“One’s-self I sing, a simple separate person, Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.... The Modern Man I sing.”
-- Walt Whitman, "One’s Self I Sing"

“We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, the first person that is speaking.”
-- H. D. Thoreau, Walden

It looks simple, this making of autobiography. Almost anyone can do it. And does. Witness the as-told-to narratives of Lee Iacocca, Colonel Sanders, Michael Jordan, and Vanna White. Consider the stories we tell ourselves and others, the videotaping that makes instant home autobiographers of us all. Simple is as simple does: form follows fact; who but the author so knows the life, builder, and building perfectly joined; none better for the task of remodeling. Remodeling’s the beauty of it. Forget Warhol’s 15 minutes of celebrity. Autobiography’s forever. It’s enough to make all of us write one.

Many Americans have. Perhaps no other people has equalled the wealth--10,000 narratives by one estimate, and that did not include volumes of personal essays. Nor did it embrace the colonial period and the 19th century’s near torrent of captivity tales, which, in contemporary incarnations, remain magnetic for readers. Today, for pine-barrens ransomers, San Francisco Shanghaiers, and Magua-like Iroquois substitute Soledad prison guards, the Symbionese Liberation Front, Hezbollah, the Branch Davidians—even the Martians. Captivity narratives, archetypal in their limning of good and evil, demonstrate in extreme form just how political the personal, how personal the political, can be—full of instruction for us as individuals and as a people.

From its earliest beginnings, American autobiography has been political and didactic, inextricably tied to and expressive of what the country meant to the people who were making it. That stemmed in part from the very nature of autobiography. It presents in vivid, individual terms images of particular communities, ideal and otherwise. As James Olney has suggested, it furnishes answers to the question, "How shall I live?" That's why Leslie Stephen could assert, "No man ever wrote a dull one." The first great autobiography is The Confessions of St. Augustine, whose other masterpiece, The City of God, resounds all the more powerfully when read as a companion to the Confessions. John Calvin and his Puritan descendants grew out of Augustine’s theology—only fit that they found outlet in his confessional form.

Autobiography epitomizes narcissistic enterprise. The autobiographer sits alone, gazes within, and discovers a landscape of surpassing depth and beauty. Conviction rises: the singular "I" on the page will grip the distant plural "you"; "you" never had better company; "I" knows from experience. Authors recognize the egoism and attempt to control it—seek balance, struggle to pin and formulate the ego, making consciousness its master. Or (and nowhere more than in America) they generalize and identify themselves with some larger cause or principle. That, too, is trap-
ridden, as the more self-conscious realize. Cause as readily vanishes in self as the other way around.

New England Puritans, who produced the first substantial body of autobiography in this country, feared Narcissus. The confession was one more field on which to battle imprisoning vanity, self-love, and individual will—combat direct, dangerous, and visibly decisive. The writer lived in a world of givens that went beyond fixed truths to encompass details. In the mind of an omniscient, omnipotent deity, all history, collective and individual, had already happened. The Creator created all. For New Englanders, the idea of self-invention itself would have appeared an abominable fiction. The Puritan autobiographer mistrusted originality and experimentation and paid little attention to formal issues. So rigid was the protocol for the confession itself that, as others have pointed out, the 17th-century New Engander did not so much compose as recite his autobiography. He offered what purported to be an accurate, straightforward account of the soul's progress. What Phillippe Lejeune calls the "autobiographical pact" between writer and reader was for the Puritan a contract with God.

New Englanders, who proclaimed their city on the hill to be a light to all the world, achieved in their communal ideal a sublimation of individual vanity. The autobiographer defined, even as he was defined by, his community. The confession was not a vehicle for discovering or fabricating individual identity. Nor did it value personality but rather character. Nor was the subject the self but rather the soul, an ideal that at least in principle restrained ego and depersonalized the individual, pointing outward to the community of believers and upward to the Maker of all. The autobiographer sought to conform to a shared ideal of the Christian. He illustrated collective truths and confirmed group unity. To succeed was to escape the narrow stall of self and disappear into the community of God's elect.

With the American Revolution and early Republic, America invented itself; the individual American, likewise. To the extent that the two overlapped, that the personal is political became a tautology. That's why James M. Cox can claim that Jefferson, who wrote a memoir, produced in the Declaration of Independence his true autobiography and that of the Republic as well. The Declaration is simultaneously a sacred text of country and of self. Here, too, is a source of the conflation of public and private language in American life, a key to why we are at once the least private of people and the one that complains most vociferously of a lack of intimacy. There's little left to get close to. Autobiography flirts with the tension between public and private, never more seductive and never withholding more than when it asserts the self's oneness with the reader and some shared story of the country.

The Revolution revived and broadened the earlier identification with community. It also reinvigorated the Puritan sense of mission. But the community became a secular one in which each person assumed original significance. No longer did the autobiographer find God's design in the personal story. Nor in theory did the community dictate the content of individual identity. That would have violated the basic premise of individualism. The community grew out of the individual as much as the other way around. The individual furnished the foundation of political life. The group enjoyed legitimacy, it would gradually come to seem, insofar as it maximized the rights and opportunities of each of its constituent parts. To so emphasize the individual was an unprecedented, incendiary thing under the sun. No Calvinist ever made a greater leap of faith, nor dared to light on such narrow human shoulders. The new creed demanded a wide-framed race.

As the Puritan threw off the old Adam, so the new nation threw off the old Europe and the moral and political death it represented to an awakening, perfervid patriotism. The Old World furnished antitypes—degraded, servile masses; licentious, overbearing aristocrats; incestuous, tyrannical kings—against which the new defined itself. European "others" touched off and helped form national identity and the individual American self.
This function was all the more critical given the abstractness of an identity founded on ideals, especially as those ideals implied an almost infinite open-endedness: freedom, equality, opportunity, the worth of the individual and his inalienable rights. The new nation shed not only a European past but a deterministic view of man and of history, not whole or at once but gradually, undergoing a series of spiritual molting seasons, to borrow one of Thoreau's favorite figures. The openness at once exhilarated and dizzied, which helps explain the hold of captivity narratives. They narrowed to "us" and "them" the options for democratic identity. In the 19th century, the spaciousness of the continent would entice, and American hopes would propel, a repeated lighting out for the territory, west after west; or, farm to town to city. Each removal recapitulated the exemplary national story in which colonizers left behind and a revolutionary generation repudiated a European community and past. By the time of Turner’s frontier thesis, American history constituted a picaresque tale in which one of the most fundamental experiences shared by generations would be the sundering of family ties and all the resonant associations of home places.

The role of transplantations reinforced the emphasis on the individual. They blunted the sculpting force of community. Less determinative, society became in the 19th century less real. History, too, became less vital and binding, less real. As early as Jefferson, it was possible to proclaim, "The dead are not even things." This may suggest why Americans can speak of "past history." For them, it's passed. It follows that the self had become less circumstance and fixed, at once more central and less assuredly real. Perhaps none but the American self so innocently can ask to be liked "as a person," as though it were possible to separate the individual from family, community, and the past. Proud, inviolate stands the mythic American: uncontaminated by institutions and innocent of history.

America from the first represented possibility, the opportunity to make oneself whatever one willed. Each removal (especially if one traveled light) wiped clean and invited recreation of the self. The 19th century’s succession of frontiers opened possibility equally for the modestly ambitious toiler, the professional confidence man, and, something deeper, the rought-hewn Gatsby, springing from his own conception of himself. Hard-earned making and remaking of self, unconscious deception of self, and self-conscious manipulation of others went on simultaneously. The distinction between reality and image, fact and fiction, eroded and diminished in value, the one transmuting into the other.

More riveting versions of the self entertained new neighbors, who furnished entertainments of their own. Improvements engendered local pride, raised property values—contributed, stone after stone, to the process of town building. Community as composite, fictionalized autobiography: removers told new homes into being. Heady stuff, pioneering, for all the barked knuckles, dust, and blood—not this as in other ways a colossal project first of imagination.

Transplanting simultaneously expressed and confirmed an emerging cult of progress. The past seemed broken and done with, which paradoxically buttressed and hardened the mythic status of the Founding Fathers. It was they, most of all, who had done the breaking, creating a future that would get better forever. National experience bred nostalgia deep in the American soul. Nostalgia pervaded 19th-century popular culture. It remains the dominant tone in country music today. Nostalgia stood in for tradition. It substituted for rooted attachment, appeased the guilt of abandonment. A conservative sentiment, it bent to the liberal purpose of freeing the American self. It also furnished a potent source of the abundance of American autobiography. From Howells to Morris, it's striking how many the idealized portraits of out-of-the-way places of little moment. Wish-fulfilment, a compensation, it may be, for the competitive individualism that drives American life. Worlds lost: one needn't take them seriously.

In the late 18th and the 19th centuries, the wide expanses of the continent, American ideals, and the idea of the
American became one, each a metaphor for the next. The metaphor substituted for ties of blood and long
generations of shared experience that elsewhere made peoples and countries. No wonder the American writer, from
Thoreau to Twain to Kerouac, has taken to the road in a search for self and country. To travel the one was to explore
the other. The American road runs endlessly through the evolving self. The very mufflers rumble. No wonder the
loudness of the American voice. "I'm here," it fairly shouts. "Everybody, know I'm here. We're in this together," it
democratically reaches out. "We're one of us forever."

III

From the beginning there were "others" within American shores: the most recent immigrants, Catholics, here and
there some Jews, Indians, Africans. The last two were too other to count. They told Americans only that they were
white and Christian, the vanguard of democratic civilization. The rest, for the most part, held American hopes of
personal advancement and national progress and stood in a common relation to the law.

American ideals called for inclusion, and American history has brought a progressive opening of doors: to the
propertyless; to various national, religious, and racial groups; to women; to those with what the founding generation
did not call alternative lifestyles. It would require Freud and modern genetics, not to mention a series of civil
struggles, to allow such an understanding. Cosmopolitan as Jefferson, Washington, and Madison were, they had no
concept of cultural relativism, however useful their descendants might have found relativism in defending what soon
became known as the Southern way of life. Now, insofar as America means inclusiveness, the idea of the other has
become an un-American idea. The other is whoever believes in or practices exclusion.

Only a political Neanderthal would rue the lessening of prejudice within the American family. Yet, the process
raises a fundamental question: what is the nature and how strong the ties of the family that encompass all races,
creeds, and persuasions; what is the content of an identity, collective or individual, that embraces all contents? The
wider the span of family, the thinner the self? A role, a fiction to be appreciated on aesthetic grounds, likely with few
readers, the rest of us being absorbed in polishing sentences of our own? Of making many books there is no end.
We're none of us forever. No matter, a cultural relativist might answer. One content, lifestyle, or worldview is as
valuable as the next. No matter, indeed. No one to defend against and nothing to defend. A lightness of being is the
burden of American identity.

These questions suggest a central challenge to Americans and America: how to achieve or to find tolerance
without sacrificing conviction, loyalty, belief in self, and any sense of moral authority. Without a capacity for
indignation, tolerance may have little meaning or value. Its objects receive the negative benefit of avoiding
intolerance, blessing enough, perhaps, for those who have suffered cruel prejudice but ultimately unsatisfying. Those
who practice it, it may seem, lack the weight to confer or to merit respect. The tensions haunt much contemporary
autobiography—Kazin's Walker in the City, McLaurin's Separate Pasts, Kingston's Woman Warrior. Tough work,
making concrete and individual this abstract, democratic self. Not surprising that Whitman sweated so profusely. It
proved there was body to his pages.

American narrative has always told a national as well as a personal story. It has defined a rich and sometimes
contradictory series of answers to Crevecoeur's question, "What then is this American, this new man?" Autobiography
from the first performed America, which helps explain the rhetorical tone of autobiographies as diverse as those of
Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglass, and Alexander Berkman. Franklin's Memoirs proved formative for what
became the tradition of American autobiography. Plain, honest, self-made Ben—two syllables shy of formal, the fist
thrust out like a friendly hand, ambling, in his coonskin cap, from Paris salon to salon, and, whether with philosophe
or lady, doing his country proud—this natural genius of the American woods offered his life as a model to be emulated by generations yet unborn.

Since Franklin, American autobiographers have tended to identify with America or some idea that is held to be fundamentally American. That identification supplies the basic theme and narrative shape of personal writing. The story moves toward some realization or, rarely, renunciation of ideal. Identification embraces the American audience, widens meaning, assumes understanding. The call-and-response pattern heard in African-American narrative runs, its rhythms altered, through the wide course of American autobiography.

Personal narrative here has for the most part eschewed, ignored, or simply been unaware of systematic ideology. That is just as well for the audience. Ideology easily divides, overreaches the common man, and challenges a cult of progress and a liberal belief in reform. It contradicts the popular image of Americans as concrete and practical, an image that, whatever its basis, compensates neatly for the abstractions on which American identity rests. Well, too, for the art. Autobiography quickly surrenders essential force when it conforms to ideological pattern or becomes, like many of its Puritan antecedents, a sermon. There exists a tension, then between avoiding explicit ideology while identifying with the idea of America. Or there would be, were it not for the nature of the idea and the marriage of form and ideal. Autobiography perfectly expresses the democratic faith in the individual, his importance and right to be heard. The more vividly individual the rendering of self, the more perfect the practice of faith.

A liberal spirit emphasizing freedom, progress, and the worth of each citizen has dominated personal narrative. An ideology-denying, individualism-exalting country has made autobiography the most deeply American form of social criticism. Personal writing has shown a keen nose for the scent of privilege—that of monarchs, of slaveowners, the white race, of Anglo-Saxon Protestants, the native-born, the male sex. Its writers, however blinkered in their perception of the burdens of others, have striven to overcome or to reform an exclusionary social order that has failed to practice its own democratic and Christian ideals. Autobiographers seek or demand admission for themselves and, by implication, others like them. Even the most ingratiating infiltrators have seen themselves as pioneering openers of ponderous doors.

Conservative voices have been relatively few and have mined at best mixed ore from the vein opened by Franklin. Tradition, for which conservatives would wish to speak, here speaks for and engenders liberal and on occasion radical writers. The autobiographical tradition has sustained groups that have been denied a share in American ideals and opportunities—the more marginal, the louder the voice. No more plangent appeals to the American Dream have sounded than the dozens of autobiographies penned by east European and Latin American immigrants and their sons and daughters. They sacrifice, or fear they must, so much history to become American. Nor is there in all our literature any more triumphant evocation of the ideal of the self-made man and the success myth than Booker T. Washington's Up From Slavery.

Native Americans, as we self-consciously style the continent's first immigrants, have stood apart from this tradition of American autobiography. Their writing generally has been inspired by a rival and radically differing vision that may have more title to the name, "American Dream," than the one most Americans dream. That differing vision is a profoundly conservative one that deemphasizes the individual in favor of the group, rejects the ideals of progress and of material success, and exalts that of living in harmony with nature. The values represented by Franklin were and remain foreign and anathema.

A second exception to the tradition of American autobiography, the case of Southern writers, is equally ironic in view of the role played by Washington, Jefferson, and others in creating America. Throughout the 19th century, the
South upheld ideals of the gentleman and lady that rebuked those of the self-made man and the success myth. Southern gentility militated against characteristic American impulses toward self-creation and self-celebration—Thoreau's Chanticleer, Whitman uttering his barbaric yawp that would rattle the roofs of the world. A vexed question, whether Southerners felt guilty about the institution of slavery. Regardless, they could hardly join with Emerson in seeing themselves as American Adams bathed in innocence.

Black Southerners, from the slave narratives onward, have produced a rich and abundant yield of autobiography. But not the white South. The South's major 19th-century contribution to American autobiography, if one excludes Civil War memoirs, was of a negative sort. It supplied contrasts to the more intellectual, progressive, democratic, and morally upright North. The South—with its arrogant, brutish aristocrats, beaten-in-chains field hands, degenerate peckerwoods, and dusky harems of unwilling concubines—replaced Europe as the other against which the dominant nation and its tradition of autobiography defined themselves. It put on fallen Adam's wrinkled skin.

Only since World War II have white Southerners written much autobiography. In that same post-war period, the South abandoned racial folkways, mechanized its farms, and filled its cities. It entered the American economic and moral mainstream, a psychological and often literal migration that suggestively parallels the other migrations that have triggered much of American autobiography. Recent Southern autobiography—Willie Morris's North Toward Home, for instance—echoes the themes of earlier migrations: hope, ambition, optimistic self-assertiveness, curiosity and confusion, superiority toward those left behind tempered by loneliness, nostalgia, and guilt over abandoning family, community, and ancient faiths that gave meaning and continuity to who the writers were and what they wanted. It voices democratic hopes and has even rediscovered American innocence (however thick the accents), at least so far as the defining trait of that innocence is the belief in the possibility of making oneself over and over. The South bids fair to become the last home of classic American autobiography. Now autobiography is simple for white Southerners, too.

But don't be fooled, not even by 10,000 precedents. It isn't simple. Autobiography remains disputed ground on which writers variously define the American self and its relation to others. It embodies abstractions and wrestles with contradictions among ideals and between ideals and practices. Never before have American autobiographers been more skeptical of their own assumptions and American beliefs, more conscious of the limitations of the form, on the one hand, and of its protean capacity for transformation, of itself and its subjects, on the other. It persists in its quarrel with privilege and has broadened and deepened the attack.

Increased self-consciousness and social criticism spring from many sources: the civil rights struggle, the Vietnamese War, the feminist movement—the sundry failings of American policy, politics, and society generally. Contemporary political and literary theories have, among the cognoscenti, heightened the self-consciousness. Thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, and de Man have challenged a Euro-American "patriarchy" and the values and outlook it represents to them. A "phallocentric" culture characterized by "linear logic" has systematically devalued the non-Western, the female, nature (seen as female), and the heterodox in ideals and lifestyles. The results, to cite two American examples, have been the near genocide of Indians and the destruction of wilderness. Postmodern writers deconstruct Western categories of thought, the literary "canon" (which has "privileged" white male authors and ideals), and language itself. "Truth," "reality," "history (herstory)," "self"—these and other terms have become relativized and problematized constructs whose referents cannot meaningfully be said to exist. The nihilism does not alarm so intrepid a thinker as de Man. He "looked into the abyss and came away smiling." Or, as an obscure Memphis bluesman one night growled into the mike, "The abyss is where it's at."
Notwithstanding the European cast to this description, postmodernism has roots in American thought and experience. The attack on patriarchy extends the democratic assault on privilege. Foucault's romantic project of becoming a knight of autonomy radicalizes the American ideal of the self-creating individual. The black autobiographical tradition, Henry Louis Gates has argued, systematically deconstructs white tradition and experience, a point that could be made for the writing of other American minorities. In the pragmatism of John Dewey, that most quintessentially American of philosophers, shines a sunny and robust version of deconstruction, according to Richard Rorty—one that leads away from the abyss to link man to man and hold out hope for a tolerant, democratic society.

Just as a combination of forces has broken down distinctions among groups, a combination has dissolved distinctions in terms and forms. Whether one turns to autobiography, criticism, or social life, one finds parallel rejections of traditional assumptions and labels, erosion of hierarchy and of the idea of authority, repudiations of boundaries or denials that they exist, mixing of elements, and presumptions in favor of experimentation.

Take "autobiography": a prose narrative of a life as written by the person himself. Each element of the definition dissolves. Start with the question of authorship. Easy enough to set aside Vanna and the Colonel. More problematic are the hundreds of slave narratives, our best source on the experience of slavery and a major model for contemporary African-American autobiography and fiction as well. Nor would we readily discard classics such as Black Elk Speaks, The Autobiography of Malcom X, and All God's Dangers. Such work provides access to group experience and outlook. It brings home and makes us understand that the personal is political. Autobiography, a lightly regarded form until recent decades, has become the foundational literature of African-American studies, women's studies, and comparable programs that center on groups that, like the form itself, have stood outside the canon.

Many students of autobiography would not stipulate prose. Some rank Wordsworth's Preludes and Whitman's Leaves of Grass among the greatest of autobiographies. Before dismissing this as wordtorturing, lit-crit talk, recall that a genius as rooted in life as Robert Penn Warren described poetry as "the deepest part of autobiography."

Autobiography shares with fiction the requirement of having a beginning, middle, and an end, as James M. Cox has noted. The narrator of his own life cannot remember his own beginning, unless he's Salvador Dali, and as for the end, words fail. By definition no autobiography can be complete, a fact that in several senses haunts the form. Or forms. Quite a few critics dismiss the question of factuality. For them the distinction between fiction and autobiography is arbitrary and largely irrelevant. No puzzle for them, the twisting, post-modernist title of a 1972 work, "Fredi & Shirl & the Kids, The Autobiography in Fables of Richard M. Elman, A Novel, by Richard Elman." All fiction, they observe, in some manner arises from and expresses the experience and outlook of its author. All autobiography, in turn, imitates art—is art, good or bad. The reader may judge verisimilitude, but, with the exception of famous people and events, can seldom assess the author's faithfulness to fact. The autobiographer selects details, deploys symbols, develops or discards "characters" in accordance with his theme, purpose, and overall design. A connectedness emerges, scene following scene, the one leading to the next, so that even the most accurate "self-biography" assumes a structure that resembles plot. The autobiographer, too, must tell a story, and revels in whatever literary devices he commands. The reader demands story, whether the book be Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn or Eddy L. Harris' Mississippi Solo.

The reader but not necessarily the critic. Many would sacrifice the requirement for narrative. They may read Henry James's preface to his New York Edition as autobiography, and at least one so reads Freud's Interpretation of
Dreams. For some, all art, indeed, all creative work, including science, philosophy, and literary theory, is autobiography. The critic of autobiography, James M. Olney divulges, "is a vicarious or closet autobiographer," regardless of whether he is aware of it or signals his reader. To write formal autobiography is but to go to the root of the matter—all matters. This view reflects the influence of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. The observer is always part of the observed. Our experience, attitudes, and values—our identity itself enters and colors even our most objective judgments and actions. We express ourselves in whatever we do. This means that the reading of autobiography is in two senses an autobiographical act. The reader reads himself. We may see this in an optimistic light. It implies that creativity is inevitable. It could not occur, this interpenetration and grafting of one story to another, were it not for some deep and potentially healing fund of shared experience and feeling. It's useful. It promotes the mutual understanding and appreciation on which our heterogeneous, democratic society heavily depends. There's something cozy in it, writer and reader encircled in warming light, engaged in the most intimate exchange. The peeling away of layers to achieve deeper levels of self-revelation furnishes the plot of much personal writing, as Phillip Lopate has commented. In no other form of literature does the writer speak so directly to the reader. Here, if ever, comes home the force of Gerard Manley Hopkins' maxim, "What you look hard at seems to look hard at you." To see yourself in the other implies the possibility of seeing the other in you.

Yet this double reading is not without cost. It readily blurs important differences between writer and reader. It at worst degenerates into narcissistic appropriation of the lives of others. This seizing of experience—trials faced, dues paid, triumphs achieved—is in part talismanic, a putting on of armor before entering darkness all our own. Such armoring helps explain the universality of autobiography's appeal. The temptation is especially strong when we are members of some group—Will Percy's elegantly declining aristocrats, Eli Evans's ambiguously assimilated Jews, Maya Angelou's rebuked and scorned but undefeated blacks, Roy Reed's cut-off and largely forgotten but long remembering hillfolk—with whom the writer identifies and for whom he self-consciously speaks. Writers no less than readers appropriate lives. Running through much autobiography is a tension between the author's desire to bear witness and a simultaneous, equally urgent need to inscribe a memorably individual voice. This tension is nowhere more marked than in American autobiography. It could not be otherwise, given our commitments to freedom and equality and the premium we place on the individual. This tension between group loyalty and individual aspiration and outlook is itself a major theme of American autobiography. Our polyglot population constitutes the uneven ground on which our ideals uneasily play out. The contention among diverse groups, each laying claim to American ideals and identity, is an overlapping theme of American autobiography.

The diversity of our population and the demands of our ideals further complicate any blurring of self with others. The closer we look at the question of autobiography, the more problematic become its assumptions. The enterprise rests on uncertain foundations and is made with unreliable tools.

Take memory. It takes enough away. Day by day, we forget what we did the day before. We are stunned by our own originality as we repeat the ideas, and—a special temptation for writers—the words of others. (Please, no credit for natural gifts, we may modestly insist.) We reconstruct as firm, backbones that, time after time, bent flexibly enough. We emerge through billowing fog, stepping smartly, the heroes of wars we never fought. Bill-owing—how excellent sweet to hear in a word my very self. Too easy to call memory a liar; it is, rather, the carpenter's assistant in the task of remodeling.

But not so fast. Memory often as not overtops initial perception. Time eases defensiveness, confers perspective,
brings understanding. An age that exalts imagination and innovation can also scant memory. Book jackets never mention it. Critics never praise it, unless reviewing a book about or by someone who can neither read nor write. A dull, humdrum faculty, this memory. The mind's clerk: it takes attendance, stocks shelves, ensures that the superior faculties arrive on time. Odd, how people confess to having poor ones as though it were a point of pride. No one boasts of meager discernment or creativity. Guilty whispers or none at all.

Perhaps we're too busy for memory. A future Eden will assign it to microchips and free a billion megabytes of human software. Perhaps it's fashion. A bloated memory isn't svelte. Or social uplift. Memory retards change. Or science. The nature that abhors a vacuum surely charges with creativity the space that otherwise buzzes between the ears. Our voices howl with power surges. Perhaps we fear memory, and not just for the dreadful matter it often holds. Memory, we on some level suspect, opposes creativity, tethers the powers of imagination we imagine we have. Or would, were it not for memory's drag. Memory muffles and easily precludes individual voice, mooring us to beginnings and making us who and where we come from. America itself meant a great casting off and starting over, a splendid wayfaring toward a future that endlessly recedes as we approach. The future that is the self and country can never be past. If America represents infinite possibility, then memory is almost un-American. Absence of memory, by contrast, opens possibility, promotes spontaneity, releases creativity. Free spirits soar above footsore pedestrians, swollen with retained information and experience.

These images and associations do not represent formed conviction or articulated thought. They're a matter of instinct. We trust instinct. It's the race's memory, embedded, mysterious. Nothing sexier than genes, coming down and washing through the generations since Adam. A word of warning. Invokers of Adam are generally a wearisome lot, of the party of memory and preachy, self-indulgently so. It's my party, and I'll preach if I want to. A didactic literature deserves a didactic criticism. I take for my text a personal fear. A collective and individual freedom from memory may be the most American freedom of all.

It's a negative freedom, the result of a forced and extravagant forgetfulness. Unbecoming, too. Perhaps it's time to admit our age. The United States is the oldest democracy in the world. Its frame of government, having withstood both internal and external challenges, has proved the most enduring of any extant. We are an old people, if nationhood defines people, heirs to a complicated past distinguished by early allegiance to democratic ideals, unprecedented material abundance, and the mixing of ethnic and religious elements on a scale that has not elsewhere or in other times been seen. That history has entered and shaped all of us, each element profoundly affecting the other and being affected in turn. It has alienated all from what they were before. New England Puritans aspired to being a peculiar people. That is what we've become, unlike any the world has ever known. Only through some sense of history can we understand our brothers and sisters and other strangers--ourselves.

Dismiss differences of origin, class, race, religion, lifestyles, and (biological function aside) sex, as well. Banish the narcissism of narrow groups, their petty affirmations and destructive spites. Allow that in the most fundamental senses we are all the same. Introspective autobiographers know Narcissus to be a tricky fellow--subtle and ineradicable, luxuriantly furnishing vast or seemingly uninhabitable space. Consciousness is single, however numerous the tribe. For all the broadening of sympathies, the figure in the mirror only looms the larger, of vaguer feature, lost in reverential mass. The democratic Narcissus swallows the Other with a sly, companionable burp.

Democratic institutions require that we recognize what we have in common. No less crucial but more difficult for one of liberal hopes is a recognition of our divisions, how various our relations to the main currents of American history, how different or layered our loyalties and faiths within an encompassing American identity. Humane
sentiments cannot erase those differences. Nor should we pretend that the differences aren't there or don't matter. If they don't, neither does anything else. Meaningful community combines compassion with clear-sightedness, appreciation for others with respect for ourselves. A didactic and political autobiographical tradition at its best helps engender such understanding. It reminds readers that they belong to a community of memory.

I offer a paradox as well as a moral. The autobiographer loads memory's freight to be worthy of the air that lifts his craft; the weight's the air. No imagination without memory, nor memory without imagination.

Nor is there self to write or be written about. The authenticity of the self is not a new issue for American autobiography. The Puritan autobiographer queried the authenticity of conversion, the proofs of belonging to God's elect. The confidence man, deluding himself as often as others, figures prominently in personal writing from Stephen Burroughs's Memoirs to Emmet Grogan's Ringolevio. Further, culture can overdefine as readily as underdefine the self. Straitjacketing closure no less than vertiginous freedom can produce a divided self, incapable of expression, mistaking the hum and buzz of hive for the unchained melody of "I." "I and the hive are one" is the historic American conceit. Testament to the genius of national ideals, how many writers have brought it off. New, or in fresh form, however, is the crumbling of foundations on which a writer might establish authenticity and have it tried, its smack found sweet or sour. Now only altogether wanting because incapable of taste.

An impressive philosophical tradition dating at least to Descartes and his thing that thinks and therefore is, and including Locke (who saw memory as the key), Hume (who denied the existence of the self), and Husserl (who saw the self as a kind of spectator necessary for all other things to appear; or in another image, a light that could not shine back on itself) has struggled with the problem of self. One of the more recent approaches argues that the self is just a story, a story that must keep telling and retelling itself to keep up with the self it is making by telling; or to keep the self up with the stories making it. I do not propose to enter the debate over "narrativity," only to note that the theory has special meaning for students of American history. For 200 years Americans have been making selves and country, the projects overlapping, implying narrative, the plot of the one that of the other. From Jefferson and his Declaration of Independence on, Americans have been writing themselves.

That self--it's everywhere, the icon of pop therapy, the mantra of advertising. You-owe-it-to-yourself is the new social contract. I wish I could blame it on outsiders. California, maybe. Driving down state highway 49 in south Craighead County, there it was on the car I overtook: Arkansas SELF.

"Self" is the secular cousin of "soul," and, as with the more spiritual side of the family, it's an article of faith. One cannot define it, locate it, or prove its existence. Yet most of us assume it. Challenged, we respond with vague formulas: the self is the essence of individual identity. Or speak in circles: the self is what makes you, you.

The autobiographer--collapsing chronology, tracing pattern, establishing coherence--clearly creates as much as records a self. Here surely is the deepest spring of autobiography, one that rises with all the greater force because of the value that Western culture places on the individual. That value mightily obligates us to become individuals. We owe a self. Autobiography furnishes incomparable opportunity to present to ourselves and others an integrated, unique, and therefore precious self. The book, as they say, is even better than the life.