3 Female Traditions of Autobiography: Memoir and Fiction

The Woman in me kneels and weeps in tender rapture; the Man in me rushes forth, only to be baffled. Yet the time will come when, from the union of the tragic king and queen, shall be born a radiant self.

_Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli_

If the primary theme of _My Apprenticeship_ is Beatrice Webb’s quest for ‘Creed’ and ‘Craft’ through a working out of the conflict between the ‘Ego that affirms’ and the ‘Ego that denies’, its secondary theme – its subtext – is the resolution of that other division of self she experienced as an intellectually ambitious Victorian woman. Growing up in an age that clearly separated the spheres of men and women, she found it all but impossible to reconcile her longings for public achievement with her desire for the private happiness of marriage and domesticity. Like Margaret Fuller, she aspired to some integration, some ‘union’, of the two beings who seemed to co-exist uncomfortably within her. Like Fuller and like so many other accomplished Victorian women, she could not understand two seemingly irreconcilable impulses – one appropriately womanly because sanctioned by society, and the other abnormally manly because it was not – without using the language of gender and without claiming possession of a double or divided nature.

_My Apprenticeship_ shares this theme of division with memoirs of other nineteenth-century women and with some of the major works of fiction by Victorian women novelists, and, in its way, it represents an amalgam of these two genres of women’s writing. Like memoir, it is the factual record of a life, but like fiction, it achieves what other memoirs by nineteenth-century women did...
not: a structural and thematic coherence through the explicit exposition and resolution of female conflict. According to recent examinations of women’s memoirs, there appear to be two dominant strains in non-fictional writings by women about their own lives. First, there is the memoir of the public woman who is loath to emphasize her public life or to make claims for its importance. These personal histories are tinged with embarrassment, self-denial and ambivalence about professional success.¹ There is also, however, the memoir of the woman writer who, as Nancy Miller has suggested, avoids discussion of her intimate life, of the emotional and physical experiences that are peculiarly female, and who shapes her life’s story according to the ‘transcendence of the feminine condition through writing’.² Both versions of the female self lack what another critic has called ‘the crucial motive of autobiography – a desire to synthesize, to see one’s life as an organic whole’.³ The first kind of female memoirist retreats from self-analysis and interpretation of intellectual experience or ambition; the second takes refuge from self in tracing only the literary or professional trajectory of her life.

The memoirs of women like Charlotte Tonna, Harriet Martineau and Annie Besant in England, Margaret Fuller and Jane Addams in America and George Sand in France are to be distinguished from the autobiographies of those Victorian men whom I have discussed, because of their largely unstructured, episodic and discursive natures. These women did not write the kinds of autobiographies that Northrop Frye has identified as prose fictions, autobiographies ‘inspired by a . . . fictional impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer’s life that go to build an integrated pattern’.⁴ Only the women novelists of the nineteenth century, notably Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, could identify, interpret and resolve, however tragically or infelicitously, the conflicts that determined and shaped their own – and other women’s – lives.

The autobiographies of Mill, Gosse, Carlyle, White and, indeed, Beatrice Webb assume the intrinsic interest and importance of the mental and spiritual lives of the autobiographer; they depend upon the translation of private experience into public document, and upon the assumed propriety of that translation. They also rely, as Frye suggests, on the perception of an ‘integrated pattern’ of life and on the resolution of internal struggle. The female memoirist, although she may have experi-