share is difference, obstinate singleness' (Chapter 23, p. 334). The literary memoir (including books by Martin Amis, Jeanette Winterson, Hilary Mantel, and Alasdair Gray) often rests on a dynamic of aligning with, and withdrawing from, a sense of literary tradition. Political community is explored in Chapter 24, which focuses on Mass Observation (MO), founded in 1937 as a scientific study of human social behaviour in Britain, which established a focus on everyday life. By asking participants to keep diaries to be read by others, MO encouraged an 'intersubjective autobiography' built around both an individual and collective sense of self. Postcolonial life-writing further complicates a sense of the autobiographer's relationship to convention and tradition, and challenges models of unified, or 'sovereign' autobiographical subjectivity which have often been prized in Western autobiographical studies. The degree to which an existing autobiographical discourse can, or cannot, provide a script for a written life is also considered in Chapter 27, which discusses illness narratives (an important, emerging area of scholarship): is it still true that, as Virginia Woolf noted, for pain 'language runs dry'?

Part 5 concludes by asking whether the collective mediations of digital technology represent a fundamental paradigm shift in terms of autobiographical practices and possibilities, or a continuity with existing modes. What links might we posit between the dissemination of life data via images, video, timelines, charts, real time video/audio feeds and tweets, and centuries of shifting autobiographical writing? If the forms of life generated by social media break, as Andreas Kitzmann puts it, 'the link between humanism, life narrative, and the impulse towards "mastery"' (Chapter 29, p. 429), is this a bold new chapter, or the latest iteration of centuries of exploration of the paradoxes of autobiographical writing?

Notes

1. Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939. St Albans: Triad/Panther, 1977), p. 11.

2. Algernon Sidney, *Colonel Sidney's speech delivered to the sheriff on the scaffold December 7th 1683* (1683), p. 3.
3. By form I mean both genre and materiality: unlike many accounts of autobiography, organised around the individual author as source, the present collection is interested in the production and circulation of texts.

Bibliography

Augustine. 1992. *Confessions*. Edited and translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bale, John. 1553. *The vocacyon of Iohan Bale to the bishiprick of Ossorie*.

Davis, Lloyd. 2006. 'Critical Debates and Early Modern Autobiography'. In *Early Modern Autobiography: Theories, Genres, Practices*, 19–34. Edited by Ronald Bedford, Lloyd Davis, and Philippa Kelly. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Delaney, Paul. 1969. *British Autobiography in the Seventeenth Century*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

De Man, Paul. 1984. 'Autobiography as De-Facement'. In *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 67–81. New York: Columbia University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1980. 'The Law of Genre'. In *Critical Inquiry*, 7.1: 55–81.

Lejeune, Philippe. 1989. 'The Autobiographical Pact'. In *On Autobiography*, 3–30. Edited by Paul John Eakin. Trans. Katherine M. Leary. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Marcus, Laura. 1994. *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Mascuch, Michael. 1997. *Origins of the Individualist Self: Autobiography and Self-Identity in England, 1591–1791*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Oxford English Dictionary. 'Autobiography'. *Oxford English Dictionary*. www.oed.com (accessed 9 September 2015).

Saunders, Max. 2010. *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Skura, Meredith Anne. 2008. *Tudor Autobiography: Listening for Inwardness*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Spacks, Patricia. 1978. *Imagining a Self*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Spearing, A. C. 2012. *Medieval Autographies: The 'I' of the Text*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Stauffer, Donald A. 1964. *English Biography before 1700*. New York: Russell and Russell.