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Memory and Autobiography

FRANK KERMODE

WE DON'T LACK advice as to the necessity of self-knowledge. "Know thyself," ordered the Delphic Oracle; and according to the Gnostic Book of Thomas the Contender, which turned up not so long ago in Egypt, the pagans were right: "Whoever has not known himself has known nothing, but he who has known himself has already achieved knowledge about the depths of things." In a more skeptical mood John Donne, a learned man who sometimes professed to believe all knowledge useless, includes the self among the things we don't know, and won't until we get to heaven. But the consensus is that we should at least try: hence the extraordinary profusion of autobiographies, evidence that a lot of people have wanted to know themselves, and believed the way to do so was to write it all down.

Their ambition was usually similar to that professed by Edward Gibbon: "Truth, naked unblushing truth . . . must be the sole recommendation of this personal narrative." Rousseau says many times over that he will put everything in, so that the readers will know him as well they know themselves. These are eighteenth-century figures, and have not, as St. Augustine had, the relatively simple life-plot, in which everything of narrative importance ends with his conversion; the likes of Gibbon and Rousseau were not (except perhaps vestigially) subject to such spiritual constraints.

Yet although they are so enlightened, they don't, by the strictest criteria, tell the whole simple truth. Sometimes they simply don't want to, and sometimes they may have a rather different notion from ours (or St. Augustine's) as to what the truth includes, as when Gibbon explains that he says nothing about his sexual life because that topic "less properly belongs to the memoirs of an individual, than to the natural history of the species"; we might reasonably suspect that another, possibly even the real reason was that on this

topic “unblushing truth” would be harder to tell. For his part Rousseau can't refrain from heightening the effect of certain episodes in his life—can't indeed deny himself the thrill of confessing that he has occasionally done so.

My belief, as readers of my own memoir will quickly discover, is that the honest truth, insofar as this suggests absolute fidelity to historical fact, is inaccessible; the minute you begin to write it you try to write it well, and writing well is an activity which has no simple relation to truth. For memory cannot do the necessary work independently of fantasy; and if it tries, the result will be a dull report.

That, however, is not the end of the problem. When the oracle and the saint spoke so firmly of the need to know oneself, they were assuming that the self was a concept available to all, a single, apprehensible thing. But it seems characteristic of the modern mind that the very existence of such a self can be questioned; or, if admitted, regarded as something that is at once complex, discontinuous, and of small value. Of course autobiographers as a rule do not much concern themselves with such speculations, or they would never get started; they need to assume that the self or selves they propose to talk about existed and exist, that they can get access to them, and that they are worth talking about.

They assume that they can offer some sort of truth about themselves. To some commentators this seems a large assumption. Freud remarked with some surprise that “the urge to tell the truth is much stronger than is usually supposed,” but it could be argued that truth-telling doesn't amount to much if the ostensible subject, the self, is a fiction, a temporary construct, or nonexistent.

We can only reply that the assumption of its existence and value is justified by our needs; even David Hume, who denied that the mind was identical at different moments, allowed that we have “a natural propensity . . . to imagine that . . . identity.” The psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott held that “the loss of continuity of the self is a psychic catastrophe,” so if the continuous self-identical self is a lie, it is one that in truth we cannot easily get along without. There

are philosophers who dispute or at least regret this. Felicity Nussbaum admits that “we feel compelled as writers of ourselves and readers of autobiography to construct a ‘self,’” but warns that this construction is ultimately the product of “historically bound ideology”—it seems the powers that be find it to their advantage that we should imagine that we enjoy a certain personal order and coherence. Even Charles Taylor, in *The Sources of the Self*, while accepting that there is such a thing as selfhood, tells us that the notion of every person having “his or her original way of being” belongs to the post-Romantic period, which saw a “turn to oneself.”

It must be allowed that many forces combine to make the modern idea of the self differ from older ones, among them improvements in literacy, advances in anthropology and psychology, and a greatly increased measure of privacy that gives time and space for introspection. Yet the natural propensity to suppose that there is a self-consistent and normally continuous (though altering) self is surely constant and relatively independent of cultural change.

Think of the concept of *property* in the language of Shakespeare, probably inherited from medieval philosophy. It is the quality that makes a class or a person itself and not something else, defining what is *proper* to it. When Shakespeare says “Property was thus appalled / That the self was not the same” he is saying that beings are normally separated by distinctive properties, they are “selfsame,” so that when, in circumstances as unusual as those he is talking about in “The Phoenix and Turtle,” the self ceases to be the same, the personified figure of Property is shocked: this is out of the normal order of things, in which distincts are always divided, not unified like the Phoenix and the Turtle, who are unique.

Shakespeare, incidentally, seems to have been interested in what could be done with the word *self*, especially in compounds, some of them quite strange, like the great cluster in *Troilus and Cressida*. He used the word *selfsame* twenty-eight times, so anticipating the philosopher F. H. Bradley, who called his “self-sameness” “the first condition . . . I must be throughout one identical person.” And it would seem that Shakespeare might, like Mon-

taigne, have accepted that while "every man beareth the whole stamp of the human condition," each person was nevertheless self-same as well as human-same. He shows more interest in the idea of selfness than might be expected from an author who lived before the philosophers had properly identified the problem; he was certainly interested in what made a self selfsame and other than other selves, even if his interest lacked the surplus intensity Charles Taylor describes as developing from the time of Descartes and spurting ahead after the Romantics.

I mean that there really is something for memory to work at, a self or a family of selves to be descried, even if our reason for thinking so is only that natural propensity of Hume's. Gerard Manley Hopkins can be abstruse on such topics as selves and selving, but we all know what he means when he writes of "my self-being, my consciousness and feeling of myself, that taste of myself, of *I* and *me* above and in all things, which is more distinctive than the taste of ale or alum, more distinctive than the smell of walnutleaf or camphor. . . ."

This self-taste may account not only for the popularity of autobiography but for whatever importance it has as a means to truth, in a time when other means of access are less frequented, when what are now called the obsolete master narratives, and other varieties of *mensonges véridiques*, are under suspicion, or at any rate less attractive. Now the instrument of access to this self and its taste is memory, with all its well-known defects as an investigator of the truth.



The first autobiographer in our tradition was St. Augustine, and he at once saw that he needed to deal with the question of memory, which he called "the stomach of the mind," and to which he attributed much greater power and scope than we generally do; for example, it would include what we'd call "imagination." His narrative is of a delayed self-opening to grace, and could not be told without recollections of the unregenerate condition in which he had for-

merly lived. He did not believe in the Platonic notion of prenatal knowledge, and accordingly located God in the human memory. He also believed we can know ourselves because of an innate predisposition to do so, a predisposition likewise located in the memory. Charles Taylor is hardly exaggerating when he remarks that “in Augustine’s doctrine the intimacy of self-presence is, as it were, hallowed, with immensely far-reaching consequences for the whole of western culture.”

So one can see why he followed his narrative in the *Confessions* with a philosophical inquiry into memory. His model of memory is rather like a library, with some books on reserve and some of readier access. But it allows for the interaction of memories discrete as to time and topic. There is a sort of catalog in which memories are filed according to the sense that introduced each of them. This enables us to enjoy but also to compare and conflate images of the world. “I distinguish the odor of lilies from that of violets without smelling anything at all.” Moreover—and this is important, for all autobiography is, in the end, about doubles—in ranging round these interacting files of data “I meet myself and recall what I am, what I have done, and when and where and how I was affected when I did it.” And with those recollections other images less immediate to that self-meeting may in their turn be blended and combined.

Augustine of course noticed that in such self-encounters there must always be a difference between the “I” that is recounting them and the “I” that is the object of the narration. The difference is not merely temporal, it is also qualitative, for the self, though selfsame, will have been changed by its decisions, its actions and sufferings, and the narrative will at least in part be required to explain in what ways the subject has altered between the living and the writing. Yet between the two “I”s there will be instant recognition. This is characteristic of all self-reflection, an acceptance of otherness within identity; and the correspondence between this necessary feature of the written narrative and the ordinary experience of the reader is one of the attractions of autobiography. It endorses the feeling everybody must have that making sense of oneself, of the

strangenesses of oneself, learning something of the meaning of one's life, depends on remembering the features by which one is and has been recognized.

Augustine in fact thought that all learning was remembering, while admitting that the act of remembering changes what is remembered; for instance, sad memories can give pleasure and happy memories sadness. You may remember without fear a moment when you were afraid, and so on. And according to Augustine you may even remember what you have had no experience of, for instance a felicity which must lie in the future. Somehow the notion has been implanted in the memory, from which it can be summoned, like so much else, to inhabit what he calls "the present of things past," in which these original deposits are modified by our present needs or interests.

When conveyed in language these perceptions or recognitions will be to some extent debased, as, in Augustine's view, everything is when it occurs in time as distinct from eternity, where all truths are a single idea and all times a single moment. Autobiography is possible only in time, only to the fallen; but although it is a substitute, it enables us to understand something of what it would be like if all actions were part of a seamless whole, as in eternity. This is a condition we can imagine (as in Augustine's famous example of the recited psalm which becomes whole only when it is finished and has passed into the memory) but not describe, except in this diminished way, which is all that is possible to those who live under the rule of time.

Some of the points I've taken from this ancient, seminal meditation may remind one of more modern attitudes to memory; Augustine knows about short-term and long-term memory, and he provides a role for forgetfulness. His idea of the reworkings, combinations, and transformations of memory may a little resemble Freud's *Nachträglichkeit* or "deferred action." Yet the comparison soon falters, and in the end Freudian theories of memory cannot, I think, be the friends of autobiography.

The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips has a paradoxical paper called

“Freud and the Uses of Forgetting,” which begins “People come for psychoanalytical treatment because they are remembering in a way that does not free them to forget.” Symptoms are involuntary and disguised memories of desire, unsuccessful attempts at self-cure, the cure of memory. But these memories are what need to be forgotten. Repression is simply a way of seeming to get rid of them while actually keeping them. We try to use memory to forget with, as in screen memories—devices designed to enable us to forget memories of forbidden desire. But true forgetting calls for a truer use of memory.

These paradoxes on remembering and forgetting represent them as a doublet; but the differences from Augustine are very sharp. In fact the logic of Freud’s psychoanalytical process, as Phillips describes it, is the reverse of what we normally take to be the autobiographer’s. “Either the most significant bits of one’s past are unconscious, and only available in the compromised form of symptoms and dreams, or the past is released through interpretation into oblivion.” The product of analysis is thus not autobiography but evacuation. Its assumptions about memory are hostile to autobiography. Indeed what we profess to remember is so far from the truth that it is precisely what we have devised to protect us from the truth; and this will be so even when the claim that one is hiding nothing is especially strenuous, as it is in Rousseau.

So any resemblance between Augustine’s idea of the beneficent reworking of the past in present memory and the Freudian *Nachträglichkeit* is illusory. Freud means to explain how the past is recovered in a malignly distorted form; a childhood memory becomes a trauma, which is not directly associated with that memory. Memory invents a past to defend us against the appalling timelessness of the unconscious. What we remember we remember because we are forgetting in the wrong way; then our remembering takes the form of repetition, of acting out; and if the analyst tries to cure this repetition by fostering the work of remembering, he does so not because the memories thus elicited are valuable but because he wishes to dispose of them as bad for the patient, as precisely what

he or she needs to forget. Or, as Phillips says, "Psychoanalysis is a cure by the kind of remembering that makes forgetting possible."

Here the timeless is not, as in Augustine, eternity, but the unconscious. It is not something we would aspire to; it is what we struggle against with substitute memories. So we write, as autobiographers, about what ought really to be forgotten for our better health. Instead of being related to the integrity of a life and to God and ultimate felicity, the idea of the timeless is now related to incest and murder. We are therapeutically induced to remember it, but only in order to forget it as completely as possible.

So it can hardly be doubted that the dominant model of autobiography is still Augustinian rather than Freudian. Perhaps this is due to a false but natural propensity, as Hume might have said. The analyst tries to pry open the box so that all its contents will eventually fly out; the autobiographer has a notion that his life, as memory reconstructs it, can by certain skills be made to hang together; so, needing the contents, he closes the box and snaps the catch on the lid.



The notion of closure is so attractive to writers that when they go out of their way to avoid it you can tell they are thinking about it but are being rebellious and avant-garde. Closure offers a kind of substitute timelessness, or a time that has a stop, with its own benefits, its own felicity. Autobiographers seek closure, so that even when, like Ruskin and Henry James, they do not manage to finish their autobiographies, they may still claim to have felt its imminence. ("How things bind and blend themselves together!" says Ruskin; James pauses to admire the way the parts of his story "so inseparably and beautifully . . . seemed to hang together"). Or take the example of Vladimir Nabokov's very artful autobiographical memoir, which, while full of elegantly rendered and disparate detail, is nevertheless so arranged as to create an impression that it is all ordered, that it is one, that the box is eventually closed.

One of Nabokov's anecdotes is about a general who amused him

as a little boy by playing tricks with matches. Many years and many pages later this general turns up again, now a fugitive, dressed like a peasant in a sheepskin coat. He stops Nabokov's father, also a refugee from the Bolsheviks, and asks him for a light. While expressing the charitable hope that the general also escaped his enemies, Nabokov adds, with his customary ruthlessness: "but that was not the point. What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme. . . . The following of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography."

For all that Nabokov's ideal is avowedly esthetic and not, like Augustine's, spiritual, they are alike concerned with "thematic designs" and believe a certain truth is to be had from the discerning of them. Augustine's book closes abruptly on the felicity of his conversion, Nabokov's on the felicity of his design. And readers want, by whatever means, to share that felicity; they will find some way to totalize even the episodic, unreflective Cellini. We see, because we want to see, behind a book a satisfying single—actually double—personality, a vertical man, as John Sturrock in his book *The Language of Autobiography* puts it, arising from a horizontal narrative.

The most obvious of all thematic designs or patterns is the familiar one of the certainties, birth and death, but in between them there occurs a vast and random set of events, experiences, and emotions different in detail as between individuals but offering, in each life, the possibility of further patterns, of coincidences, of repetitions, of endings, all substitutes for the final end. From the little we know of such combinations in others we construct ideas of character that to some extent affect our dealings with them. Contemplating one's own life one sees in more detail typical weaknesses, habitual truths, habitual lies, what we come to think of as our characteristic responses. These can be held in common between the differing selves we identify (by their inextinguishable taste) in the course of a life.

But of course we can also recognize alterations, changes of conduct, changes of character. These changes are also little models of the great change, the end that is common to all, but they differ

from it in the manner of their narrative appearances, and also in that they are symbolic rather than real endings. There will be more narrative to follow. Augustine's symbolic ending was his conversion and baptism, a crisis so vast, so close to a full ending, that he saw no point in continuing his narrative after it. But most autobiographies have mimic endings on a smaller scale. In the spiritual-confessional type they are always conversions—this is true of the archetypal hundreds of nineteenth-century working-class memoirs, which, in the wake of Augustine, exploit the enormous contrast between a dissolute youth and the mature spiritual life that follows the moment of recognition and forgiveness.

But such moments need not be religious; the more secular form of autobiography will offer comparable crises or epiphanies. These mark a distinct, though possibly quite slight, deviance from what had seemed a norm of conduct, the transition from one version of the self to another, yet within the limits set by the prior conviction—established by that natural propensity—that these different selves can be organized by narrative into one self, oneself.

The memories of what was once the normal self and of the ways in which these significant deviations qualified it are not necessarily recovered by acts of will. The broad distinction, familiar from the virtuoso narrative of Proust, and explored in Beckett's early book on that author, between voluntary and involuntary memory, may be on a different track from the studies of the modern psychologist, but we all have a sense of the distinction, though we may not be capable of recording our experiences of involuntary memory in a narrative that makes of them elements in a thematic design. These moments are privileged though they may, in themselves, seem trivial enough: the musical phrase, the madeleine, the rough paving stone. Even the aristocratic prose of Gibbon pauses over a moment in Lausanne when he fancied he discovered the outline of a statue in the marble block of his normal life, a privileged view of the great historian he was to become. That Rousseau had such moments we know from the description of the fatal closing of the town gates of Geneva, and the journey to Vincennes which made him a writer. It is likely that

many such moments become significant only by hindsight, by reworking, by the action of a writer's memory.

Edmund Gosse, in his memoir *Father and Son*, speaks of the "trifling things" that become landmarks in a life. The boy's fundamentalist father wanted him to decline an invitation to a party he would have liked to go to, and suggested that the boy pray for guidance on the question. The boy obeyed. Asked what the Lord replied, the boy, well knowing his father to be confident that the Lord would agree with him, replied, "The Lord says I may go to the Brown's." The father, says Gosse, "gazed at me in speechless horror and left the room, slamming the door."

Commenting on this scene, Barrett J. Mandel remarks that it forms part of a pattern of significant moments of rebellion in the boy's life, but that he can have known this only later when he remembered it, and it was this knowledge that made what might sound like a trifling occurrence into a landmark. It is because of the recurrence of such trifles—they occurred to the first "I" but were made significant by the second "I"—that the double-dealing author can persuade us that things—*his* things, at any rate—hang together, that there is a resemblance between his remembered life and a narrative structure that makes sense; that there are possibilities of pattern in the flux of existential events. We have a natural propensity to desire and require it.

Incidentally, we wouldn't think it sensible to complain that the mature Gosse can hardly be remembering his father's exact words on that distant occasion. His tacit claim to be doing so will not strike us as in bad faith; as Mandel expresses it, the autobiographer is always saying "My life is as this tale I am telling"—"as this tale" implying analogy, not identity. It is the most that can be said, and it is quite a lot; the writer confers at least this kind of meaning on what would otherwise be at best a series of mnemonic trifles. This kind of meaning is his kind of truth.

Perhaps we could add that in a sense he has very likely recalled the episode many times before actually writing it down; that this

particular memory of his father might be the memory of a memory, that it has acquired, before he sets it down, those complex associations of which Augustine speaks. Augustine as a boy stole pears although they weren't good enough to be eaten except by pigs, and Wordsworth as a boy stole a boat and was accused by the mountains, but the boy wasn't thinking, as the writer was, about the discipline of fear, nor was he thinking that such an experience, though in its way alarming, formed part of a necessary and benign education of the spirit (whereas for the mature Augustine the theft of the pears was evidence of a degeneracy he probably didn't feel when stealing them).

What autobiography aims to do is, as Wordsworth puts it in the *Prelude*, "to rescue from decay the old / By timely interference," and indeed, by a series of timely interferences. Wordsworth's "spots of time" — mnemonic trifles of which he struggled so beautifully to discover the significance — are there in the two-book *Prelude* written in 1798 and still there in the more extensive patterns of the two published versions we call respectively 1805 and 1850, each remembering the memories recorded in its predecessors.

So autobiography depends on the action of memory which may be memory of memories. The decisive act is the self-encounter of writing, and that may, as with Wordsworth, occur several times, each time altering or deepening the complexity of the pattern. The question then arises, whether making sense of a life, fully indulging our natural propensity to do so, is something that only writers can achieve, whether on their own account or on behalf of us all.

It is a question that exercised Wordsworth, the greatest English autobiographer. It will be remembered that he said of prose and poetry that "they both speak by the same organs . . . their affections are kindred, almost identical, not necessarily differing even in degree. The same human blood circulates through the veins of them both." And so he comes to speak of the relation between poets and ordinary people. The poet, he goes on,

is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighted to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the universe.

You notice a change here, from “supposed to be common among mankind” to “who rejoices more than other men”—not “who *is supposed* to rejoice more.” There is a difference: the poet is to ordinary people as poetry is to prose. Yet they are kindred.

Ultimately the difference between prose and poetry, between ordinary men and poets, though only a difference of degree (for Wordsworth finally has to concede this point) is enormous. He calculates it by the discrepancy in the power of giving and experiencing pleasure (and also pain), so much higher in the poet. *The Prelude* is a poem about “the naked and native dignity of *man*,” which all share, and “the elementary principle of pleasure,” which, though all share it, the poet has preeminently. The way to demonstrate that this was so was to write the life of a poet, namely himself, and allow the contrast with what he called “common minds” to declare itself in the course of that narrative. Admittedly, “There’s not a man / That lives who hath not had his godlike hours,” but it is for the poet, the self-delighting, to dedicate himself to the task of remembering and recording them.

Doing so he has those confrontations with the distanced self: memory ensures that the doubles meet. Childhood memories sometimes have what he calls “self-presence” in his mind, but often, and most impressively, Wordsworth dwells on the gap between the recorder and the recorded: “I cannot paint / What then I was,” he says—that wild boy is a difficult double—or puzzles over the meaning of the gibbet and the girl with the pitcher on her head, or the bleak music of an old stone wall. These mysteries are what count, a

testimony to the stereoscopic depth of the double life: "O mystery of man, from what a depth / Proceed thy honours."

Those depths cannot be sounded, but they always reverberate. They are the mysterious, epiphanic experiences that unite the beginning and the end. The autobiographer, dealing with doubles, is treating with ghosts, like the old soldier, that still, ghastly figure who speaks as if "Remembering the importance of his theme / But feeling it no longer." The poet listens, leads the pathetic figure away, and carries on. This is a projection, a shedding of the panic specific to autobiography, the forgetting of why it is important, by transferring it to the soldier. He finds shelter for his terror and so can proceed on his way "with quiet heart." There is some ruthlessness in the way he discharges his fears as rememberer and writer; first he records an uncanny identification with the soldier or the leech gatherer, the blind beggar, or Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage*, then a sense of liberation created by his having faced their misery and gone on his way, as if absolved by this meeting with ordinary suffering. It is now, in the present of writing, that such memories become valuable, even, he says, divine: they keep, he says, his face "towards the truth."

In this way the doubles of past and present, lilies and violets, poverty and plenty, the prose and the poetry, misery and joy, beginnings and endings, are reconciled by memory within the autobiographical narrative. I called *The Prelude* our greatest autobiography, a judgment I suppose few would question; but it will stand as an image of others, insofar as they can be called true accounts of a life as a tale that is told, insofar as they use art as a means to keep in view a truth both particular and general, describe a self that is distinct yet not divided from that of mankind. It has all the disappointment, the dedication, even the self-reproach entailed by the barely manageable obligation to keep one's face "towards the truth." It also has the completeness that comes from the resolution of another problem: that the sources of joy must grow remote, as images of the end approach, and yet be remembered so that they exist in the face of that end.

It is easy to see that the depth and complexity of such a narrative go beyond what most can expect of themselves in telling the story of their lives. That is because it does what nothing but writing (and rewriting) can do, writing as an act of memory, of many acts of memory, the making of the past of the present, of a temporary eternity; recording, combining, and sometimes, alas, evading the truths of the selves that make a self.