Teaching the Art of Autobiography

by
Thomas Becknell

To judge from the swelling number of autobiographical "best sellers," it would seem that Americans have an insatiable interest in the lives of the famous, the successful and the notorious. While there may be many explanations for this hunger, I suspect one of them has to do with the perceived "ordinariness" of our own lives.

All of us are somewhat autobiographical by nature. We enjoy telling about our lives, selecting certain details, editing others. Students especially welcome the opportunity to narrate events from their personal experience. But, curiously, if asked to "write your autobiography," most students resist (as would most teachers), believing they have "nothing to say." Indeed, such undirected autobiographies usually *don't* have much to say. They begin flatly, "I was born in . . . ," and mark off a chronology of events which may reveal exactly what the writer fears (a boring life) and what the reader dreads (lifeless prose).

Why, then, write an autobiography? Even more to the point, why offer a *course* in autobiography, especially for students just entering adulthood? Millions of Americans, we know, keep diaries and journals (Mallon). But an autobiography requires more than a record if one's experience; its challenge is to make private experience public. Autobiography provides a way of composing one's life. For students, instruction in the art of autobiography can contribute significantly to their personal development and self-definition, and to discovering an *extra*-ordinary dimension to their individual lives.

To understand the apparent paradox between a student's natural desire to write about personal experience, and the equally natural assumption that he or she has "nothing to say," it might be helpful to note how persistently "self-identity" is associated with vocational or idealogical commitments (Erikson). Young people who have not yet made commitments to a profession or to a certain way of living, *do* seem to lack a language with which to define themselves. Even those who project themselves as "athlete," or "mother," or "Lutheran," or "student," know that those terms do not really define the "me myself." Autobiography, however, can be useful for exploring other ways of defining oneself than the vocational or idealogical. Autobiography represents life "not as something established," Roy Pascal reminds us, "but as a process; it is not simply the narrative of the voyage, but also the voyage itself. There must be in it a sense of discovery" (182). A *course* which is concerned with autobiography should be designed in a way which nurtures a sense of discovery and encourages a process of development.

William G. Perry, the developmental psychologist, shows that development of college-age students progresses through three pronounced stages. Students in their mid-teens are largely "dualistic," he claims; that is, they tend to divide experience into two exclusive realms: good/bad, right/wrong, we/they, success/failure, etc. Students develop (a) as they move away from "dualism," (b) as they discover "relativism," recog-

nizing the validity of a diversity of opinions, values and judgments, and (c) as they affirm their own "commitments" to particular positions, choices and values in light of the relativism they have encountered. How might we order a course in autobiography which would promote this process of development?

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin provides a useful key for translating Perry's scheme of development into a course of study in autobiography. Franklin, of course, was no "student" when he composed the story of his life. What is particularly instructive, however, is that he composed it in three separate stages. In 1771, at the age of 65, Franklin set down his recollections of his "unlikely beginnings" for his son and for posterity. When he was 78, he added an account of his project for arriving at moral perfection; and at age 82, he wrote a third installment describing his commitment to public life and responsibilities. These three stages of his composition actually represent three major components of any reflective autobiography: (1) recollection, or memory, (2) the search for some unifying pattern or model, and (3) the affirmation of certain commitments. These stages of composition complement Perry's stages of development and quite naturally suggest a developmental plan for ordering a course in autobiography.

In my course, designed primarily for freshmen, I assign a sequence of various autobiographical sketches throughout the semester. From these separate writings, students produce a "final" autobiography near the end of the term. The number of individual assignments may vary from course to course—and even the course itself may change. But I suggest that any course in autobiography—whether it concentrates upon literature or upon composition, whether it emphasizes "women's lives" or "American lives"—should be informed by three distinct stages.

Stage 1 - Growing Up

All autobiography is rooted in memory and recollection; usually it originates in one's memory of childhood. Nothing else contributes so much to a sense of shared experience as considering what it was like to grow up. To read another's account of growing up, regardless of the time, place or situation, always seems familiar in some way. Such works as Russell Baker's *Growing Up*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, or Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* all provide bright backgrounds for reflecting upon one's own experience. Their questions reflect ours. Baker, for example, may lead us to outline the historical events which "frame" our own beginnings, or to wonder whether children growing up now encounter the same sorts of expectations to "make something" of themselves. McCarthy may invite us to describe the religious tradition or milieu in which we were brought up, identifying one single event or image which seems to represent that environment. Or, Angelou may cause us to remember an encounter with a "grown up" which made an indelible impression. In short, reading assignments which call up one's own past, and writing assignments which affirm those associations, serve both to validate and to enlarge a student's experience.

I like to begin my sequence of writing assignments with this sort of exercise:

> *Autobiographical Sketch #1.* Consider this claim from Russell Baker's autobiography: *"We all come from the past, and children ought to know what it was that went into their making, to know that life is a braided cord of humanity stretching up from time long gone, and that it cannot be defined by the span of a single journey from diaper to shroud."*
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> All of us have grown up hearing stories handed down from our family history: how mom and dad met and fell in love, how Aunt Mable wrecked Uncle Herbie's new Studebaker, how great-grandpapa Karl came from the "old country" with 27 dollars in his pocket and started his own business....
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> You get the idea—the kinds of stories Russell Baker tells about his family.
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> I'd like you to re-create, in writing, one of the stories *you* have grown up with. It need not be an especially dramatic one; perhaps it is a very quiet tale. But whatever it is, it is something from those old days of the past that is important to *you*, something you carry with you in your memory.
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> As you think about this story, try to recall all the details that, for you, make it such a vivid part of your heritage. Who told the story? What happened? How do you picture these people—what they did, how they dressed, where they lived, etc. Don't be afraid to use your imagination to fill in details you are not clear on. Re-create the story *in such a way* that we, too, hearing the story from you, can share in the joy, or the sadness, or the exhilaration, or the simple quietness of that part of your past.

Such a beginning assignment minimizes the initial "risk" of writing about oneself—which is essential if student writings are to be "workshopped" in class. Rhetorically, it requires what James Moffett would call a low level of abstraction; that is, the writer merely re-tells an experience which has already been ordered and transmitted to him or to her. But the most salient feature of such an assignment is that it encourages students to recognize the many strands of their own beginnings, thus challenging any initial tendency toward dualistic thinking (e.g. of one's life as "the span of a single journey").

Students should write frequently about growing up, for it is what they know best. But it is no mean task. Richard N. Coe, in a somewhat scholarly book, *When the Grass Was Taller*, examines some of the difficulties of re-constructing childhood experience. The child, he reminds us, sees the world much differently than his or her adult self—so much of childhood is filled with magic and play and delight in trivia. To reflect upon one's growing up, then, is to begin to recognize the subjectivity of one's "adult" perspective.

Stage 2 - Searching for a Pattern

Autobiography, like any other literary art, communicates most effectively through metaphor. "What is my life like?" it asks. Benjamin Franklin, for example, reviewed his life as a book, with all the *errata* corrected. John Woolman recorded his life as a journey. The events of Sylvia Plath's life seemed to her as a "bell jar," descending and distorting. And Richard Selzer, the surgeon, presented himself as a "priest" in order to portray the spiritual nature of his work.

To see one's life metaphorically is really to see it within a context— that is, to see not merely the strands of one's beginnings, but the very fabric of places, people, events and traditions from which the pattern of one's life is cut. This sort of vision is acquired through recognizing a multiplicity of perspectives (or, through what Perry would call "encountering relativism"). Combining *both* the reading and the writing of autobiography can contribute substantially to this second level of a student's development.

In his autobiographical novel, *Black Boy*, Richard Wright said, "I hungered for books, new ways of looking and seeing. It was not a matter of believing or disbelieving what I read, but of feeling something new, of being affected by something that made the look of the world different." Observing some of my literature students, I sometimes lament their frequent lack of hunger for books and for new ways of seeing. Often they claim that they just cannot "relate" to a particular novel or poem. Autobiographies, however, demand that the reader "relate" in ways which inevitably *do* make the look of the world different. Autobiography, by its very nature, invites a *responsive* approach, which is often neglected in traditional classrooms.

Consider Thoreau's *Walden*, for example. If the goal of the course (in which *Walden* is read) asks the student to produce his or her own autobiography, then Thoreau's request for "a simple and sincere account" of the *reader's* life will be primary; that is, Thoreau's autobiography will evoke the reader's:

1. Of what, in your culture, do you find yourself most critical? Are your criticisms similar to, or different from Thoreau's?
2. How does Thoreau's basic economic philosophy compare with yours?
3. What does Thoreau most value about his college experience? What do you most value, and least value, about yours?
4. Do you need to "simplify" your own life in any way? Explain what *you* would mean by the word, "simplify."
5. Describe, as specifically as you can, your attitude toward the great technological advances our civilization has made.
6. What need do you, as a college student, have for solitude, and where do you find it?

Posing these sorts of questions slights traditional literary analysis, of course; but it leads to a keener self-awareness.

In her article on "Teaching Women's Autobiographies," Estelle Jelinek observes that "changing the main focus from an analysis of the works as literature to an analysis of them as models of the various ways available for writing one's own autobiography probably resulted in more learning about form and the genre of autobiography than a purely structural approach would have achieved" (32). Jelinek supports her observation with many useful examples of this sort of responsive analysis, including specific lists of questions which engage the reader-as-writer more than the reader-as-critic. Such an approach urges not the primacy of the text, but the response of the reader. It may see more value in a student's re-writing Ben Franklin's thirteen virtues than in an analysis of his prose style. It may ask students to show how *their* outlook on life has been shaped by another's suffering (Cf. Richard Wright), or to outline their ways of categorizing people sexually (Cf. Sylvia Plath's Esther Greenwood), or to contrast their "spiritual" concerns with Black Elk's. Such a shift in focus results not only in "learning about form and the genre of autobiography," but also in acquiring a (metaphorical) language for speaking about one's own "waldens" and "bell jars" of experience.

To *create* an original metaphor of the self is the essential *art* of autobiography. As James Olney has shown, "One cannot . . . hope to capture with a straight-on look, or expect to transmit directly to another, one's own sense of self; at most one may be able to discover a similitude, a metaphor, for the feeling of selfhood" (226-7). One work especially instructive for seeing metaphorically is Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *A Gift from the Sea*. "What is the shape of my life?" she asks, and finds the answer reflected in the various seashells along the beach: in the inward spiraling of the moon-shell, in the symmetry of the double-sunrise, in the irregularity of the oyster shell, etc. The variety of shells speak of her ever-changing need for patterns of living.

Other examples of such informing metaphors abound: Emily Dickinson's "My Life had stood—a Loaded Gun", or Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," or Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" are conspicuous examples of object lessons in metaphors of the self. Given the challenge, students will readily find their own curious metaphors: my life is like an inter-state highway, a finely-tuned engine, a camera, a balsam fir, etc.

Most autobiographies seem to define a self primarily in terms of a particular place (e.g. Thoreau, Dillard), of other people (e.g. Franklin, Angelou), of a series of events (e.g. Bradford, Plath), or of a particular activity (e.g. Twain, Selzer). Students need to explore these various contexts for defining themselves. Richard Lyon's *Autobiography: A Reader for Writers* is especially helpful for doing just that. His selections are ordered by these contexts (people, places, events), and his suggestions for writing are provocative. Through a series of such written exercises, students can be encouraged to see themselves relative to the environment and milieu in which they are located, to understand the truth of Emerson's claim, that "it is the eye which makes the horizon."

Stage 3 - Commitment: Running Order Through Chaos

Autobiography, finally, requires what Roy Pascal once called "the acquisition of an outlook: "The distinction of great autobiography is not so much the truth of knowing as the truth of being, an integration and reunion of different aspects of the person, a coherence . . . in the particularity of circumstances" (98). How is this third stage of

development—acquiring an outlook, a sense of commitment—to be nurtured?

Having accumulated a substantial amount of writing, students are now ready to "put it all together." Striving to order these disparate writings is finally nothing less than an effort to "order" one's life. To prepare for this "final" integrative task, I like to assign one concluding autobiographical exercise:

> *Autobiographical Sketch #9.* One quality which characterizes all the autobiographies we have read in this course is that they all are written out of some deep, cherished convictions. (What are some of those convictions you recall—convictions about relationships between people, stealing, love, the secret of success, the virtue of good appearances, virginity, solitude, deliberate living, etc.)
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> James Harvey Robinson, an American historian, claimed: *"Few of us take the pains to study the origins of our cherished convictions; indeed, we have a natural repugnance to so doing. We like to continue to believe what we have been accustomed to accept as true, and the resentment aroused when doubt is cast upon any of our assumptions leads us to seek every manner of excuse for clinging to them. The result is that most of our so-called reasoning consists in finding arguments for going on believing as we already have."*
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> In this last "assigned" writing, I'd like you to talk about one of your "cherished convictions"—something that is part of who you are, how you act and how you look at the world. What led you to such a belief? Why is it still true for you now? Is it ever tested or challenged? If so, how do you respond?
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> Now if Robinson is right about us, I would imagine that it might be easy in this writing to slip back into familiar, stock answers and cliches—"excuses," in other words. Instead, I'm asking that you honestly "take the pains" to present the origins of this particular conviction—to SHOW us, in whatever style of writing seems most appropriate—how you came to hold such a belief.

This exercise, like the first, seeks to unite past and present; to connect what *is* with what *was*. But it also anticipates the goal of the autobiography itself, which is to discover the origins of what one is becoming.

To produce an autobiography at this stage requires *selecting, editing, revising* and *developing* this "raw material" into some coherent whole. In short, it involves making choices and commitments from what already has been produced. Freed from the major task of "invention," the student need not wonder, "What shall I say?" but rather must ask:

> —What shall I *affirm*? What shall I choose to omit?
> —Where do I begin? Where do I end?
> —For whom do I most want to compose this autobiography?
> —What *themes* seem to be running through all my writings?
> —Does my writing seem to be *asking*, "Who am I?" (like Richard Wright's)? Or, is it *telling*, "This is who I am" (like Ben Franklin's)?
> —How will I *order* my sequence of writings?
> —What sort of *tone* colors my writings? Does it *express* confidence, indifference, humility, pride, tolerance, warmth, passion, anxiety, hope, determination, fervor, intimacy . . . .

Such questions serve not merely as rhetorical guides for ordering one's prose, but also provide strategies for composing one's "self."

This process leads to "re-vision" in the truest sense of that word. One student (who was also a musician) discovered in her writings a persistent awareness of "putting on a show," whether on stage or off. Her final composition, then, became a sort of "performance" in itself—a series of "variations" upon the "theme" of performing—affirming what she saw as a pervasive habit and need in her life.

Some students need more direction than others with this process of "re-vision," though all seem to find some way of running order through chaos. I find most students are helped by a few judicious guidelines:

1. This is YOUR autobiography! Develop a manuscript which first pleases you!
2. Form the body of the autobiography as it seems most appropriate to your purpose: perhaps as one extended piece of prose, or perhaps through several chapters or vignettes. SELECT portions from your autobiographical sketches—do not simply include everything. DEVELOP new material where the design of the project calls for it. ORGANIZE the whole in a meaningful and pleasing way.
3. Provide a one-page *preface* or *introduction*, addressed specifically to the AUDIENCE for whom you are writing your autobiography. This might be an imaginary audience, or your classmates, a parent, a special friend, etc. In this *preface*, provide as clear and as succinct a statement as you can concerning the PURPOSE and UNITY of the autobiography. That is, *why* it is written, and *how* it is unified or held together. (This *preface* is especially helpful to me, too, as an aid in evaluating the overall integrity and coherence of the manuscript.)
4. The manuscript must bear an engaging TITLE (not "My Autobiography," or some such generic label).

While other guidelines may be suggested, their basic intention is to ask, "How shall I make this life public?" Commitment, I believe, can best be understood (both rhetorically and developmentally) through preparing to "give over" one's life to a perceived audience. To "publish" one's life (for however small an audience) is ultimately an act of commitment—it demands that one take up a position with respect to an audience.

The autobiography of Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger of Memory*, serves as a brilliant model of this process of composing one's life. What he modestly refers to as "six chapters of sad, fuguelike repetition," were written separately, as individual essays. Through the resonances set up among these *collected* essays, each answering the others, we can understand *his* commitment: "I remember what was so grievously lost to define what was necessarily gained" (6). What anyone "gains" through the art of autobiography will depend precisely upon that—discovering a language for what one has "lost."

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