Autobiography of Alfred Matthew Runion

by

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Introduction

The traditional Masters thesis centers on the analysis of literature or a perspective on an author or genre. Generally the work is a mini-book of extended critical thought demonstrating the student’s felicity with language and ability to research and conduct a complicated analysis, all centered on a strong main point. This is one skill area for which the student should be amply prepared, since most courses center their final evaluation around the research essay. The thesis project that follows takes a significantly different tack: the student as editor and annotator. I have chosen to present a previously unpublished manuscript of an autobiography written by a layman. This project involved digitizing the text, editing it for clarity, analyzing the writing style and errors, preparing detailed notes to provide further information on people and items of interest, writing an essay discussing the author’s life after the close of the text, and compiling a glossary of names. In the essay that follows, I will define this type of project by discussing the nature of the autobiography genre, exploring the potential rewards to literature and history that result from analyzing and publishing the autobiography of an unlettered person, analyzing the manuscript itself for its literary and historical merits, and presenting the challenges facing the prospective editor of a posthumous work.
I. Autobiography: Literature and History

The autobiography carves out a difficult niche somewhere astride literature and history. As history it attempts to tell one individual’s life experiences as a member of and participating in society, as well as that person’s affect upon the time in which the person lived. As literature it makes a protagonist of the narrator and an odyssey of the recollected journey through life. These events are placed into thematic order and grouped by subject, demonstrating that the complicated and chaotic life is now a life thoroughly understood. As literature it is artifice, changing personal history into a treatise on the correct path to follow through life. As history it humanizes the bland details of actual events by placing them into pleasing narrative form. In effect, it is neither literature nor history, since it is too “real” for the land of poets and yet too revisionist and personal to be palatable to the scholar of linear, historical time.

Autobiography is the review of past action in order to make sense out of the life lived. Whether recounting the actual concrete events of personal history or meditating on thoughts and memories in order to make judgments and conclusions from them, the genre ultimately is concerned with the question of self-knowledge. From the fixed point at which the narrator tells the story, “What the narrator sees . . . is nothing less than the eternal form of the life he once lived moment by moment, the true meaning of his false life” (Spengemann 7). He becomes omniscient and can recreate his life either to show that it all was purposefully directed at the creation of the present self or to examine his past and use it as a thematic platform for a
philosophical position. The narrator's job is not necessarily to strictly recount the past, but to show a linear development toward the end product. Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, originally written for his son, reconfigures all of the complexities of his life into the embodiment of virtue, reason, and hard work. As such, he transcended history or anecdote and produced a work with a much loftier goal: "the conducting means I made use of... my posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable for their own situations, and therefore fit to be imitated" (3). Franklin fashions his past and makes it into the Bible for the new nation; the reader must only follow his example of practical, rational living and success will follow. St. Augustine's *Confessions* recounts his life up until his conversion in order to testify to God's purpose for his life and its miraculous course toward salvation. Necessarily, the task of writing autobiography is the task of taking the random, scattered experiences, emotions, and thoughts of normal human existence and arranging them around a main goal and purpose. It is an exercise of pride, presuming to claim God's prerogative of directing and ordering life.

Since the genre presumes to manipulate life, it is necessarily an act of fiction. The myriad events of the author's history seemed haphazard to the author when they were experienced, and it is only after the author has reflected upon the past and filtered it repeatedly does it take on itself an order and purpose. What at one time was random becomes a part of a pattern directed toward the final product. The clarity of self that is achieved through this process is analogous to the process of polishing a mirror. In the same fashion as the reflective surface is buffed to remove impurity and
distortion, the autobiographical narrator purifies his/her life to eliminate anything that doesn’t fit with the author’s central vision of self. The result is a recreation of the creator - revisionist personal history.

The self-reflective text does not exist solely to privately reflect upon self; whether consciously or unconsciously, it also comments on society and what it means to be human. It is impossible for the autobiographical narrator to address character issues without narrating a second, simultaneous text. Since the author is affected by and affects the times in which he lives, he/she is compelled to pass judgment on those events and circumstances. A narrative describing the difficulties involved with growing up in the Jim Crow South narrates a sociological vision of the region, the people, the laws and the culture, whether directly or indirectly. This public text lends the autobiography a broader appeal than the voyeurism inherent in a pure recitation of self. At the same time, autobiography, with its development of self and public comment, explores the broader issues of humanity within the exploration of one person’s struggles and accomplishments. An autobiography must be “communicable through its representativeness” (Bruner 43). It is impossible to “reflect upon self (radically or otherwise) without an accompanying reflection on the nature of the world in which one exists” (43). Therefore, any autobiography, although reciting the details of the life of one person, actually develops a shadow plot about what it means to be human and what it meant to the real person to experience history.

It is one matter to conduct a study of a recognized autobiography; studying the autobiography of an unlettered person is quite another matter. One more study of
Rousseau’s *Confessions* or John Stuart Mill’s *Autobiography* would occupy safe ground in educational circles; Pepys’ translated diaries, lacking the literary standing of the typical autobiography, are easily acceptable to the traditional literature department. Restrictions of this nature only serve to preserve traditional theories of exclusive texts and reinforce the concept of an exalted canon and its study. Scholars are increasingly turning to a definition of literature that embraces its social aspects. Marxists, Feminists, and Post-colonialists, while valuing the word choice and complexity of the work of art, deconstruct texts for social messages. What the New Critics rejected—women diarists and slave narratives, for example—contemporary critics have embraced. Philip Gerber’s *Bachelor Bess* examines a woman’s struggle with teaching school on the North Dakota prairie. The protagonist that emerges from this collection of letters is every bit a heroine in the classic sense: although confronted with overwhelming forces, she overcomes them and emerges triumphant. Taura S. Napier’s collection of Irish women’s autobiographies, *Seeking a Country: Literary Autobiographies of Twentieth-Century Irishwomen*, demonstrates that the stories women tell about their lives are much different than the ones their husbands would tell. Women’s autobiography “centers on the non-exclusive domestic arena,” unlike traditional male narrators who tend to “write of historically significant events so that their viewpoint, with its concurrent subjectivity and self-portrayal against the backdrop of the event, achieves similar significance” (Napier 5). Consequently, literature has traditionally valued the voice of the professional male writer because it appeared to write with authority.
Traditional restrictions upon what achieves literary status neglect the voices of the underprivileged, the domestic, and minorities. Critics have largely ignored texts not generated by the professional, unwilling to evaluate based upon the works’ worthiness to be treated as literature (Napier 12). Autobiography has become the voice of the people, suggesting that each person has a possible autobiography allotted him or her, and with its connections to a ‘bottom up’ historiography that would enfranchise anyone ready to tell his or her tale (including orally). From this perspective the weak canonical status of autobiography is an advantage, and its importance especially in recent years as a vehicle for members of minorities and inhabitants of third world countries is obvious. (Folkenflik 12)

Opening the doors of autobiography to non-professional writers validates the voices of those who have not directly impacted world events. The daily struggles of the housewife to raise children, to cook, to clean, and to fight against depression and loneliness are epic in scope but small in world importance. The diary of an Italian immigrant relating his struggles to learn language, support a family, and survive in tenement housing and appalling working conditions cannot hold out promise for memorable turns of phrase or metaphorical subtlety. It is a life story demonstrating the struggles of one individual as a symbol of the struggles of humanity against appalling odds. The study of these alternative narratives allows literary scholars to examine language syntax, narrative flow, development of the self as a protagonist,
and conflict, all flowing from the recital of the events of an ordinary life.

This is not to say, however, that Lucy A. Delaney's former-slave autobiography, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*, should be placed alongside John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* for evaluation on equal grounds. The expert with letters should exhibit his/her expertise. We should read Augustine, Rousseau, Mill, Cellini, and Goethe with an eye for craft and intention. Autobiographies written by the lay person constitute a subgenre that deserves separate criteria for analysis.

Estelle C. Jelinek, writing of women's autobiographies, claims that these types of writers "are writing of and continuing to create a wholly different autobiographical tradition from that delineated in studies of male autobiography" (8). I would argue that, although the women's writing from masculine authorship, a better and more fair delineation exists between literature of privilege and literature of subservience. It is appropriate to group autobiographical texts from the underprivileged, since all develop a narrative voice that either lacks the confidence of authority or struggles to achieve it. These circumstances require the scholar to examine other literary issues. Given this lack of authority, how does the narrator develop himself/herself as a protagonist? How are events arranged and sequenced? What recalled events, mundane or exceptional, does the author call on to piece together the self? These literary questions, also applicable to the professional autobiography, are more appropriate and interesting in the autobiography of the unlettered, underprivileged writer.

The autobiographical work of a non-professional writer can therefore be of
literary value. Furthermore, underprivileged writers exhibit an authenticity and forthrightness that authors of more polished prose may lack. Robert Herrick, writing a foreword for the autobiography of former criminal Jack Black, claims "he displays the rare literary power of letting the facts speak for themselves, without any window-dressing, either lachrymose or hilarious. He has an instinct for realities" (vii). It is reasonable to argue that the rejuvenated criminal, recreating the past, can offer a narrative that is "entertaining, because [it is] unvarnished and unpretentious" (xi). Direct experience lends authenticity to storytelling; the desire to tell one's story tends to nurture clarity, honesty, and bluntness. Ann Fabian, introducing a collection of nineteenth-century personal narratives, claims that "For those without genius, education, or expertise, experience offers a kind of authority, for are we not all experts on our own lives?" (7). In the narrative of the underprivileged, the opportunity to speak even to no audience at all is empowering and enabling. Autobiographies of this nature, while not aspiring to the pretensions of the career writer, write with a pencil sharpened by a desire for the world to both understand life through the author's eyes and to recognize his/her existence and experience.

The democratization of literature brought by nonprofessional autobiographical narratives simultaneously signals a broader, more complete scope and analysis of history. Textbooks are replete with items of national scope: wars, national politics, leaders, disasters, and scandals. Most high school seniors should be able to give a general account of the progress of World War II, but few, if any, would express an understanding of the soldier's experiences in the Battle of the Bulge or on
the beaches of Normandy. Discussing the strategic importance of fending off the
German Luftwaffe's attacks on Britain during the war removes war from the bombs
and the blood. Accounts of those Londoners who huddled in the subway during raids
and then returned to their homes to fight fires and clean up brings the Blitz back to
personal experience. In this way, the layman's view "offers a challenge to the
accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgment inherent in its tradition. It
provides a means for a radical transformation of the social meaning of history"
(Thompson 21). An examination of the historical data of finance, politics, race,
gender, wars, democracy and a large variety of other historical subject areas results
only in an abstract understanding of history and social movements. Determining, for
instance, the number of businesses that went bankrupt and analyzing the gradual
descent of the United States' Gross Domestic Product during the years of the Great
Depression reveals a lot about financial matters, but the individual experiences of a
newly married and unemployed man who is directly affected by the depression grant
substantive depth to these national historic forces.

Since it tends to focus its attention on a particular region and specific people,
the autobiography of an unlettered author also holds importance for local history.
The work is not fiction, and it is peopled with real individuals in specific locations.
Most towns have never compiled a complete history; if one exists, it generally relies
upon first-hand account. Small-scale history relies heavily upon oral tradition and
first-hand accounts from the older generations of society. Many local historians have
worked industriously to gather and scribe recollected history in order to preserve the
past, especially in areas that have experienced population shifts and demographic change. The townships studied to provide annotation for this project -- Tranquility, Blairstown, Tenafly, and New Berlin -- have depended heavily upon first-hand accounts in order to preserve their identity. Three of the towns currently rely heavily upon elderly residents to preserve local history. Blairstown has three or four small compilations of local history, while New Berlin boasts a two-volume history, accompanied by another history of the township across the river. In all cases, existing local history relies heavily upon letters and conversations with townspeople. To the town historian, an autobiography written by a native is a treasure trove of local detail.

Thus far, I have attempted to explain the philosophical background of this project by defining both the traditional autobiography and the autobiography of an unlettered writer. An explanation of the literary and historical significance of the latter followed. In order to attempt to edit a text, whatever the genre, it is important to establish the text's standing and significance, establishing the basis for more detailed editing decisions to come. This analysis should include awareness of critical comment, attention to similar texts, and determination of the value of the studied text. It is this groundwork that allows an editor to approach the work in an informed manner.

II. Literary Analysis

In 1963, Alfred Matthew Runion, newly retired to Florida from an upstate New York farm, began to type his autobiography. He was a writer of no pretension and no credentials. His education consisted only of scattered grade school
experiences, a Dale Carnegie speaking course, and whatever he read at leisure. Despite these limitations, he produced a 325-page manuscript that is filled with concrete detail and vivid description, telling his life story as he remembered it from 1897 to the move South. Alfred Runion, son of a rural wheelwright in Tranquility, NJ and a mother whose parents were of German immigrant wealth, experienced life in both the town and country of turn-of-the-century America. He ran a farm, played the piano for silent movies, telegraphed for the railroad, delivered coal, speculated for oil in Oklahoma, served as justice of the peace, and raised seven children on a Depression-era farm in upstate New York. Detailing a life both mundane and rich, his manuscript autobiography tells history from the eyes of one who first experienced it and then made it live again in prose.

His autobiography lives as a literary work, and a close analysis reveals textual richness far surpassing the author’s education and personal reading. Throughout he demonstrates an awareness of audience, physical description, structural awareness, thematic arrangement, character development, and elevation of the mundane to the status of symbol. The author has a narrative gift, ordering events to draw the reader onward with the protagonist. Runion has the knack for telling a good story and for delineating himself in a way that elevates him as the hero but preserves the humility of one who recognizes that while many things happened to him, he made very few things happen in isolation.

Page one of the manuscript presents the author’s vision for the work to follow. He hopes the reader will “gain an understanding of some heretofore unfathomable
why’s and wherefor’s Runion” (1). Although the effort will be “sort of autobiographical” (1), his purpose is a larger one: the definition of what it means to be Runion. This establishes the audience of the text, something he attempts to accomplish in the Foreword. Primarily, he writes for his children and their progeny, even stating that “this effort is just for family consumption, so to speak” (1). If an autobiography of a layman serves partly as a vehicle of history, Runion hopes to leave his legacy to give further generations a sense of history. Family history helps clarify identity, and by defining his life he hopes to leave a blueprint behind detailing many of the measurements of what was “unfathomable” about being a Runion. An early awareness of his primary audience is an absolutely essential tool in deciphering the rules that governed his self-definition. If one wanted to explain essential family hallmarks in order to define one’s self, one does not, for instance, tell stories of regularly stealing company products, engaging in petty family squabbles, or even being reprimanded on the job. Runion’s autobiography occasionally mentions a regrettable action, but it is usually minor and easily explained away. He wants to be perceived as a positive role model and an example for his great-grandchildren to follow.

Runion is also aware of a secondary audience, since he mentions that a fictional representation of family history would be “uninteresting to those outside ‘the fold’” (1). At the very least, he hopes to initiate those who marry into the family. There seems to be a broader audience intended, however. He occasionally refers to his audience as “reader” and never anything more intimate. His narration of events in
the New Berlin chapters doesn’t allude to proprietary knowledge, even when talking of the most recent events. Why, for instance, spend time on narrating events such as family vacations or cutting down the elm tree if your audience is your children? Conversations and correspondence with many of the Runion children reveal that many of these events are sufficiently cemented in their memories. While the events of the last three chapters do not hold the same sentimental narrative charm, they do largely follow the pattern the author embarked upon beginning in the first chapter.

His sense of a general audience leads him to fret occasionally about the entertainment value of the subject matter. After a lengthy discussion of how to raise fowl, he says he had “better ‘get off’ poultry, or you folks will think I am trying to lead you into the business” (64). A similar discussion of piano lessons and music ends with, “right now my readers might say ‘Ho hum, fiddledy dee, do, re, mi, climb a tree!’” (89). This type of narrative embarrassment signals his broader intention to write about his life in such a way that any reader will be entertained.

One of Runion’s principal concerns is to convey the visual. The narrative relies heavily upon physical description to provide the stage sets upon which the author acts out his mini-dramas. These descriptions are fundamentally important to the depth of the autobiography since they flesh out real people doing ordinary and amusing things in normal settings. Runion does not leave it to the reader to imagine a stereotypical farm, however. Left unattended, his audience might picture the idyllic farm, complete with picket fences, a bright red barn, field after field of wheat and corn, and a neat little house complete with a wishing well. The description of the
New Berlin farm painstakingly details the major buildings, their situation in relationship to the river, the hillside pastures and orchards, and the dirt road, which continually discolors the white siding. Runion's care with setting the story is significant: the picture must be transmitted in order to accurately pass on his history.

Three sections of the text contain geographic and visual descriptions that serve as a town map for the reader. The portrayal of Tranquility, NJ in Chapter One does just this. His narrative begins by briefly describing his house and lot. He crosses the road to the Hull farm, moves down the road past the Kennedy house and "four or five other dwellings that I considered of little importance" (8), pauses at the store, and then returns home. Within this short round trip, the author gives a fairly complete look at the little town. Using this visual knowledge as a town map, he is able to describe his father's wheelwright shop without losing the audience:

What a thrill as you'd come to the store, a short way on the shop, and there was the water backed up into the mill pond right up to the bank at the rear of the shop. The wheelwright shop fronted about 30 feet on a lane which ran some quarter of a mile downstream to a grist and saw mill. A dam across the river made deep water for considerable distance up stream . . . . The front of the shop was mostly two big rolling doors, which allowed vehicles to be pushed into either side.

(32)

The story contained within this description of how he once caught a big fish out of the back of his father's shop would be incomplete without appropriate spatial orientation
-- in fact, it might seem rather childish and silly. The author gives a similar tour of Marksboro, NJ (44-45) in order to tell stories about the blacksmith (55-57) and the railroad (45-46) properly. In Chapter Three, he spends a great deal of time describing the location of the telegrapher’s shack where he worked the night shift; it is appropriately lonely and dark, and it sets up stories of drunk telegraphers, sleepy nights, and railroad disasters (112-15). Runion’s attention to detail places the reader in the situation visually, creating an environment and atmosphere that legitimize quaint and childish stories.

While details abound, the author takes care to select and order episodes purposefully. Tucked inside the manuscript of this autobiography were seven little pieces of paper (Appendix D) containing vague notes about random topics, most of them from the first half of the text. Clearly the author leaves out a great deal of information as he proceeds, choosing to discuss playing mumbly peg, donkey on the rock, and baseball (74), but leaving out swimming in Yetter’s Pond, swinging on May Day, and playing fox and geese. Lena Ketchel appears in the notes, but he never mentions her in the text. In a letter written from Florida to The Blairstown Press on December 20, 1973 (Appendix A), the author reiterates nearly verbatim the episode told in the manuscript of the embattled Rev. Knox and his supposed cruelty to his dog (96-97). He also tells the story of another Blairstown minister that had to resort to extraordinary means to receive the salary due him, but this tale never makes it into the text. Runion’s choices centered on thematic concerns. The story of Rev. Knox fits into a description of the author’s stint as substitute organist, an anecdote within the
broader narrative of the development of his pianistic abilities. Throughout the text, thematic grouping takes precedence over strict chronology. It does not matter that he mentions seeing the U.S.S. Pennsylvania in the context of a visit to New York City a few years before the ship was even built (25). He notes that they visited the city several times per year, so a general description of one visit is assumed to cover many. He develops several main points from this section. One of these themes is that New York City changes drastically over time: a visit in Chapter Nine demonstrates this stark contrast by pointing out that "It wasn't the same as I remembered; there was something of the sinister about the place" (338). Most of Chapter Eight catalogues ministers of the New Berlin Methodist church, and much of the end of Chapter Seven details their frustration with finding good help on the farm. These chronologies overlap in several places, but it is important to deal with each history separately in order to demonstrate what character attributes are valuable for the respective jobs and what makes an unreliable worker. Time does march by in a fairly orderly fashion, but the author demonstrates an underlying commitment to the larger themes that he wishes to demonstrate about himself and the way he views his world.

The author spends little time directly developing his own character as a protagonist. Most of the time, Runion forces the reader to either examine his narrated actions or deduce his character from the description of other characters. As discussed above, this interesting characteristic is a direct consequence of a lack of authority. He works for people, reacts to people, responds to situations, and watches history affect him. While he does describe his own actions, most of the time he "reacts," not "acts."
He suffers heroically through the Depression and war years, but does not possess the ability to alter the time he inhabits other than on the family level. During his most independent period, while he traipses around Oklahoma, he is still at the mercy of his brother Harry's good pleasure; when the money is not there, he is bound by economic realities, eventually selling Fuller brushes. It is impossible for him to grandly expound upon the virtues of his character because he does not have that independence and authority.

The narrative "I" is therefore defined indirectly. He communicates his own ideals and revulsions by drawing a portrait of another person. Joseph Fiske, pastor of the New Berlin Methodist Church from 1950-1953, stands as a model for what he likes in a pastor: one who gets programs started and rallies people together. Admiringly, Runion states, "what years of work and activity that was" (291). Rev. Fiske set up a group called the "Lord's Acre" to maintain and improve the church building; Alfréd Runion enthusiastically involved himself in the group and its activities. The foil to Rev. Fiske is his replacement, John Wolfe, pastor from 1953-1954. About Rev. Wolfe, Runion says,

I confess that he was not my ideal person to head up the church; such things as his remarks on other Tuesday nights, our meeting night being Tuesday -- "Let's hurry up this deal so I can get back and look at the fights." Well, that was the year of not too much Lord's Acre activity. (301)

The two characters exemplify opposite perspectives on the same beliefs. Fiske spurs...
action, while Wolfe prefers stagnation. Fiske preaches with "profound discourse" (291), while Wolfe's sermons were "the product of his father's [a minister] pen" (301): Translation: Alfred Runion likes his religion participative and intelligent, and he abhors any lack of facilitation and engagement in the pulpit. This is corroborated by other sections of the text. He admires his mother's strong and active faith, claiming she "was in the true sense a practicing Christian; a believer in answered prayer, and evidently tried in every way to live by the Golden Rule" (13). His tone of admiration for Rev. Armstrong, the Presbyterian minister in Blairstown when Runion's father died in 1919, resonates from the text: "This fine person made friends all around the countryside by pedaling his bicycle from farm home to home, visiting briefly, praying together and being on his way. People never seemed ill at ease in his presence; it was as natural as going in to dinner to pause in prayer with this man" (134). This type of description obviously reflects well upon Rev. Armstrong, but it also defines Alfred Runion's character and ideals.

The author also defines himself in the narration of his own actions. The account of how he enrolled in a study course that might lead him to a promotion in the Northern Valley Railroad demonstrates an eagerness to learn and a desire to advance his position in life (169). The story of how he and a friend spent a monetary gift to hear Harry Lauder in recital at the Brighton Beach Music Hall indicates his love of music and the extent to which he would go to hear it (80). As Justice of the Peace, he refuses to acquiesce to a group of mountain men who want to hunt out of season, thus exemplifying his belief in public action that upholds the law. A
multitude of stories about carriages, horse cars, trains, and automobiles illustrates his fascination with transportation and locomotion. He demonstrates his ability to act foolishly by telling the story of swimming with Carrie Merz in the Paulins Kill without permission, and almost drowning in the process (91-92). He also recounts taking caffeine pills to stay awake and becoming violently ill. As a result, Runion vows to learn from mistakes (311-12). He doesn’t dictate, he illustrates -- a quality that separates didactic prose from the literary narrative.

In Chapter Three, the author describes how he was assigned to work the telegraph lines during the night shift at Hainesburg Junction, a remote junction of two rail lines:

The fellow who preceded me fell asleep on the job, causing a head-on wreck! He became automatically fired for negligence. The accident happened somewhat as follows. The old Susquehanna was a single-track line, and all but regularly scheduled (passenger) trains had to get running orders. The operator charged for this accident was supposed to flag a train for passing orders; the trouble was that, while he had dropped off to sleep, the train he was to flag had already passed his station. (112)

As in the previous examples, Runion attempts to explain the significance of his job and his trustworthiness without having to say it. The weight of his predecessor’s negligence poignantly describes both how crucial it was to do this job correctly and how much confidence his superiors had in his character and ability. This passage’s literary quality lies in the author’s ability to tell an interesting tale while not
didactically drumming his audience with his point. As such he makes his life a story with a subtext of meaning, a quality of any autobiography that has literary merit.

Runion's autobiography occupies the sphere of the mundane, delighting in accounts of the ordinary event, object, and character. His manipulation and placement of these objects, however, sometimes elevates them to the level of symbols. For instance, in Chapter Two he details the arrival of the first automobile in Paulina, NJ.

One Sunday afternoon, Mom and I started out for a little drive with Fanny hitched to the family buggy. We hadn't gone far when the old girl pricked up her ears and began to prance about. She'd heard the chug, chug of a motor long before what appeared to be a wagon without any sign of horsepower ahead hove into sight. Quick as a whip Fanny turned us around in that narrow road, and raced us, ahead of the monster, to the safety of our dooryard. Pop allowed Fanny was shaking like a leaf; Mom and I were likewise shook up. That was the first auto to be seen around Blairstown... (77)

It would be noteworthy historically to merely mention the fact that this was the first car he had seen. He gives it more significance, however, by framing it in relation to the horse-drawn cart, a contrast that shows one to be outmoded. He makes the event symbolic of technological change and the coming end to traditional rural life.

The New Berlin farm receives the same symbolic treatment. His attraction to the property begins when he sees it the first time: "So we went over there, and, before..."
I'd known what happened, I knew that I wanted that farm” (214). Despite a brutal winter and disease-ridden chickens after their second winter, he states that, “for some unaccountable reason, we were growing into a love affair with the old place; suffering together, you might say” (238). He takes great pride in describing the addition of the flagpole and other improvements that make it “one of the show places along the Unadilla Valley” (283). The author’s treatment of this piece of property elevates it into his ideal of family life, honorable occupation, and rustic beauty. Life symbolically comes to completion with this farm. “I’d said, when we came upstate New York, that I never wanted to move again. We were in love with that patch of river flat, hillside, forest, spring runs, and the cluster of venerable structures” (322). This statement serves to make the farm a governing symbol in his life. As he looks back at his life from his apartment in Holly Hill, Florida, it is the farm that had the most significance. The end of the book is the end of life on the farm. Within the last few paragraphs of the book, he says he “prefer[s] to cherish memories of the old home as it was” (344), leaving the reader with the impression that he will always be looking north to the farm as the center of life at its best.

One of the weaknesses of the manuscript is its reliance upon the distillation of time for thematic significance. While he has mused at length upon the events of the first forty years of his life, more recent events are not as meaningful or developed as they might become over time. Consequently, the last three chapters contain many more random incidents than earlier sections. A single-line paragraph interjects that “The Fiske’s first child was born January 25, 1952, and they named her Alice Louise”
(297-98). He provides no further comment to show why he mentions the event.

Chapter Nine reads like a list of dates and events, skipping from one event to another with little elaboration. This is a natural tendency, since time and reflection are the agents that make memory meaningful.

The value of Alfred Runion’s autobiography goes far beyond simple historical value and quaint stories. The author uses the genre of the autobiography as a means to construct a past out of the seemingly meaningless jumble of events in his history. Autobiography, since it is a reflective and not a reactive medium, “provides a unique opportunity for individuals to negotiate identity on their own terms” (Shawcross). Autobiography is normally studied in collegiate English departments because as a deliberately structured and thematic piece it ranks as literature and not pure history. The reality that Alfred Runion constructs is not a collection of memories, but a studied attempt to categorize his life around themes. The manuscript that results from these memories is a literary text with a coherence that holds up well to analysis.

III. Analysis of the Manuscript and Notes on the Editing

The study of non-literary autobiography is necessarily the study of manuscripts. Many literary figures have left multiple drafts leading to polished prose. Scholars rejoice when they find a long lost manuscript of Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn because of its usefulness in studying the evolution of the polished work. Before the advent of computer word processing programs, the nonprofessional writer seldom had the luxury of this kind of drafting. In the latter case, the writer generated a manuscript or produced a diary with no intention of
editing it, and certainly no hope of publishing. For some, knowledge of the
imminence of death spurred the writer to put his or her memories down on paper in
haste, with barely enough time to write, let alone edit. For others the typewriter was
an unforgiving drafter, making revision difficult. A second draft would mean weeks
or months of retyping, a daunting task for literary efforts in life’s late fall. Most
often, the writer’s purpose was not to produce something that is literate and precise.
If literature happened, it was accidental. The goal was communication: to let one’s
family know about what came before, to show what molded the author, and to
produce a tombstone that spoke.

Editing a manuscript, therefore, becomes a process of allowing the author to
speak more clearly. The editor removes the vagaries and distractions, and provides
comments to help the reader to understand the author’s intentions.

The original manuscript of Alfred Matthew Runion’s autobiography, newly
published here, has rather obscure origins. One daughter thought he had worked on it
periodically for many years before moving. One son felt that he had only worked on
it in Florida. No evidence exists of a rough draft, and very little is known of the
author’s gathering and outlining process. A few scratchings on notepad paper
enclosed with the manuscript were all that has been found to suggest prior planning
(See Appendix D). All indications suggest that he typed his thoughts as they came to
him while he sat on his porch overlooking the Halifax River. Quite a few one- or
two-letter cross-outs suggest that he rolled the platen down, made a minor correction,
and continued.
It is difficult to date the manuscript. There are a few clues that suggest its creation must have occurred somewhere between 1963 and 1967. On page 142, while discussing Methodist campgrounds and the solemnity with which the town was forced to hold the Sabbath, Runion sarcastically states, “No one apparently has ever thought of consulting the U.S. Supreme Court. Surely those guardians of freedom of expression and action would see to it that this ‘road block’ to progress be removed.” The author may have been reacting to the 1962 and 1963 U.S. Supreme Court rulings against enforced prayer in schools. Page 196 is the only place he gives a date in the present tense, while he is discussing the steamship, The Alexander Hamilton, “which in this year 1966 still makes short holiday and charter trips.” A page later the author inserts a magazine cover entitled “Travel USA 1966.” Within seventy-five pages of the end of the book, another magazine photograph portrays a jar of amber marmalade dated “1967.” From these few hints, it is possible to date the manuscript as narrowly as 1963-1967.

The 325-page manuscript is typewritten, using both sides of each 8 1/2 x 11-inch sheet of plain typing paper. A carbon copy was made of each sheet as he typed, and that is identical to the manuscript, save for corrections made later to the manuscript but not the copy. The manuscript was bound in a two-inch, three-ring binder and the copy was bound with red yarn and wrapped in plastic. Sometime after the author’s death, his wife, Ruth, photocopied the manuscript for each of their children. The photocopies were clear except on pages surrounding pictures the author had inserted. The cellophane tape used to anchor the pictures both reflected the light
of the photocopier and leached through to the opposite side, causing black spots that obscured the text on that page as well as the surrounding pages. It was one of these photocopies that was originally used to scan the manuscript into the computer.

The editor of any posthumously published manuscript faces a dilemma. Since no possibility exists of a productive dialogue between author and editor, the editor becomes much like the curator of a museum. One could take the manuscript completely as artifact, exactly reproducing the document as the author last touched it. While this seems to be faithfulness to intention, it insults the author by assuming he intended to make what appear to be typographical errors, as well as muddying the readability of the text. At the same time, methodical elimination of errors of punctuation, spelling, and grammar, among other things, smacks of officiousness. The result becomes something foreign to the author and more akin to the editor. Any attempt, therefore, at posthumous publishing forces the editor to resolve this problem, falling on the continuum somewhere between “leave” and “change.”

In a project of this nature, the text must be more than just the underlying intentions and themes; it must embrace writing quirks and idiosyncrasies of usage. To fully appreciate the protagonist of the text, the editor must accept the flaws of the text as part of the flaws of the man. For the purposes of this project the author’s words must be preserved as a sterling example of the self-made man. Given the fact that Runion’s formal education ended at ninth grade, the text contains relatively few writing transgressions, and keeping the errors allows the reader to get a sense of the character of the man. For example, he tended to enclose words and phrases in
quotation marks any time he attempted a clever or euphemistic turn of phrase. Editing instinct pushes for removal, but according to those who knew him well, he spoke that way, trying to inject a novel turn of phrase or a witty line into the language. Let Dr. Johnson be appalled - Alfred Runion molded language in his own image, not the textbook’s.

Consequently, errors abound in the text. He misspells “necessary,” or variations of the word, thirteen times. “Its” and “it’s” are commonly juxtaposed, and twice he uses “adjourning” when he meant “adjoining.” His misspelling of “accomodate” and “neccessary” demonstrates difficulty with double consonants; his difficulty with “explaination” shows he struggled adding suffixes to root words. He uses the word “lead” when he meant “led.” Many examples show that he spelled words as they sounded to him, such as “vegtables,” “canidate,” “sox,” and “eazy.” Errors resulting from phonetic spelling, homonym exchange, prefix/suffix addition, and doubled consonants, among others, clearly demonstrate a writer intimate with language but not with all of its precise elements. Alfred Runion knew a large variety of words, and when he lacked a rule to follow, he made up his own.

This same principle applies to his use of word combinations. The English language contains a vast array of highly confusing, and sometimes arbitrary, word combinations. Words such as “twenty-five,” “bathroom,” and “good-natured” pose significant problems for the emerging writer. He writes numbers either with no hyphen, “thirty eight,” or neither hyphen nor space, such as “thirtyeight.” Many noun combinations stay as separate words, such as “cook book” and “bath room.” Word
combinations for use as modifiers are by far the largest group of errors in the text. “Good looking,” “good sized,” “long haired,” “one room,” and “full time” are all modifiers missing hyphens; “for ever” and “some time” are left as separate words, instead of conjoining them as proper syntax dictates. As with spelling, the author steers his own course through word usage, choosing what has the appearance of correctness.

At the same time, the author had a comprehensive vocabulary and ability to form sentences that transcended his learning. One measurement of his language level is the Flesch-Kincaid grade level formula. This matrix assigns a grade level to a text based upon the average sentence length and the average syllables per word. Each chapter was examined individually, and the results were averaged. According to this model, Alfred Runion wrote at a 10.48 grade level - an astounding fact given that he graduated after ninth grade. These levels are fairly consistent throughout the text. Chapter five reaches as high as 11.4, while chapter nine scores a 9.54. The remaining seven chapters read at a level within one half of a grade level of the average. Other indicators point to his comfort with the language. Only 6.9% of his verbs are passive. On a scale of one hundred, his sentence complexity rates a 64.8. He uses an average of 21.8 words per sentence and an average of 6.6 sentences per paragraph. While grade-level analysis does not take into account complex usage, tone, metaphor or any other word element of a work of literature, it can lend insight into the baseline abilities of the author. Given the fact that he had limited formal education and did not read much more than newspapers, magazines, or Reader’s Digest condensed books, it
should be noted that the author wrote with proficiency.

Another major editing issue is punctuation. Misspelled words and incorrectly formed word combinations constitute, at worst, minor distractions; improperly placed elements of punctuation can confuse the reader. In the chapter centered on the author’s time living in Tranquility, NJ, he attempts to recreate dialogue between himself and his father. Because of his improper placement of quotation marks, commas and periods, the reader is easily lost in the conversation. His inconsistent use of commas to close off appositive remarks or items makes some sentences confusing in purpose or description. He is particularly fond of the parenthesis and dash, correctly using them to include parenthetical remarks, but neglecting to signal a close to the section by closing the punctuation. Finally, throughout the text the author neglects to close quotations with the period or comma inside the quotation mark; he inconsistently places periods following parenthetical remarks both inside and outside the closing parenthesis.

Besides the odd typographical error, the above constitute the bulk of the anomalies in the text. Since a significant portion of the author’s character is elucidated through the writing mistakes he makes, errors of grammar, punctuation, syntax, and spelling are preserved in this edition unless they constitute a hindrance to comprehension. This needs to be the central guiding principle when editing a text of this nature. Every decision depends upon clarity for the reader. Most spelling errors do not impact readability; therefore most are left in the text. However, when the author remarks that the piano was in “an adjourning room,” correction was made in
this manner: "adjo[i]ning."

Punctuation errors were dealt with more severely. Quotation marks were corrected without inserting distracting brackets. Commas, semi-colons, dashes, and parentheses were given similar treatment. Leaving erroneous punctuation is counterproductive, and bracketing it every time it occurs distracts from the purpose. A good example of this is Philip Gerber’s editing of the collected letters of Elizabeth Corey, published as *Bachelor Bess*. He makes a point of bracketing every change he makes to the text. Since this happens rather frequently, the text that is left is cumbersome, forcing the reader’s eye to pause, figure out the jumble of characters, and move on. Changing punctuation that distracts from readability without resorting to brackets results in a text that allows the author to tell his story with less static.

The only other major editing change was the division of the text into chapters. The author begins the text with the heading, “Tranquility,” closes the chapter at the point the Runion family moves from there, begins a new page, and titles the new chapter, “Marksboro.” The remainder of the text is one large chapter. This pattern suggests an early intention to divide the text into chapters, the subject matter of which was largely centered on a geographic location. In almost every instance in which the author is closing out his narrative about one town, he does so in language befitting the end of a chapter and the beginning of another. It was, therefore, a logical step to continue the pattern the author began by dividing the rest of the manuscript into chapters. Chapter three describes his time in Paulina and Blairstown. Chapter five is Tenafly before marriage, and chapter six is Tenafly after marriage. There are two
problems with making chapter divisions purely on strategy. He makes a marked conclusion after selling the Van Camp household at the end of Chapter three, but his narrative of the section up until he moves to Tenafly centers on no place in particular. He is wandering, spending time in New York City, Long Island, Blairstown, Camden, Arizona, and Oklahoma. Restless bachelorhood is a theme he explores throughout this section. This suggests a secondary rationale for chapter division: lacking geographical shift, look to theme and content for guidelines. That reasoning guided the division of the New Berlin section into three separate chapters.

Conclusion

The editing and production of a manuscript text should not be entered into lightly or casually. Editing involves heavy preliminary study and the formulation of strong philosophical guidelines for the genre pursued. It requires an awareness of similar texts and an in-depth analysis of appropriate literary criticism. A study of the literary and historical merit of the manuscript should follow. The value of the text is at issue, and since it is not written by Mark Twain, Nathaniel Hawthorne, or Virginia Wolfe, the scholar is at pains to prove its validity. Only then can the editor make substantive decisions about the editing of the text. In the case of the manuscript autobiography of Alfred Matthew Runion, the product that follows is a consequence of the process above. It was important to investigate the nature of autobiography, the literary and historical merit of any autobiography produced by an unlettered author, and the specific literary qualities that Runion's manuscript exhibits. The editing standards that resulted from this study were based on the need for clarity of
expression and the paradoxical desire to preserve the writing quirks of the author.

The resulting thesis is a thorough genre study and a lesson in text manipulation, clarification, and annotation.