



What Can We Do with Autobiography?

by Liu Wei, grad student, Bemidji State University

In society, it is a popular opinion that writing is a magic thing, even not comprehensible. However, autobiography tells us how one can write something. Robert Lyons' *Autobiography: A Reader for Writers* is very helpful to those who have interests in writing. In this book, Lyons has broken several superstitions about writing, and these superstitions have been the obstacles in the way of writing for a long time.

First Lyons has broken the superstition that our writing has to deal with

something exceptional, to deal with the celebrity. He states "it is not

necessary to start off by recounting some grand and exceptional accomplishment or to worry if nothing in our lives strikes us as being very exceptional" (84). The superstition that our writing material has been something exceptional is very harmful to common people because they seldom experience something exceptional. Thus many people dare not write. This also harmed me a lot. In China, this superstition is prevalent. It goes like you should write about the life of the celebrity, the revolutionary, the soldier, the worker, the peasant and etc; or you writing should represent the achievement of the socialist country. It seems that the life of student or the life of intellectual is not worth writing. As a student, I go to the school and come back; one day is much like another. I don't feel in my life there is something that can be as grandeur as the revolutionary; nor do I have a chance to near the worker and etc. without affecting my study. Thus for a long time, I don't think I may get the writing material, and don't write anything. I just send an essay to my city newspaper once without receiving the response. During my twenty-nine years' life, I hadn't got any of my

writings published. Now when I look back at my blank life in China, I feel the superstition about the writing material played a great role in it.

The autobiographies we used for the class are also written by common people. Linda Brent's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is about Brent's life as a slave girl in the southern plantation. Obviously she is not a celebrity but a common person. Rachel Calof's *Rachel Calof's Story* is about the hardships of her immigrating life in America. She is also a common person, not a celebrity. Perhaps the only author that is famous among our textbooks is Henry David Thoreau. His *Walden* is world famous. In China, *Walden* has been translated again and again. Still we are safe to say this book is written by a common person. Because Thoreau has written only two books, and *Walden* is his masterpiece. Thus when he was writing it, his reputation had been established.

When the things of common people get written down onto the paper, I see the lives of common people are also meaningful and touching. This piques me interest to write my own life down onto the paper. I have written an essay about my summer life in China when I was six years old, and it has got published by American literary magazine *Wired Heart*. This is an elec-

tronic magazine whose office is in Florida. It gives my essay an Internet address: 198.92.138.78/liu_wei_under_still_starry_sky.html. In my view, this may be the best outcome that a student can get from the course. On the Internet, the magazine does not paragraph my essay, but when I do the submission, it is paragraphed. It runs as the following::

Under the Still Starry Sky

In recent days the temperature in my hometown—Chongqing, China—was standing at one hundred and five degrees. In the daytime, the glare of the sun melted the pitch on the road on which my plastic sandal had been glued several times. At home, even though I sat motionless, I still felt the sweat ooze from my skin slowly.

Thank God. The torrid afternoon dragged away at last. After supper, I—a six-year-old kid—said to my parents, “Daddy, Mommy, I want to go out to have a walk.”

“Sure. A walk after meals every day may make you live ninety nine years.” My mother was always fond of such adages about health.

Then I bounced out of my home. On the playground, I saw several adults watering the gray ground, water basin in hand. When that was over, I walked over the watered patches that looked black. Immediately I felt the rising heat ca-

ress my feet. It was not hot; it was warm. I liked that kind of feeling.

Watering the playground was the prelude of our congenial evening life. When the watered playground got dry and cool, dozens of the families began to come

out of our shabby living building into the playground, bamboo bed in hand. On the playground, they settled up the bamboo beds by wood stools. Among these people, I also saw my father and my

mother, and helped them in doing the same job. Then I place a bottle that contained ice water by our bamboo bed. In the daytime after adding sugar into a bottle of the boiled water, my father would put the bottle into the refrigerator of his working place, and at night we could enjoy the ice water.

As soon as I lay down on the bamboo bed, I took my breath at ease unwilling to move one muscle. All the sweat and fatigue from daytime were leaving my body. In the mean time, many other people were resting on their bamboo beds like I.

At that time, the deficiencies of ice cream, cold drink, refrigerator, air-conditioner, television and even the electric fan shaped our summer life. At night the room in our shabby living building remained

a baking cage. We could not have any pleasure at home but would undergo the heat. So every day we spent the whole evening on the playground under the sky till midnight when we returned home to sleep.

Now I began my pleasures for tonight. First I tried to count the stars in the boundless sky. Each time when I counted over fifteen, then I would become uncertain about whether the next star should belong to the ones I had counted. I heard the little girl who was lying three meters apart from me articulating numbers in her crisp voice, “fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen.” At the last number the voice faltered. I should say she was better than I.

Then I changed my program. Lying comfortably on the bamboo bed, I began to contemplate the sky over me. At present my whole world appeared to be the sky overhead only. All the shabby living building and the steaming air were sent into limbo. Looking up, I could not find the moon but the countless stars scattering in the boundless sky. I heard the elder sister of that little girl showing that girl where was the Big Dipper. I had no interest in the knowledge of it because in my view every star in the sky was amazing in its own way.

I woke from my contemplation and said to my father, “Daddy, why don’t you continue the story . . . ?”

The ceaselessly flickering stars gave off the bright white light, which made them brilliant against the dark blue sky. The occasionally flickering stars gave off the steady dim light, which made them look soft in the dark blue sky. All the stars were sending the cold light in silence, which worked into a still starry sky.

Perhaps each star had a story. Oh, story was interesting. I woke from my contemplation and said to my father, "Daddy, why don't you continue the story of the Three Empires?"

"OK." After a draught of the ice water, he began to favor me with the story. During his recitation, I asked questions now and then.

"Has that ever-victorious general lost a battle during his life?" inquired I.

"Oh, yes, finally in a place called Wheat Town he suffered a disastrous defeat and was beheaded by the enemy."

"What a pity!" I breathed a long sigh.

During the story telling, we continuously drank the ice water that was only two pints. Many a time I wished I was able to spare the next draught, but one draught invoked another. When drinking, I felt its sweetness and coldness massaging every heated nerve of mine. To me, it was nectar.

Later, lying under the still starry sky, I felt it looked so tran-

quil that it must be able to bless my lot. Gradually I yielded to the drowsiness with the still starry sky as my cover.

Suddenly I heard a stir from the resting congregation. "Earthquake is coming here! Earthquake is coming here!" Somebody broke the news in an agitated tone. Having seen some families get startled at this, I arose on my bamboo bed waiting for the order from my parents. Several minutes later, another news came declaring that the earthquake was in Canada and the former news was owing to a wrong intelligence.

"Canada—that is ten thousand kilometers away from here. How can the intelligence staff make such a blunder?" Several adults were complaining about it.

With my sleepy eye gazing at the face of my mother, I uttered, "Mommy, where is Canada?"

"It's a far, far place."

After I made sure that the earthquake was too far to be able to affect us in the least, I lay down on the cozy bamboo bed, consoled. Yeah, the earthquake shall not disturb us who rested under the still starry sky, shall it?

The above is my essay. I'd like to make an acknowledgement that my teacher Susan (Hauser) read it before I sent it to the press, and some words of it were hers. If considering the writing material, the

material is not exceptional. There is no war, no invention, no big deal. I feel the essay is fine. This semester we held a reading meeting in Headwater High School for our "Dust and Fire." That noon when I went there, I met Carol Bly. When she asked me whether I brought with me some writing, I showed her this one. She told me it was very good when she finished reading it. Especially she asked me about the bamboo bed, and told me there was a lot of bamboo in her garden.

Yeah, the life of us common people is meaningful. Those who think that the life of common people is not meaningful is just because they haven't discovered the meaning in it; they haven't used a pen to write down their life.

Here we have reached the most beneficial thing that Lyons brings to us. It is that writing autobiography serves as a perspective for an individual to discover the meaning in his or her life. He says that writing autobiography is to explore some past moment (13). And Oriana Fallaci says, "I think transparency should always be substituted for what is secret" (26). That is to say by writing our own life down, we discover something in our life. This point is critical in considering about writing autobiography.

Because many people assume that since we write about our past, while our memory cannot retain everything in the past, thus the written experience must be less than our actual experience. Yeah, nobody can remember everything in his or

her past. However, the assumption is not safe because it overlooks one thing that is by writing down our life, we find something that we haven't been conscious of before. For example, when Brent wrote her

autobiography, she might feel "Oh, how vicious my master had been to me; what a dangerous position I had been, but at that time I didn't know clearly." When Tobias Wolff wrote his autobiography, (*This Boy's Life: A Memoir*) he might feel "Oh, Dwight is actually so bad a guy, but at that time I haven't noticed it."

The same is true with myself. Now all my writings deal with my own life both in China and in America. They belong to the genre of memoir. When I am doing it, I feel now many things in the past become clearer than they were at the time they happened. For instance, in April, 2000, I wrote an essay about my watching the playing of "Go" in my hometown of Chongqing, China.

In the essay, I describe two Go players, the black jacket and the

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brown jacket, playing Go.

"Go is a kind of traditional Chinese chess. There are 361 points on the checkerboard. The one who gets more points on the checkerboard than his rival wins the game. I feel one basic tactics of playing Go is to surround the rival's pieces and kill them. Thus playing Go is just like a battle on the checkerboard."

During the game, the brown jacket uses the black pieces, while the black jacket uses the white pieces. In a big battle, the black pieces kill thirty-odd white pieces. At that time, I suppose that the brown jacket will feel relaxed and win the game soon. Then I wrote:

When a white piece is put on the blue paper, I hear a crisp sound. This is an exhibition of confidence. I like the sound very much. The brown jacket takes deeply one smoke after another, which is a sign of encountering difficulties. I cannot understand why he does so. Perhaps he is a heavy smoker. Perhaps besides winning the game, he likes to kill as many white pieces as he can.

In the meantime, the black jacket keeps puts the whites pieces on the checkerboard with the crisp sound. The assumptions of the two should be interchanged. These two odd guys.

But the result is beyond my supposition. The black jacket wins the game. Then I wrote: "You have

been killed of so many pieces, how can you win?" I ask the black jacket.

"During that big battle, when he was engaged in attacking my white pieces that were on the west edge, I was also attacking the black pieces from the east—the area near the middle of the checkerboard. His attacking pace turned out to be faster than mine, and killed my pieces, which is within my expectation. On the other hand, although my attack from the east didn't kill the black pieces, it formed strong force in the middle of the checkerboard, which had influence over the whole checkerboard, while his victory of the battle was just regional," the black jacket answers.

This watching happened in February, 1997. Three years ago when I was watching the game, I didn't notice that the pose of the two guys were not only the real reflection of their feelings but also the situation on the checkerboard. At that time I just felt they were odd. Now when I am writing about the scene, I know their judgment of the situation on the checkerboard is much accurate than mine. Thus writing my life provides me with a more effective perspective to view my past, to view my life. In Headwater High School at noon, Carol Bly gave us a lecture. The main idea of it, I feel, is writing makes us feel our life is meaningful. I agree with her.

This semester I take Susan's course "Creative Writing of Non-fiction." In class, we students read our own writings, and I feel most of our writings belong to memoir. Now we are working on publishing a book consisting of our own writings. Susan asked us a title for the anthology. At first I had no idea about it. Think each essay comes from a different person. The theme, the expression, the style of the essays must vary a lot from each other. How can there be a title to unify them? I just feel I should consider it from the feature of the course. As I said above our writings deal with our life, and by writing we get fresh perspective to view our life. Then I get an idea. Last Thursday, I proposed Susan to use the title "Light the Life." She said she would propose it to the class and she did. And during my proposal to her, John—the faculty from Moorhead State University—liked the title, too.

Unlike many other books, the most wonderful thing of Lyons' book lies in the picture on its cover. On the cover, there are green lines that are delineating a face on which there are the mouth, the nose, the eyebrow and the eye. The hand that is taking a pencil is so delicate that I think it must be a hand of a lady. To me, picture is still being drawn

because there are still many blank areas in the face. The most interesting thing is the end of the stipple of the pencil. It is connecting with the line of the eye. It looks strange. When we draw a painting, we use a pencil to draw on the paper with our eye looking at both the scene and the paper. That is to say we use our eye to command the pencil in our hand, not in a contrary way. We don't a pencil to draw our own eyes. The connection between the end of the pencil and the eye remains a puzzle to me. As our course goes on, and I do more writings, one day all of a sudden I understand what does the connection mean. Here obviously the pencil means writing. And the eye does not confine in its literal meaning. It refers to our perspective. Thus by the picture, we are using a pencil to draw our eyes. Yes, when we are writing memoir, we get fresh perspective on our past from time to time. When we write one essay, we may get some fresh perspectives on our life; when we write another essay, we may get more fresh perspectives on our life. Perhaps this is an important way for our writing to make progress. After this being illustrated, we move to its adjacent point that writing autobiography or memoir is done from hindsight. First as I mention before it is impossible

*... we are
using a pencil
[writing] to
draw our eyes
[perspective].*

for a person to remember everything in his past. On this point, Lyons states, "Obviously, no writer is going to erase entirely the passage of time and re-create exactly the thoughts and feelings of the younger person he once was" (115). However, this is not a disadvantage but an advantage. Just imagine if someone really writes his life down exactly as it was, what may the reader feel? It will read like record or history, but not like literature. Thus our inadequate memory prevents many people from spending futile effort. Actually autobiography is written from hindsight, not from the sight when the thing happened in the past. For this Lyons says, "Any writer of autobiography is telling us about himself as he was at some time in the past, but he is also writing about that from the perspective of the present, with whatever advantages hindsight provides" (115). This may be a difference between autobiography and biography. Because biography is done by another person instead of the figure in the book himself. It is unlikely for him to have hindsight. His view of the figure in biography is just another perspective that might have nothing to do with the difference of time.

One advantage of hindsight is that we may get detached from the time of the happening in the past, and view it more clearly. For this, Lyons says, "When we write our

past, we know it but are not enveloped in it, since we possess a degree of detachment toward our past, we often want to make some explicit interpretation of our experience" (317). Suppose we go to the mountain. In the mountain, we might not see the terrain of the mountain clearly. If we want to enjoy a clear view of a mountain, we'd better looking at the mountain in the distance or looking at it from the air, instead of entering the mountain.

There is one big problem here, especially when the writing of autobiography deals with one's childhood. That is to say when one becomes an adult and writes about his childhood, what pattern of expression should he adopt to describe his childhood? Should we use the naive speech or even babble of a child? Or should we use the words of an adult? Because some people may think that since one is describing childhood, thus it will be unbelievable for the child to utter the big words. Some may hold that if the language of the autobiography consists entirely of that of children, it may not appeal to the reader at all. The answer is that one can use any words he likes to write an autobiography. Both Brent's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Wolff's *This Boy's Life* deal with the life of childhood, and they both use big words for it.

In China, I had been disturbed by this a lot. Because when I wanted to write about my childhood, I would worry about the criticism of somebody that it was impossible for a child like me to use big words, or to have profound thought. But if I abandon these elements, how can I write something appealing to the reader? So I abandoned the spur of writing about my childhood. When I came to America, I feel I can write, as I like. Especially, last semester I took the course of Victorian Novel. When I read *Jane Eyre* I get enough support for me to write my childhood by the expression of an adult. This novel is written in the first person. Moreover, it is said that many things in the book actually happens in Charlotte Bronte's life. Thus this novel has strong sense of an autobiography. In the beginning of the novel, Jane describes her mood when she was locked in a room by his aunt for her defense against the attack from her aunt's son. She uses big words. This also happens when she describe the scenery she views from the window and the thoughts evoked by the scenery. The writing about the childhood of Jane serves as a basis for the novel. This is the starting point of the development of her character, and later we may see her character develops from that. If Charlotte Bronte is wrong on this

If I am wrong here, then this essay cannot be accepted . . .

point, then this novel cannot be a world famous work. It is said that it is one of three most popular books in China in 1990s. Thus I feel it is all right for me to use the words of adults, the thoughts of adults to describe my childhood.

Again I'd like to use my own writing as an example. The first paragraph of my "Under the Still Starry Sky" runs like this:

In recent days the temperature in my hometown—Chongqing, China—was standing at one hundred and five degrees. In the daytime, the glare of the sun melted the pitch on the road on which my plastic sandal had been glued several times. At home, even though I sat motionless, I still felt the sweat ooze from my skin slowly.

The words *temperature*, *glare*, *plastic*, *motionless*, and *ooze* are unlikely to be used or even known by a six-year-old kid. However, there is no problem to use them. If I am wrong here, then this essay cannot be accepted by two American national literary magazines. The other magazine that accepts it is also an electronic magazine. It says that it wants unpublished writings only. At that time, this essay had already been published on the March/April 2000 Issue of *Wired Heart*, thus I have to inform them that and let go the chance.

Now we are safe to say that adopting the expression of adult to write one's childhood is acceptable. Further, it is beneficial. Just imagine, if the expressions of adult in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *This Boy's Life*, and *Jane Eyre* and my own writing get eviscerated, what may happen to these writings? They will lose lots of flavor.

Then we move to next point about autobiography. Up to now we haven't touched the problem that why so many people like to read autobiography. Why? Because it is true. When a person wants to know the life of someone, he may feel good if there is an autobiography available. People have the desire of getting knowledge. Thus to some extent, autobiography is like confession. Among the texts we read in class, I feel Thoreau's *Walden* and Calof's *Rachel Calof's Story* possess stronger sense of confession than the others.

Autobiography is writing about one's personal experience. Thus it is unlikely to do generalizations. Doing generalizations is not a safe way to tell the truth. For example, when someone sees that a man invites his girlfriend to dinner, he makes a generalization, "All men believe that their bank account has sexual appeal." This sentence is too broad to be persuasive and, like most extreme generalizations, tells us much more about the values of

the writers than it does about the subject matter. In our text, I seldom see such generalizations. As autobiography deal with one's personal experience, it must be highly individualized, instead of being generalized. Therefore the things in an autobiography are likely to be true.

On this point, it has strong similarity with letter writing. Letter is written to our friends. It is private, and it is telling the things that actually happened in our life. Thus both autobiography or memoir and letter have the sense of confession, which appeals to the reader most. Reading a memoir is like reading a letter to some extent. For instance, all my writings belong to memoir. In America, I don't have time to write letter to my friends in China one by one. Thus I tell my teacher in China, if he sees my publications in the media either in America or in China, he may regard that is my letter to him. In fact, when I do my writings, I have expected that my friends may see them if they get published. I feel that when I am writing a letter, I am telling my friend the things that actually happened in my life; when I am writing a memoir, I am also telling the things that actually happened in my life. There isn't great difference between them. Perhaps the difference lays only in the respect of literary tactics. Lyons also acknowledges the value of letter writing. In China, let-

ter writing let me retain the confidence of my writing talent for a long time. During my life in China, I did not have any of my writings published, and my writing was just ordinary compared with that of classmates. The only thing that consoles me was the letter writing. To my classmates, letter writing was a great embarrassment. I could not imagine what occasion may make them use a pen to write down their thoughts onto a paper and send it out. For me,

I expected she might not like my answer, which was the common practice of Chinese teachers.

letter writing had never become an embarrassment. When I could not talk to my friends, I would write to them. When I was writing a letter, it was just like talking with my friends. It was a fun. I felt I might possess some vein of writing. However, a big problem remained. Letter does not have a high status in literature, and some people even doubt it should belong to literature. In 1996, when I read Chang Yaoxin's *The Literary History of America*, I saw that in the colonial period of America, letter played an important role in literary history. Then my confidence in the value of letter writing was strengthened. I wrote more letters, telling more truth of my life to my friends.

In August, 1999, I came to America to study English. The only

way practical for me to contact my friend in China was writing to them. During the first fortnight here, in average every day I send a letter to my friend. Such high frequency of letter writing had not happened to me in my life. In these days, I felt I

was just like a plane that was dashing on the track of the airport. I was dashing faster and faster. When the ninth day came, and I sent the ninth letter out, I said to myself, "Why can't I send some writing to the publishing house?"

Then I did. I sent my "I Come from Sichuan Foreign Language Institute" to the newspaper of my old school in China. I felt I took off. In December, 1999, it was published there with substantial deletion to my work. Recently I know that my city newspaper published it on March 28, 2000. Therefore, letter writing has played an important role in my later memoir writing. On this point, Robert Lyons has similar remarks. He says that letter writing is an activity that bridges the private and public uses of writing (64).

Last semester I took Susan's Advanced Prose Style class. I remember long we met, one day after class when she asked me what special thing I might have in writing, I answered, "I like writing letters to my friends." I expected she

might not like my answer, which was the common practice of Chinese teachers. I did not mind. I told the truth. Beyond my expectation, she said, "Oh, good." I was comforted and encouraged. Later I began to write memoir, and my second essay "A Letter to my Literary Teacher in China" is actually a letter. I sent it to the publishing houses last fall, although it had not got published.

Besides that genuine appeal of autobiography to the reader, autobiography has great influence upon the development of literature. Novel came into being along with the appearance of women's autobiography in the seventeenth century. Although there were several masterpieces written by men, almost all the novels in the early age were written by women (Ingrid 56). We see what a tribute autobiography has made to literature.

Moreover, the origin of the novel also contributes to the literary standard of western literature. The women writers in the seventeenth century are intended to tell a true face of their life, which bids well for their writings to focus on moving people rather than attracting people.

The literary standard of a text is determined by how much it can move people rather than how much it can attract people. Thus the autobiographies of these have chan-

neled western literature in a right way.

Contrast to this, the Chinese novel is originated among people who make money by recounting legend to the audience in teahouse. Thus the Chinese novel focuses on attracting people instead of moving people. This critical difference determines that western literature must be at a higher standard than Chinese literature. This can also explain why Chinese cannot win Nobel Prize, although it has 1.2 billion people. So I feel it is right for Lyons to put a face of a woman on the cover of the book instead of that of a man. For his book, the picture on the cover appeals to me most.

Many autobiographies deal with the hardships of the writer. How the writer will deal with them is an important facet of their autobiographies. Here humor serves as a device to deal with the hardships. For example, in Wolff's *This Boy's Life*, Wolff imitated the assumption of Wright when he came to visit his mother for the first time, which made his mother and their neighbor laugh heartily. Behind it, we see that Wolff did not like Wright, who was going to marry his mother, but owing to their poor condition, he could not prevent it. Humor can turn out to be effective in the occasions in which we can merely endure the hardship, and cannot reason whether the hardship for us is rea-

sonable or our endurance of it is reasonable.

On this point, I would like to use one of my essays as an example. In this essay, I describe the scene that in China when I was in primary school, one day after morn-

ing classes, my English teacher detained me in the classroom for I could not recite the text like my classmates did. In China, we have noon break that is from twelve to half past two—a time for the student to come home to have

lunch and a nap. That noon I had been unable to recite the text, and my teacher detained me for a whole noon break. When the afternoon classes were going to begin, she released me and told me that she would ask me to recite it again the next week. In the end, I wrote: "None of my classmates showed up by now. There was no time for me to walk home to eat and sleep. Today I had been a diligent student for I was the first one to be in the classroom."

examination. Even if I could do so, I don't want to. Because such reasoning reads like political argumentation, and it would damage the style of literature. Therefore, I cannot do reasoning here. I use humor—a literary device—that contains enough connotation against the teacher to end my essay.

Finally, as for the category of autobiography, now an autobiography can belong to either fiction or nonfiction. Perhaps in the past, people regard it as nonfiction. Among the texts in our class, I feel Brent's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Calof's *Rachel Calof's Story* are nonfiction. However, there are also many autobiographies that read like fiction. Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Wolff's *This Boy's Life* and Spiegelman's *Maus* all have strong sense of fiction. The sense of fiction in short is the sense of making up something. That is to say if we feel some text is unlikely to actually happen in life, then the text may be fiction. On the other hand, if we feel some text is likely to actually happen in life, then the text may be nonfiction. Nowadays demarcation between fiction and nonfiction has been blurred pretty much, and many a time it is not easy for us to tell whether a text belongs to fiction or nonfiction.

***This thing
actually
happened to
me. When
Susan read this,
she said that I
had wicked
humor.***

Just as the title of Lyons' book *Autobiography: A Reader for Writers*, autobiography can not only appeal to the reader by its truth-telling style but also provide an opportunity for an individual to step into the domain of writing. Meanwhile it contributes a lot to the genre of literature.

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