

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century : Quests for Identity (1960-)

All autobiography involves a quest for identity: a re-seeing of the past, a reconstruction of the paths that led to the present, a definition of the self, or an attempt to defend the self. Each of these efforts entails, to some degree, a search for the self, in order to present a version of this self to an audience of one's self and others.

Only in the last generation, however, have autobiographers and their readers seemed to become truly aware of how autobiography creates the self. In the 1920's, in his attack on Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, D.H. Lawrence never considered that the *Autobiography* might have been a means Franklin used to examine or create a self. Instead, Lawrence took Franklin's character as something already complete when Franklin wrote. Yet, it is now quite common to regard the *Autobiography* as a means by which Franklin remade and even invented himself: his text is not just a statement of self, but a process of finding and inventing it.

That we have come to see autobiographies this way is reflected in the parallel development and popularization of the word *identity*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the word is derived from *idem*, the Latin for *same*, and in early usage it meant sameness or likeness. It signified the opposite of diversity. In the seventeenth century, it also came to be applied to persons and to the "continuity of personality," "the sameness of a person at all times or in all circumstances." In this sense, it commonly referred to internal and essential qualities, and to consciousness, rather than to external features.

During the Second World War, a group of psychiatrists working at a veterans clinic began to use the term "identity crisis" to describe patients who had "lost a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity." Soon Erik Erikson and his associates "recognized the same central disturbance in young people whose sense of confusion is due, rather, to a war within themselves, and in confused rebels and destructive delinquents who war on their society." (1) When Erikson went on to develop his very influential concept of the life cycle, he focused on youth as the period of identity formation. The revolt of youth in the 1960's, Erikson speculated, was caused by changes within western society-changes in technology, culture, and human expectations-which had disrupted how youth (and other people) knew themselves and each other. The affinity between person and culture could be broken when one changed without the other.

Persons and cultures also need change, however; it is how they grow and learn to adapt. This seems particularly true in the United States of the 1960's, when it was finally waking up, or being awakened, to its long-festering racial injustice, its entrenched poverty, and the brutality of the war in Vietnam. In the summer of 1963, over 100,000 people took part in a "March on Washington" to demand the passage of a Civil Rights Act. From 1965 to 1967, there were massive riots in the black ghettos of the cities across the country. Demonstrations and sit-ins against the Vietnam War and in favor of new programs like Black studies occurred at nearly all the major universities. The publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, in 1962, also began to make people aware of the dangers of DDT and other chemicals that had once been seen as benign and as scientific miracles. Meanwhile, television changed the way people learned about and experienced these changes in the world. In November, 1963, following the Kennedy assassination, the whole country watched television day and night and saw Jack Ruby, a previously unknown, small nightclub owner, shoot Lee Harvey Oswald, the once unknown assassin. In July, 1969, it watched men land and walk on the moon. Television could almost instantly gain the attention of the whole country, and possibly even the whole world, momentarily uniting it or alarming it. In the process, television made great heroes or villains out of people once as unknown as any of the millions of people in the audience. The age of the instant celebrity had begun.

Spinoffs of the creation of the instant celebrity were the invention of the commissioned autobiography, the publishing of more ghost-written autobiographies, and the "unauthorized biography"-

books about such men and women who could capitalize on their quick electronic stardom. In the 1970's for instance, there were autobiographies of the Watergate burglars and White House staff members who planned the burglary. By the 1980's, television (and radio) had also become a standard agency in the promotion of new books, including new, mass-market autobiographies. Authors routinely appeared on local and national talk-shows, morning, noon, and night, to give a quick resume of their books and to recount the emblematic events in their lives that would explain the writing of the book and relate it to the audience's interest and experience.

There are other reasons for this surge in the writing, reading, and talking about autobiographies than just the new media and the related changes in book marketing, however. In a culture that is changing fast and struggling to deal with the conflicts of permanence and change, people are inevitably interested in how other people are handling these conflicts and opportunities, how they are "coping." For this, the writer did not have to have been a Watergate burglar, a hostage in Iran, or an astronaut to have a significant story. Quite the opposite. People were more likely to be interested in things that were also happening to them—divorce, a drug problem, a weight problem, teenage pregnancy, the loss of a job, a "midlife crisis," alcoholism, retirement, abortion, a change of religion, living with a serious disease, and so on. Autobiographies merged in such cases with self-help books (and were often read by groups of people discussing some common problem). They could also be inspirational and about success, two long-standing traditions in American autobiography. With the nation going through a "national identity crisis," as it was sometimes called, there was inevitable interest in individual identity crises and their endings, sad or happy.

The increasingly frequent use of the word *identity* also seems to have changed its meaning. For some people, the word no longer has its traditional association with sameness but connotes something which is the core or essence of a person's being. It is almost a synonym for self. It also seems, sometimes, to be nudging aside the traditional terms "character" and "personality." *Character* traditionally referred to someone's moral worth, or lack of it, and to virtue, although it obviously carried other meanings as well. *Personality* applied more to what is entertaining, or even flashy and distracting. One "turns on the personality," but one does not "turn on character." *Identity* seems more serious than personality, less pretentious and moralistic than character, but still related to one's basic *integrity*. Identity can change and can or must be searched for. It is also something which is usually shared with other people of the same race, culture, or background, as in "black identity," "feminine identity," or "middle-class identity." And this should remind us that identity, in being shared with others, does have to be more or less the same in all those people, something like a theme with many variations. (2)

These changes in the vocabulary of selfhood are vitally important to the American autobiographies of this current or most recent generation, the autobiographies written from approximately 1960 to 1990. Finding one's identity, in the sense of what is unique and also what is shared, what is permanent but also subject to change, and what is real and yet also in some ways an artifice (a product of culture and history), and then expressing, explaining, and interpreting it has been the great goal of the best recent autobiographers.

*Nobody Knows My Name*, the title of James Baldwin's book, virtually announces his need to make his name, the designator of his identity, known—known to those who would miss it or misinterpret it or mistake him for someone else. They might miss it because, from arrogance, they had habitually paid no attention to "Negroes" (Baldwin's term). Or they might mistake him because when they looked at him they did not see *him* but one of the stereotypes of Negro character which they had acquired from the American past. The title of Ralph Ellison's great novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), announced almost exactly the same problem. The black man in America did not suffer from being "highly visible," as some experts said; he was invisible, operating always from behind a host of masks and shadows of himself. Thus one of the things the autobiographies and autobiographical essays of Baldwin, Ellison, and other black writers of the 1960's and '70's did was to analyze these masks and try to show the authors in more complexity and depth. They also, on occasion, attempted to defend themselves against the false accusations and misrepresentations which white Americans made about them. As a part of this whole difficult, painful but also liberating process, we might note that the word "Negro" itself gave way to "black" or "Black" and "Afro-American."

A careful reader of Baldwin's "Discovery of What It Means to Be American" will see that his exposure of these stereotypes and misrepresentations generates the intense emotional power of his essay. A "Negro" was somehow not expected to discover what it means to be an American. He was expected to be "only" a Negro, an inferior American. Thus Baldwin aroused his white readers's secret prejudices and fears and kept all his readers uncertain of what role he would play next-the expatriate, the man of letters, the responsible citizen the angry prophet, or something else the reader had never seen before. As a man writing from Paris, he also appropriated some of the status, favorable and unfavorable, of the American expatriates of a generation before. He could talk in a worldly way of French waiters being better than American waiters. He could talk of his friends from different parts of the French capital.

Saying these things and, consequently, manipulating his readers emotional expectations, Baldwin was indeed "discovering what it means to be an American." He was carving out a new identity for himself as American, black American, writer, and prophet. He was using the autobiographical essay to discover his powers and to create who he was.

The autobiographies of Jewish-Americans of this period make an interesting comparison with those of Afro-Americans like Baldwin. Jews, too, faced discrimination by the white Christian majority, but had made much faster progress in overcoming it, as measured by admissions to elite schools and colleges, access to the professions, good salaries, and houses in suburbs, though they were still barred from many private clubs. Jewish traditions, however, continued to hold great meaning to Jewish Americans. The irony of Abraham Cahan's autobiographical novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), was that as the hero succeeded in American business and "rose" to become a millionaire, he "fell" as a Jew. At the end of the book he realizes sadly, "My past and present do not comport well"-a lament that has been called "the tragedy of Jewish reconciliation with America." (3) Even Mary Antin's confident integration into American life as described in *The Promised Land*, was later qualified by her writing just at the beginning of World War II that she had to remember her Jewish past and try to preserve solidarity with the Jews still in Russia and Europe. After the war, the horrifying revelations of the Holocaust and the establishment of Israel made Jews all the more aware of their Jewish identity.

Thus, in post-war Jewish-American autobiographies, the conflicts of culture are intense, and the quest for identity is complicated by the recognitions of different interpretations of both "Jewish" and "American." In *A Walker in the City* (1951), the first of Alfred Kazin's three volumes of autobiography, the young Kazin is just as eager to shed his immigrant past as Mary Antin was. In the next two volumes, *Starting Out in the Thirties* (1965) and *New York Jew* (1978), he is successful, like Levinsky. He also tries harder than Levinsky to make his past and present "comport well." *Starting Out in the Thirties* is full of excitement of becoming a writer and teacher and working on *On Native Grounds*, his classic study of American literary realism. Kazin kept a certain Jewish sense of being an outsider to American culture, but by playing a leading role in the writing of American literary history, he was also discovering and possessing American culture, defining it for other Americans. This status as both the outsider and the authority seems confirmed in *New York Jew*, where Kazin seems almost to invite the antagonism of the old Gentile establishment. He is now proud of being what they detest. He also does not wish to drop his ancestral past into the great American melting pot. He wishes to hang on to his particularity just as tenaciously as any descendants of the *Mayflower* who once dreaded a "New York Jew's" entry into "their" colleges or clubs.

"One of the longest journeys in the world," Norman Podhoretz began, in his autobiography *Making It* (1967), "is the journey from Brooklyn to Manhattan-or at least from certain neighborhoods in Brooklyn to certain parts of Manhattan." He added that "I have made that journey." But because of his smugness and brazenness about it, many readers have never felt quite comfortable with him and his story. They further resent his absorption in the literary circles of Columbia University and *Commentary* magazine. Still, Podhoretz seems to speak for a lot of Brooklynites and ex-Brooklynites when he says that as a child he did not think of himself as an American. "I came from Brooklyn, and in Brooklyn there were no Americans; there were Jews and Negroes and Italians and Poles and Irishmen. Americans lived in New England, in the South, in the Midwest: alien people in alien places." (4)

Where Kazin and Podhoretz clung to their ethnic heritage in order, finally, not to identify with those "alien people in alien places," Allen Ginsberg attempted both to celebrate his Jewish past and to

universalize it as a piece of all human experience. It was a bold undertaking, but then “Kaddish” is an extraordinary autobiography. It is a poem, first of all, and therefore a better medium than prose for Ginsbergs extended and seemingly spontaneous lyrical flights. Its models are not other autobiographies but works like Shelly’s “Adonais,” the Jewish Kaddish, the Buddhist Book of Answers, and Ray Charles’ singing.

Nevertheless, his “Kaddish” is full of the particulars of the early twentieth-century Jewish-American immigrant experience. Naomi Ginsberg grew up in Newark, New Jersey, and it was as far from the tenements of Newark to the fashionable streets of Manhattan as it was from Podhoretz’s Brooklyn. She was a communist union organizer, who sang hymns and workers’ songs, went to union summer camps, and was full of “mad idealism.” In this sense, as Ginsberg tells it, her story could have been the story of thousands of people in the early American labor movement. The sad difference is that in 1919 Naomi began to have nervous breakdowns. Later, with the approach of World War II, she saw Hitler, Mussolini, Roosevelt, and the FBI spying on her. Allen, we gather, became her caretaker—the person she would still trust, the person who at just twelve had the responsibility of taking her to a rest home in southern New Jersey, and the person she sometimes seductively flirted with. It was, in turn, Allen who inherited her idealism, her visionary fears and ecstasy, and also her tendencies to madness, as the world defines it. This identification with his mother contributes to the profound autobiographical nature of the poem. Different as they are, the poet and his mother are also so much alike that their stories are fitted together like lock and key. Her message that “The key is in the sunlight at the window” is the eternal mothers message: to come home, to let himself in, to cease being the prodigal (“Get married Allen don’t take drugs”), and to know himself by knowing her.

Black and Jewish Americans were not the only ones to seek their identities by reclaiming their racial and cultural heritages in the process defining their relation to the rest of America. One of the most unusual was N. Scott Momaday’s quest for Kiowa heritage, recreated in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) and *The Names* (1976). As he explains in the latter, his father was Kiowa, but he himself had been raised mainly at Jemez Pueblo in New Mexico, where for twenty-five years his parents taught school. Later he went to a military school and the University of New Mexico, then took a PH.D. in English at Stanford University in 1963. *The Way to Rainy Mountain* poetically records a journey from the northern Rocky Mountains out onto the Great Plains and then down to Rainy Mountain in Oklahoma, a journey which follows the historic path of the Kiowa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Along the way, as it were, Momaday juxtaposes Kiowa legends, as told by his father and his ancestors (and recovered from ethnographic works), with historical material and his own memories and observations. The combination is *original* autobiography in the fullest sense—a search for origins as well as a new and different kind of book. It also serves as a kind of abbreviated Kiowa tribal history and example of Plains Indian experience, thus giving the book an even greater historical interest than usual.

In *The Names*, Momaday told a more particular family history, including the story of his mother Natachee Scott, who was descended from white Tennesseans. But her name, “Natachee,” had come from a great-grandmother who was Cherokee, and this was the ancestor the teen-age girl chose to identify with. “She imagined who she was,” wrote Momaday, adding that “this act of imagination was, I believe, among the most important events of my mother’s early life, as later the same essential act was to be among the most important of my own.” (5) Such a statement epitomizes the role of imagination in modern ethnic identity quests. Identity, to such an autobiographer, is not given, fixe, and changeless. It is an act of passion, will, and vision working upon the diverse materials of history. These materials of history, moreover, are also viewed as created things, being as they are the results of earlier acts of passion (like sexual union), legal procedures (like marriage), and will or accident (like someones saving the stories, records, or photographs with which the autobiographer works).

Maxine Hong Kingston’s “No Name Woman,” from *The Woman Warrior*, and Richard Rodriguez’s account of his experience with skin color and his definition of machismo, from *Hunger for Memory*, provide further illustrations of modern ethnic identity quests. Kingston’s making a fascinating comparison fo Momaday’s, because in it, too, identity is a fusion of ancient myth or legend, various kinds of history (some of which are on the verge of legend), and personal memory. Rodriguez’s books is a good contrast to Baldwin’s, because it deals more with race as a social and economic issue in America and with the

more immediate experiences of prejudice. But Rodriguez takes a much more conservative position than Baldwin did. In fact, before his book was even published, he had announced in various journalistic articles that he opposed bilingual education in schools because he thought it so important for children to be required to learn English as the "public" American language, the language which had enabled him to participate fully in American life. As a very well-educated Mexican-American, he had, in turn, won scholarships to prestigious universities and so did not consider himself as needing the assistance of affirmative action programs.

Rodriguez's articles against bilingual education and affirmative action made him widely sought as a conservative lecturer. His autobiography was in turn, sought as a further statement and explanation of his views, and it became hotly controversial. As such, it is a perfect example of the interplay among media, public issues, and autobiography. Yet there are precedents for *Hunger for Memory* as an apology. Rodriguez insisted that he had been misunderstood and his message oversimplified. He argued that he really opposed affirmative action because it gave unfair advantages to people who did not need help, such as the educated middle class, and deflected attention from the poor and uneducated who needed more special programs like Headstart. His book should, therefore, be read in full, along with the well-reasoned replies that it provoked from other Mexican-Americans. (6)

*The Woman Warrior* has also been attacked. Chinese-Americans have accused Kingston of misrepresenting Chinese-American experience, making her own life over into something exotically "oriental," and distorting Chinese legends. Frank Chin has raised the additional argument that *The Woman Warrior* is untrue to Chinese tradition because autobiography is a peculiarly Christian literary weapon." (7) Indeed, the debate raises questions not only about Chinese-American autobiography but about autobiography in general. (8)

Many other autobiographies have come out of the political controversies of the sixties, seventies, and the eighties. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) was solicited by publishers after Alex Haley's widely read interview with Malcolm X in *Playboy*. The difficulty with Malcolm X and Black Muslims had in obtaining sympathetic reports from white journalists made a partnership with Haley very valuable, even though Malcolm X at first distrusted him. Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* was the account of his service in Vietnam, his being wounded, and his conversion from a born patriot and believer in the war into an anti-war activist. Kat Millett's *Flying* (1974) was her account of her discovery of herself and her deeper sexuality in the process of becoming a feminist. In *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973), Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston told of her coming of age in an internment camp for Japanese-Americans during World War II. In her essay included here, "Beyond Manzanar," she describes her later conflicts between Japanese and American concepts of womanhood. Her conflicts will be understandable to many other women (and men) caught between cultures and between traditions.

At the same time, earlier American identity quests which had been ignored or forgotten were rediscovered. *Black Elk Speaks* is now recognized as a classic Native-American autobiography. Yet, between its initial publication in 1932 and the late 1960's, when it began to be read by a few anthropologists, hippies, and young Indians, it had been virtually forgotten. Suddenly, Black Elk's account of his visions and his later finding his role in Oglala Sioux society as a medicine man and healer had enormous appeal. (9)

Some other classic autobiographies rediscovered in this last generation are Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859), Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* (1943), and Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). In the latter case, Alice Walker took the lead, having discovered Hurston in the course of trying to write a short story about voodoo. Until then, as she says in her autobiographical essay, "looking for Zora," (10) she had never heard of Hurston's work. Once found, her affinities with Hurston were so great that she identified with Hurston on many levels. Hurston became a role-model, a teacher, and an inspiration.

The universal need for such models is surely another reason for the continued and growing popularity of autobiography in the last generation. From its beginnings, autobiography has been written to be used as instruction. But the early religious autobiography was generally much narrower in focus

and more inclined to leave out material that might show the subjects faults or have a detrimental effect on the reader. Such selectivity was even more pronounced in didactic, inspirational autobiographies like Lydia Sigourney's *Letters of Life* and Lucy Larcom's *A New England Girlhood*. A reader could turn to them for moral elevation, but not for much consolation or sympathy. Autobiographies such as Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) or Patricia Hampl's *A Romantic Education* (1981) represent more of the ups and downs, the disappointments and struggles, and the uncertainties of life. By telling their tales, Angelou and Hampl make the lives of other women in similar times and places easier to live and easier to tell about. Their identity quests help readers to find their own identities.

In the chapter from *Black is a Woman's Color*, bell hooks goes a step further by telling a series of stories which are not just representative or illustrative ones but ones which could be even more central to contemporary culture. The six stories in this provocative chapter have as their subjects the straightening of hair, the discovering of jazz and poetry, memories of her father's attacks on her mother, her mother's leaving, and her own rebellion against her mother. The stories move from a relatively innocent initiation into black sisterhood to a very dangerous, passionate initiation into our society's conflicts of authority: the socially accepted but unjust authority of an abusive father, the inadequate authority. Clearly, this series of stories is more than just hooks own "life" or *bios*. It is what another black woman autobiographer, Audre Lord, called "bio-mythography," an extension of autobiography into a personal-cultural mythology. Autobiography has long had a certain mythic function—think of Franklin's *Autobiography*, primarily, however, an autobiography is *one* person's story, where a myth is *everybody's* story, a story which has either happened to everybody or which everybody shares in. Hooks stories qualify as myth in these senses. Without being a full cultural hero, someone, say, who in slaying a dragon has saved everyone in the village, she has made herself someone around whose story others can tell their stories and talk of their needs for liberation, and its pains and obstacles, thus helping these others to liberate or, as hooks says, "to recover" themselves.

Race and gender are not the only sources of modern identity, however. The true "guardian of identity," Erik Erikson thought, was "*ideology*," and he italicized the term to give it the widest possible meaning, applying it to any social system that conveyed to its members a faith that "the best people will come to rule and rule will develop the best in people." (11) One of the reasons for identity confusion in modern America, therefore, may actually be that we have so many rival ideologies, yet such an oversimplified dominant public one. That is to say, the dominant modern American ideology of free enterprise, which represents the self-made man rising to "rule" simply by being "best," in the process showering himself and his family with consumer comforts, is one that nearly every American over the age of eighteen has at some time or another found to be a hollow lie or one offering goals that do not satisfy. "Sexist" and "racist" are only the latest epithets directed at it. Its older critics long ago found it selfish, deceitful, and spiritually lacking.

Thus we end this selection with two contemporary American autobiographies that represent yet two more American "ideologies." The first is Wendell Berry's story of his finding "all I need" in his "marginal farm" in Kentucky. It brings to mind Daniel Boone's autobiography, for the "great-great-great-grandfather" of berry's who first settled there in 1803 would have been a contemporary of Boone's. But where Boone was interested in settlements and was as restless and violent as many other Americans of 1800, Berry is interested in *re-settlement*, and there is an enormous difference. Berry tells in this essay (as in many of his other novels, poems, and essays) of the time, work, and thought he has given to correcting the abuses of the restless, violent exploiters of the land. No crops on hillsides, such as the early settlers tried to grow. A return to farming with horses, which the later farmers and developers had abandoned. And promotion of subsistence, "marginal" farming, even though acknowledging that he also depends on the income from his writing. But he does this not only because he is ecologically conscious, he does it because he truly loves his land. The land and proper husbanding of it are his ideology, the truest guardian of his identity that he can imagine. His first Kentucky ancestor may have been a contemporary of Boone's, but Berry's ideological ancestors are Jefferson and Thoreau.

Modern autobiographers who are close to Berry are other nature writers and ecologists, even though their own physical turf may be as far away as Anne LaBastille's cabin in the Adirondacks or Edward Abbey's house trailer in Arches National Monument, celebrated in *Desert Solitaire*, or Gary

Snyder's homes in the "back country." They all identify with nature and a place, which in turn means that the more they know that place and the more eloquently they can describe and protect it, the better they can identify themselves.

Another person strongly identified with place is Annie Dillard, who in 1974 became famous almost overnight for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. But unlike Berry, she has not chosen to stay in one place. In the years since *Tinker Creek*, she has lived in many other places, such as Middletown, Connecticut, and Bellingham, Washington. In *An American Childhood*, she celebrated Pittsburgh, a very unlikely place because it is so different from "Tinker Creek" in rural Virginia. But it was the town where she grew up, and it was, therefore, inextricably connected for her with all the awakenings, discoveries, and rebellions of childhood and youth. Her parents and grandparents houses, a friends house in the mountains outside Pittsburgh, the Allegheny, the Monogahela, and the Ohio rivers, the Pittsburgh Pirates, and the outstanding local libraries and museums all contributed to making her who she was.

Something else that Dillard said about writing *An American Childhood* is also very important to the issue of autobiography and identity, however. In a talk that she gave at the New York Public Library shortly before the book was published, she said,

My advice to memoir writers is to embark upon a memoir for the same reason that you would embark on any other book: to fashion a text. Don't hope in a memoir to preserve your memories. If you prize your memories as they are, by all means avoid-eschew-writing a memoir. Because it is in a certain way to lose them. You can't put together a memoir without cannibalizing your own life for parts. The work battens on your memories. And it replaces them. (12)

Not all writers of memoirs and autobiographies might agree with Dillard, but many critics and careful readers of autobiography today would. The text-the words on paper-are not the reality. They are a book, not a life. And they reshape the life- "cannibalizing" it, as Dillard says-until there may be very little of it left. The words on paper also ave an independent force because of the echoes and shades of meaning which they carry from elsewhere, from other books and from other texts of all kinds. Furthermore, traditions of autobiography shape the kinds of texts the author chooses to write, as we have pointed out before.

Do the modern identity quest in autobiography is a complex process. From one point of view, the words make the new life, even though the author chooses the words, being more or less conscious of what words he or she is using and exerting more or less freedom in choosing them. On the other hand, since autobiography is a referential art, the words must also refer to facts, and the facts, in turn have to do with the deeds and events and places that the author-as-actor performed or experienced. And yet these deeds and events and places and memories of them become cannibalized in the writing.

Adapting Dillard's metaphor of cannibalism, we might compare the whole process to a kind of food chain. Words eat memories, which have grown fat on experience. Experience happens to and is caused by persons. Persons seek their identities and start to write words, which again start eating up memories, changing the identities. The process is also like a food chain in that it is not necessarily a perfect circle. The creatures in it may cross over: new experiences may arise and eat up memories before the words even get to them. And all this takes place in a forest we might call Culture, which both sustains and destroys all the creatures-the words, memories, experiences, persons, and identities-as well as all the little micro-creatures within them. Moreover, the process never stops. We can imaginatively halt it and look at a part of it, but it is ever-moving, and all parts are necessary, all interdependent.

This, then, is the ecology of modern autobiography, in which Americans continue to seek their identities and express their latest concepts of self.