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From Autobiography to Memoir

Autobiography and the Autobiographical Essay

For the last century and a half, the world of life-writing, which includes biography, autobiography, memoir, and confession, has been dominated by the personal tale of a public figure, a life socially significant in his or her own time. Autobiographies issue from such luminaries as Ulysses S. Grant, Helen Keller, Malcolm X, and Bill Clinton. The great-person-turned-writer thinks of his life as a series of causative events: childhood begets adolescence, adolescence begets youth, and so on. The author thus organizes the work in strict chronology, usually dabbling in enough of the parents' past to bring about his birth. (Readers will recognize a format similar to biographers.) As the life collects its periods and phases, the tone becomes self-justifying and is often trained on moral experience. The author's purpose is to set the historical record straight, an idea based on the assumption that there is a single record and that the person who lived it can best document it. A

good writer might tell a gripping story, but it's not a requirement. What is required is that the author must have accomplished something notable—he may be a scientist whose discovery eradicated a disease, or a military leader whose campaigns were decisive—in order that the tale be written.

Despite the occasional female author, autobiography is a male genre. Such books typically promulgate career, heritage, social standing, or fame. In England and America, tall tales of the great man include *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), in which Adams charts his development as an intellectual in the third person, and T. E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926), which is the self-mythologizing reminiscences of his fighting alongside the Arabs who revolted against the Turks in 1916. Books written by public figures have at times been labeled “memoirs,” a literary genre, also concerned with historical events. Rendering the public life means leaving the private life either underdeveloped or ignored. What remains is commonly a tabulation (though it may be exciting to read) of whom one knew and what one witnessed—seldom what one felt. Autobiography and one's “memoirs” generally avoid introspection and scenic drama and, instead, summarize the significant people and events in the author's life.

In *The Norton Book of American Autobiography*, Jay Parini tells us that autobiography “might well be called the essential American genre” (11). This would be accurate were the form widely practiced. But it hasn't been. In fact, its exclusivity as the story of a notorious or exceptional figure has probably censored more formal life-writing than it has encouraged. Parini, I think, wishes that autobiography were America's genre because he's enamored of a few very good books, two in particular: Franklin's *Autobiography* and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. Like armies massed at Gettysburg, these works pit two autochthonous New World lives against each other: Franklin's book tells of how his thrift found a home in the burgeoning American economy, while Thoreau's tells

of how his thrift opposed that economy's intrusions into the place-sustaining lives of Americans. In both stories, the authors attest to their liberation, often more ideologically than experientially. The tales represent political visions, endemic to this country, quite well. In Franklin's conservative vision, the idea of liberation is harnessed to sin, going against the moral authority of God or church: whatever you're freeing yourself from means you've already overdesired it. In Thoreau's liberal view, the idea of liberation is harnessed to freedom from narrow-mindedness or enslavement; indeed, some can only be free when they are politicized and seize their rights. (With the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* [1845], a work that predates Thoreau's, the title tells us that his tale is a personal testament to and a call for the release of a bound people, slaves and former slaves like Douglass. Yes, he's the one who's freed, but he portrays his freedom as an example to others.)

Leonard Kriegel has noted of Franklin's *Autobiography* that "there is something missing . . . something essential, an absence not merely of the deeper self but of the very possibility of a deeper self" (213). I read America differently than Parini does: the deeper self *is* essential to American writers and artists but is not found in traditional autobiography. Unless you lived a life as consequential as Douglass's or Franklin's, you wouldn't have (in the last two centuries) been drawn to write your life story, let alone think of it as such. Without a publisher's blessing, your biography would not have been written, either. About the closest you would have come to anything full-length and life-assessing might have been the confession, a religious work in which your failings as a sinner would have been assuaged by your atonement. Indeed, some older confessionals are remarkably *inner*, albeit ideologically beset, in their focus. And yet despite the conditions that severely limited who actually wrote an autobiography, American writers have written *autobiographically*. Which is to say, they have used personal experience

in story, essay, poem, or travel account—in the short form—in service of a larger subject.

The autobiographical essay has, especially in the twentieth century, flourished as an alternative to, even a comment on, the overwrought life story. As a memoir-essay, personal narrative, or personal essay, by either known or unknown authors, this compact piece has been published in newspapers, magazines, and literary journals. (The personal essay's most important innovator was the Romantic era's William Hazlitt. As Phillip Lopate has written, Hazlitt "brought a new intimacy" to the form, "establishing as never before a conversational rapport, a dialogue with the reader" [180].) One of the greatest essayists, who uses the direct personal style in much of his work, is George Orwell. His 1931 tale "A Hanging" ranks among the finest short memoirs ever written. The piece tells of a Hindu man who, during the British occupation of Burma, is hanged in "classy European style," that is, dispassionately and efficiently. The piece shudders with the Orwellian notion of a blithe state torturing a debased individual as it also glows with a familiar participatory truth. The idea a personal narrative could be as exciting and intimate as a Hemingway tale has taken time to sink, in part because the form has had to play second fiddle to the narrative invention of fiction. It wasn't until Orwell's several examples ("Shooting an Elephant," "Marrakech," and "How the Poor Die") and those of writers as diverse as E. B. White and Zora Neale Hurston had captured readers with their participatory narrators that the form gained currency. (Of course, today, short and long sections of personal narrative grace books on psychology, economics, travel, science, even literary criticism, by authors whose direct experience gives their subjects greater weight.) The short memoir piece is spare, universal, confessional, and true. Who among us has not been touched by what is perhaps the best personal essay by an American, Joan Didion's "On Self-Respect," first published in *Vogue* in 1961?¹

The Memoir

It may be that the memoir has risen in the last two decades because the personal essay expanded its singular theme and fleshed out its emotional immediacy. It may be that the life story shrank its garrulous, self-important voice. In either event, the hull of traditional autobiography began to leak sometime during the 1980s. It was then that a new kind of storytelling emerged: short and midlength books, sometimes called memoir, in which the author *chose* a particular life experience to focus on. Heralding the new in particular were three books of intense interior drive: Vivian Gornick's *Fierce Attachments: A Memoir* (1987), a story of mother-daughter closeness in which both, disturbingly, inhabit each other's pasts; Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life: A Memoir* (1988), a tale in a boy's voice of his peripatetic mother and cruel stepfather that reads like a novel with fiction's narrative punch; and Richard Rhodes's *A Hole in the World: An American Boyhood* (1990), a harrowing story of two brothers who endure the abuse of a tyrannical mother and the neglect of a hapless father. Such books felt new, in part, because they lacked the scope of autobiography and the limitation of the essay.

Another publishing event, in 1995, also reshaped our sense of what memoir might be. This was the publication of the unexpurgated edition of *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank.² The new edition included material Anne's father, Otto, excised from the original when he first published her diary in 1947: Anne's insight into his character, her budding and more explicit sexual feelings for Peter, and the anxiety she had about herself. Her anxiety was spurred mostly by difficulties she had had with her mother, which she discussed in passages that were also kept out. As great a book as the original edition was, we had not read, for a half century, Anne's most trying revelations about her family, truths which, read now, only deepen her story. The new Anne Frank blossoms

as a memoirist: we can finally see *her* as clearly as she once saw those suffering around her.

The emotional concentrations of Gornick, Wolff, and Rhodes, as well as the ever-affecting Anne Frank, all carry that personable voice: diary-like, reflective, intimately close and trusting, at times uncomfortably so. An instance of the latter is Lucy Grealy's *Autobiography of a Face* (1994). Despite the title's playfulness, Grealy details how her interior self was changed by an operation for cancer that surgically took away one-third of her jaw when she was nine. "This singularity of meaning—I *was* my face, I *was* ugliness—though sometimes unbearable, also offered a possible point of escape. It became the launching pad from which to lift off, the one immediately recognizable place to point to when asked what was wrong with my life. Everything led to it, everything receded from it" (7). Engagement with "this singularity of meaning" is emblematic of a new approach to personal narration. As my writing teachers trumpeted, a good topic is a narrowed topic. One emotional or thematic focus is plenty for a book. Indeed, only those parts of Grealy's life that were germane to the shadow and substance of her disfigurement got in.

How simple this is! For two decades, writers have gravitated to this simplicity, whether they were writing about buying a house in Mexico, living with AIDS, or losing a child. Memoir situates the one story as equal to or greater than—even against—the epic chronology of the Life. Autobiography's central tenet—wisdom gained through many years—is much too grandiose for the memoirist. In fact, memoir writers are so bent on activating the particular in their books that many are writing of the immediate past, even the still-corruptible present, not waiting for time to ripen or change what they know.

As the memoir has evolved, the canvas and the frame have gotten a lot smaller. And, to see the new form properly, we have to look more closely and the canvas has to contain more detail—

detail that is revealing and reflective, textured and telling, exclusive and sharp. For example, note how this memoir's subtitle announces its severe singularity: *Heat: An Amateur's Adventures as Kitchen Slave, Line Cook, Pasta-Maker, and Apprentice to a Dante-Quoting Butcher in Tuscany*, by Bill Buford (2006). Buford, of course, is writing autobiographically. But he's hardly writing an autobiography. He's writing memoir. He's focused not on a life but on a portion thereof, a portion small enough to allow him the nitty-gritty he and his readers crave. It's true that critics have conflated autobiography and memoir throughout our literary history. But what we need to do is to sharpen their growing distinction: the memoir is supplanting its uncle, in part by telescoping the form, in part by accruing stylistic innovation. In the last ten years, writers have been distinguishing the form faster than we can analyze their attempts.

Once authors pared down the autobiography and it was no longer recognizable as such, the new form needed a name. It was christened "memoir," and the designation has often been attached as or in a subtitle: *Fried Butter: A Food Memoir*. Twenty years later, the form is recognizable on its own. In the memoir, writers use a modicum of summary and great swarths of narrative, scenic and historical, to sustain their single theme or emotional arc. Thus, Lauren Slater's *Prozac Diary* (1998) concentrates only on a ten-year period which has just ended, when the drug has removed her debilitating depression and she isn't crazy anymore. As the story grows, she discloses to herself, often in surprising ways, the truth about her years of suffering. Slater is guided as much by these revelations as by her memory. She seems to have trusted that in the wake of her disease she could be the most honest with herself, and this honesty would best express the disease. One key is courage: she went at the topic immediately, not waiting for the autobiographer's prerogatives, age and wisdom.

For such emotionally intense memoirs we need emotionally revealing memoirists, authors who are willing to put themselves on the couch, under the lamp, into the darkness, sometimes as they are living or soon after they have lived the emotional mire they are working with and, perhaps, waking up in. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes the old plural form, “memoirs,” as that which emphasizes “what is remembered rather than who is remembering.” If we invert this, we can call a book that emphasizes the *who* over the *what*—the shown over the summed, the found over the known, the recent over the historical, the emotional over the reasoned—a memoir.

Memoir and Memoirist

A word or two about this relationship. Both memoir and memoirist draw attention to the writer now—product and producer. Still, there’s something tentative, not quite out of the womb, about the pair. The *ist* in memoirist doesn’t have the bona fides that novelist and scientist do. The job description needs codifying: memoir practitioners have no field yet (memoirship) for which, like psychologists, they can hang a shingle. (The field of books analyzing autobiography and memoir as a form is small but growing.³) A memoir sounds like a dalliance; there’s something purely personal and time-bound about it, like a fall fashion or passing clouds. With autobiography, we think there is only one life—the person lives it, then writes it. Boom, done. But the memoir feels prey to (or is it desirous of?) immediate emotional memory, almost as if the point is to preserve the evanescent.

There’s a practical reason for memoir’s provisional status. Once we locate its engine and the emotion with which to make it go, we will find that far more of our lives will be left out than can ever be put in. Leaving so much out adds to the mystery of selection. The memoirist has to limit the project severely, be a master trim-

mer. Most of us find that through writing memoir we behold the great vistas of our lives, even among our circumscribed phases. We quickly discover, however, that no matter how telescoped our thematic and emotional emphasis is, the story is still *a* story: it is subjective and distinct, a melody with the barest orchestration. It cannot be *the* record of *the* past as autobiography tries to be. Memoir is *a* record, a chamber-sized scoring of one part of the past. Despite its rightness, it's a version of, perhaps a variation on, what happened. We don't really read Jeannette Walls's "childhood" of poverty and neglect in *The Glass Castle: A Memoir* (2005); we read her version of it—which, because it's so well written, we think *is* her childhood. And yet it's something else, too: one path down a set of precisely chosen days of desperation she took in this one book.

Imagine ten siblings, born at one-year intervals, each of whom, on his or her thirtieth birthday, writes a memoir about growing up. Reading those ten memoirs, we would find agreement, in general, only on the barest facts. Everything else—pecking-order differences, stronger and weaker egos, parental favoritism—would be subject to individual perspective, in part because each kid had fought hard to be heard or had wilted in the competition. Which book is true? All are true and none is truer, though each of the ten writers would defend his or her truth forever. Who can say what that family's story is? I've never heard of a single-family bevy of memoirs. Rather, there's usually only one author in the clan. He or she is situationally selected as the most observant one in the group—I'm afraid that's been my lot—who, though she is crowned, can never really be the family spokesperson. Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) may seem like the story of what happened to her because of her family. But, in the absence of competing views that might refute or refashion or deepen the tale of how she was interrupted at eighteen and why, her memoir is only *her* truth—only her *adolescent* truth, only her *late* adolescent

emotional truth, only her late adolescent emotional *breakdown* truth—and no one else's, a conclusion I'd wager her parents (who seem selectively absent in the book) would have easily agreed with.

The memoirist, then, is one who while and after she writes realizes the existential limitation of memoir. Private, mythic score-settling, at times given to ax-grinding or ax-wielding terror—and yet true to one rigid but gossamer particularity. I hope the challenge to traditional autobiography and its absolutist view of the self is met. But the construction of a relative self in the memoir is no less difficult: the person writing now is inseparable from the person the writer is remembering then. The goal is to disclose what the author is discovering about these persons. But such a goal can arise only in the writing of the memoir, a discovery which then becomes the story.