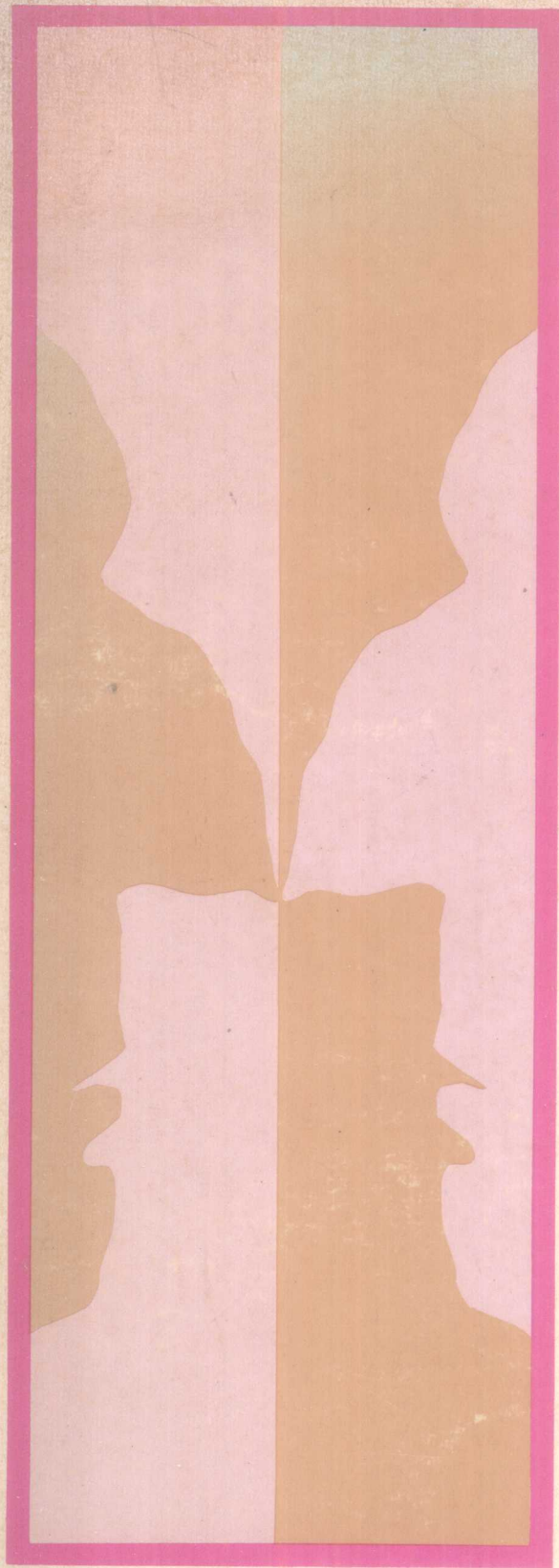


THE BOBBS-MERRILL SERIES IN COMPOSITION AND RHETORIC



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EDITED BY

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THE BOBBS-MERRILL SERIES IN COMPOSITION AND RHETORIC

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introduction

USUALLY we read autobiographies not only to get a behind-the-scenes story from aging movie stars, war heroes, elder statesmen, and past presidents, but also to satisfy what might be called a voyeuristic appetite, an unabashed curiosity about the private lives of famous persons. We want to peek through the keyhole, as it were; and the width of the aperture is limited solely by how much the autobiographer has chosen to show of himself. We tend to call such revelations "memoirs," "recollections," or "confessions" and our interest lies more in their subject matter than in their form.

But there is another way of considering personal experience, one in which form, as a mold for shaping the memories, is of primary importance. Such writing appeals less to our appetite for facts and secrets than to our urge to get at the felt quality of experience in someone else (whether famous or not), to slip into someone else's skin. We want to see the world from the author's perspective and capture his characteristic mode of feeling and quality of self-awareness; his work allows us to confront his resources of memory and interpret the impact upon his personality of events in the past as he has come to know and understand them. This, it seems to me, is the major concern of the autobiographer, as opposed to the memoirist: the conventions, narrative perspective, thematic design, and style which arise out of the special and personal way in which he experiences reality. "We are seen from the outside by our neighbours; but we remain always at the back of our eyes and our senses, situated in our bodies, like a driver in the front seat of a car seeing the other cars come towards him."¹ Autobiography succeeds precisely at the point where it gives us this view of our neighbor, and our neighbor this view of us.

The selections in this anthology have been made in accordance with this criterion; they attempt to suggest the range, depth, and variety of

personal experience available to the inside view of the autobiographer. Autobiography can involve us directly in the author's memory, feeling, and self-awareness; the reality it can confer upon his objectively unverifiable resources of memory, thought, and feeling is, at least in its immediate interest to us, superior to the objectively verifiable reality of the public life documented by the historian or the biographer. My primary emphasis here, therefore, has been upon autobiography as an art form; I have attempted to assist the student in reading autobiography with the same care and interest he would ordinarily give to any other carefully wrought work of art. For this reason, many of the writers included here are poets or novelists—not because they are technically more proficient in the craft of writing (that can be a deficiency, leading to overwriting and stylistic self-consciousness), but rather because as imaginative writers they are more concerned with the controlled articulation of subjective impressions and responses than with outer, public events and achievements.

A second aim, which grows out of the first, is to focus the student's attention upon his own resources of experience and to make of him his own autobiographer, not merely a memoirist. Although this anthology is designed primarily for an introductory course in literary analysis, in which student writing is keyed to the critical problems raised by texts of artistic merit, it can be given effective use in a writing course, to concentrate the student's attention upon his own experience, to jog his memory, and to illustrate a variety of rhetorical devices, points of view, and narrative styles which he can then imitate or compare with his own efforts in the same vein.

The artistic questions raised by the selections included here are closely interrelated: What sort of truth and fidelity to experience do we expect of autobiography? and What enables autobiography to be a form of literature that we enjoy for its own sake, not as an adjunct to our knowledge of politics, military history, or public affairs? It can, of course, be argued that there is no objective criterion for ascertaining the subjective and personal content of autobiography, for which the author is often our sole authority; it can also be argued that all literature is autobiographical, insofar as all literature is a transformation and shaping of experience into words, the literary production of a writer's consciousness, and beyond that, of the sum total of his experience. Every fiction, fantasy, or symbolic

¹ Stephen Spender, "Confessions and Autobiography," in *The Making of a Poem* (London: H. Hamilton, 1955), p. 64.

fable can be traced back, by however devious a route, to what we ordinarily call "real life," if we give that term a wide meaning: life as a writer has perceived and experienced it, whether directly or symbolically; life that includes the subjective dimension of emotion and dream, as well as the hard facts and verifiable events we usually think of as "real." We know that our sense of our own lives is more complex and inclusive than the facts and events might suggest to our neighbor; if we chose to render an account of our lives, we would need to include the anxieties, fears, aspirations, good intentions, and regrets—that dimension of experience we think of as the "inner life" of emotion, wish-fulfillment, and identity. There is often a sense of unfulfilled potentiality in our inner lives, which leaves them incommensurate with the outer—a discrepancy Yeats suggested in the closing sentences of his autobiography:

For some months now I have lived with my own youth and childhood, not always writing indeed but thinking of it almost every day, and I am sorrowful and disturbed. It is not that I have accomplished too few of my plans, for I am not ambitious; but when I think of all the books I have read, and of the wise words I have heard spoken, and of the anxiety I have given to parents and grandparents, and of the hopes that I have had, all life weighed in the scales of my own life seems to me a preparation for something that never happens.²

It has been remarked that autobiography depends on the philosophical assumption "that the self comes into being only through interplay with the outer world . . . for the autobiographer is not relating facts, but experiences—i.e., the inter-action of a man and facts or events."³ This remains true despite the discrepancy, noted above, between the sense of self as potentiality and the achievement of self in events. What interests us in autobiography is the felt quality of remembered experience—the consistency, the fidelity to personality, the emergence of a distinct mode of consciousness, that we think of as the process of self-discovery, a process

whose emergent pattern is discernible only in retrospect. Although to others the autobiographer is an object, someone recognizable from the outside, he is to himself a subject, a temperament whose inner and outer worlds owe their very existence to the way in which he perceives them. And this inward knowledge is, for our purposes here, truer than outward, verifiable knowledge, at the same time that it is also more illusory.

The argument I have just summarized—that there is no objective basis for verifying the subjective dimension in autobiography—obliterates the usual distinction between, on the one hand, *all* non-fiction, including autobiography (which we assume will present a true account of its author's life), and, on the other hand, fiction (taking "fiction" in its usual meaning, that of something made up or imagined). Ordinarily, as Northrop Frye has remarked, a librarian would classify a new autobiography as nonfiction if she thought its author were telling the truth about himself, and as fiction if she thought he were lying, or altering or embellishing the truth⁴—or else, I might add, if she thought he was writing about himself obliquely, under the disguise or persona of a fictional character, as D. H. Lawrence did in *Sons and Lovers*, and James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Our high regard for "factual" truth over unverifiable psychological and emotional truth, and for non-fiction over fiction in our expectations for autobiography, is probably related to our traditional biographical and historical approach to "great lives," although it might be remembered that the most satisfying "lives" (using the criteria of autobiography, not of memoir), those of St. Augustine, Rousseau, De Quincey, Yeats, and Sartre, for example, place priority upon the psychological and intellectual factors leading to self-discovery. What we are looking for, then, is a coherent perspective upon personal experience, a consistent and evaluative attitude—a "chain of feeling," as Rousseau called it. We seek "a dominant direction that is not accidental, so that ultimately the life is a sort of graph linking the experience," to borrow Roy Pascal's metaphor, which he further qualifies: "But the graph is an imaginary line, in actuality the movement oscillates, perhaps violently, and the autobiography misrepresents the nature of experience if it fails to indicate these oscillations."⁵ The criteria

² *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1953), p. 65.

³ Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 8 and 16; this study is a provocative analysis of autobiography, to which I am indebted and to which the student should refer for an extended and informed discussion of points merely touched on in my introduction.

⁴ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 303, 307–308.

⁵ Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, p. 17.

of authenticity, fidelity, coherence, and thematic design (or "chain of feeling") are artistic ones; they grow out of literary form and style, out of the achieved content of the written work.

Furthermore, as soon as we deal with autobiography—regardless of our expectations of authenticity in a kind of literature that presents itself as a true account of its author's experience—we are dealing with written words, and words are something different from feelings, facts, or events. Words are fixed, not fluid as thought and memory are; thus the rendering of a life through the medium of written words is really a fixing or shaping of that life into a certain form. The act of committing remembered experience to words implies something creative, a "making" of inward and outward events, and a shaping of their significance. It involves fiction.

"Fiction," regardless of its popular meaning, refers etymologically to something made or formed (Latin *factio*, "a making," from *fungere*, "to form"). Whether or not we believe that a man can make his own life (and the force of circumstance suggests otherwise), it is clear that by writing his own autobiography, he is making or forming a pattern of words that fixes and conveys the felt quality of his life, just as Rembrandt, in his more than sixty self-portraits, used color and shape to show us something of himself that another portraitist (analogous, here, to a biographer), or even a mirror, could not possibly have shown. And like self-portraiture, autobiography selects, emphasizes, and interprets according to the inward dimension of personality. However closely the autobiographer may wish to adhere to outer events and the public record, the very fact that he is *writing* forces him to select, juxtapose, and interpret himself in terms of the "chain of feeling" for which he is the sole authority. He is writing at a given point in time, a certain stage of his life, so that his circumstances at the moment of composition must inevitably influence the way he perceives his past. He might be desperately unhappy and view his life with bitterness or self-pity, or else the past might appear disguised by a nostalgic haze; he might be important and successful, and patronize the reader, or tell his version of public events for the purpose of self-vindication; he might be old, the last representative of a bygone era, eager to be its personal historian, using his own life as a lens to focus and record the past; he might be a writer, religious mystic, or philosopher, selecting and interpreting the

experiences through which his particular mode of vision evolved. Each of these possible situations, motives, and perspectives entails a certain selectivity, whether conscious or unconscious, and a purposive juxtaposition of episodes and experiences to illuminate their causal or emotional connections, as these connections bear upon the emergence of that sense of self which has in turn shaped the autobiographer's account. Whether he does so explicitly or through his style, the autobiographer cannot avoid revealing his own attitude toward the past he is engaged in evoking. Selection, emphasis, style, and speaking voice, then, point to the same conclusion: by his very act of writing, the autobiographer has interpreted his experience for us.

But I have described only a certain kind of autobiographical writing, one that is shaped, formed, controlled, and unified by a single perspective. It has the internal coherence of a novel, and is unlike a novel only in its subject matter: no autobiographer could make the novelist's usual disclaimer, "All characters in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental," and still pretend to be writing autobiography. On the other hand, autobiography (as I have limited the term) is like the diary, journal, memoir, or reminiscence in its subject matter, but is unlike them in that it has coherence, thematic design, and other formal qualities. Although a provocative selection from the broader categories of autobiographical writing could be compiled in an anthology, the truncation and excerpting that would go into making the selections fit into a small anthology would distort the differences in organization, coherence, and form that distinguish autobiography from other autobiographical genres. For this reason, some important autobiographical works have not been represented here: Thoreau's *Walden*, Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, Newman's *Apologia*, T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Pepys, Benjamin Franklin, and Osbert Sitwell, to name only a few.

Once the principle of inclusion has been understood—if not as an absolute and final definition of autobiography, at least as a provisional criterion for analyzing the selections before us—certain advantages emerge. The formal qualities that have been sacrificed in the extreme brevity of a few of these selections (for obvious reasons, autobiographies tend to be long), will, I hope, be compensated for by the startling differences in style, speaking voice, narrative perspective, thematic design,

and symbolism that distinguish, for example, Gorky from Nabokov, Baldwin from Joyce, and Poe from all the others.

Chosen to illustrate certain aspects of the autobiographer's technique, the selections are arranged to focus upon four interrelated problems: self-dramatization in a speaking voice and control through a consistent point of view; the evasiveness of memory; alternative perspectives upon the self; and the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in a writer's sense of identity. The narrative control achieved by point of view and use of style to create the literary equivalent of personality (that is, the "speaking voice") are illustrated by the first three selections, from Gorky, Nabokov, and Henry Adams. In the excerpts from Richard Hoggart's critical essay "A Question of Tone," and in the "Colette" episode from Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, we see the writer recapturing memories which in Hoggart's case are initially unfocused and disguised, and for Nabokov, evasive and recalcitrant; we see also the various strategies which both writers use to get at "the truth" of their past. Here we have, not the artistic *product*, as in the first three selections, but rather the difficulties and the obstructions which block the creative *process*; these two excerpts will serve as a corrective to the apparent ease of the others, and as an encouragement to the student in his own wrestling with an initially deceptive or blank memory.

The next group of selections, from Baldwin, Thomas, the *Seafarer*-poet, Joyce, and Poe, juxtaposes straightforward personal history (Gorky and Baldwin) with condensed, symbolic personal myths (Dylan Thomas and Poe). Whereas Gorky or Baldwin might seem to remain closer to the factual texture of their lives, Thomas or Poe or the *Seafarer*-poet might be closer to its spirit, with Joyce somewhere in between. Alternative perspectives upon the self are juxtaposed as well, whether written by the same author at different stages of his life (Baldwin), or contrasted in different episodes within the single work (the *Seafarer*-poet and Joyce). And the last two selections, from e e cummings and Jorge Luis Borges, cast a new light over everything that has preceded them, by asking questions that will be provocative once the artistic problems raised by this introduction and by the questions that follow each selection have been put to rest.

Because this anthology provides materials for critical reading and for written analysis, as well as models for student autobiographical writing, there are suggestions for discussion, comparison, and writing at the conclusion of each selection. Thus there is no need for interpretation and explanation in the headnotes, which have been kept to an absolute minimum in an effort to allow the autobiographers to speak for themselves.

MAURIANNE ADAMS

"Maxim Gorky" is the pen name of Aleksei Maksimovich Peshkov (1869–1936), Russian short-story writer, novelist, dramatist, and revolutionary. The selection below is taken from the opening pages of the first volume of his autobiographical trilogy (CHILDHOOD, 1913; IN THE WORLD, 1915; and MY UNIVERSITIES, 1923). Gorky's father died when the boy was five, and he grew up in the family of his maternal grandmother.

the autobiography of maxim gorky

MAXIM GORKY

¹ ON the floor, under the window, in a small, shuttered room, lay my father, dressed in a long white garment I had never seen him in before. His feet were bare and the toes were strangely distended, while the fingers of his hands, resting on his breast, were curled in. The blackened disks of two copper coins covered his eyes, shutting out their accustomed, cheerful gleam. All the light had gone out of his still face. But what scared me most was the snarl his open mouth showed with the teeth bared.

² Beside him, on her knees, was my mother, in an undergarment. She was combing his long, fine hair back from his forehead to the nape of his neck. The comb she was using was the one with which I scraped edible shreds from watermelon rinds. As she combed away, she talked to him without stopping, through tears that fell without stopping, until it seemed that they must finally flood her eyes out of their sockets.

³ I saw all this holding on to the hand of my grandmother, whose dark head and eyes and nose looked enormous—the nose shapeless and pitted like a sponge—but a gentle, yet vividly interesting, woman. She, too, wept with sobs that were like cadences to my mother's. Shuddering herself, she pushed me toward my father, but I was too terrified to let go and clung to her.

⁴ This was the first time I had ever seen grown-ups cry, and I could not understand her repeated bidding, "Say good-by to your father. You'll never see him again. He's dead before his time."

⁵ I, myself, was just out of sickbed after a long, hard illness. It was still fresh in my mind how my father had done all he could to amuse me; and then how his place at my bedside had suddenly been taken by that old woman, then a stranger to me, my grandmother.

⁶ I asked her where she came from, using the verb form which implies coming by foot.

⁷ "From up north, from Nizhny," she replied,

FROM *The Autobiography of Maxim Gorky*, TRANS.
ISIDOR SCHNEIDER (NEW YORK: THE CITADEL PRESS,
1949), PP. 3–8. REPRINTED BY PERMISSION OF THE
PUBLISHER.

"but I didn't walk it; I came down by boat. You don't walk on water, you little scamp."

This made no sense to me at all. Upstairs there lived a gaily-dressed Persian who wore a beard; and downstairs, in the cellar, there lived a withered, yellow Kalmuck who dealt in sheepskins. And I got up to one and down to the other by way of the banisters; and if I had a fall, I just rolled down. But there was no place for water. So her "down" from "up north" on water could not be true; but it was a delightful muddle.

"Why do you call me a little scamp?" I asked.

"Because you make so much noise, that's why," she said, with a laugh.

Her voice was sweet and her words were merry and I made friends with her at once.

Now, clinging to her, all I wanted was for her to hurry and get me out of the room.

My mother caught me to her with a burst of weeping and moaning that frightened me. I had never seen her so before, this strong, composed, reserved woman, always so glowing and neat, strongly-framed like a horse and with tremendous power in her arms. Now, quivering and puffy, she looked utterly stricken. Her hair had shaken out of its gaily-trimmed cap and out of the usual tidy coil around her head and was streaming over her shoulder, and the part of it that remained in braid tracked across my father's still face. All this time she had not given me even a look, unable to tear herself away from her grief-stricken combing of my father's hair.

Then a policeman and some grave-diggers appeared at the door. "Get a move on!" bellowed the policeman.

A draft had filled the shawl that curtained the window, filled it like a sail. That picture came to me because my father had taken me sailing, once, and the sail had filled out the same way, in a sudden gust. With it had come a clap of thunder and my father had pulled me to his knee to reassure me and, laughing, had said, "It's nothing; don't let it frighten you."

All at once my mother dropped to the floor and immediately turned over, her hair in the dirt. Her mouth came open on her now-livid face so that her teeth were bared like my father's. In a terrifying voice she ordered me out, and the door to be shut.

Pushing me aside, grandma rushed to the door crying out, "Friends, there's nothing to be alarmed about; it's not the cholera; she's giving birth. For the love of God, leave us! Good people, go away."

Hidden behind a big box in a corner I saw my mother moving convulsively over the floor, panting through clenched teeth. Grandma hovered over her with soothing, cheering words, "Patience, Barbara . . . Holy Mother of God, be her protection!"

I shook with fright. In their frantic movements they bumped against my father, they groaned and shrieked into his unmoved, even smiling, face. For a long time this thrashing about on the floor went on. And all through it, rolling in and out like a big, black woolly ball went grandma on her errands.

Suddenly there was a whimper of a child. "Thank God!" grandma called out, "it's a boy!" and got up to light a candle.

And at that point, I must have fallen asleep in the darkness behind the box, because that was all I remembered.

My next memory is a solitary spot in a cemetery, in the rain. Standing beside a muddy pile of earth, I looked down into the hole in which they had sunk my father in his coffin. Frogs splashed in the water that had seeped in, and two were perched on the yellow coffin lid. Beside me were grandma, the drenched sexton and a pair of grave-diggers with shovels.

The sexton ordered the grave to be filled and moved off. Grandma wailed into an end of her head-shawl. Bent nearly double, the grave-diggers shoveled lumps of earth over the coffin, kicking the frogs who were trying to hop out, back into the grave.

"Come, Alex," said grandma, her hand on my shoulder, but I was too absorbed and slipped away.

"What next, O Lord!" grandma complained, half to me, half to God, and stood there in silence, with a dejected droop of her head.

Not till after the grave had been filled and the diggers' shovels had clanged to the ground and a sudden scurry of breeze had spattered us with rain-drops, did she stir. Then, leading me by the hand, she took me to a church some distance away, over a path bordered by occasional dim crosses.

As we left the graveyard, she asked me, "How is it you're not crying? You ought to."

"I don't want to," I replied.

"You don't? Well, you don't have to," she said, gently.

It was a surprise to me that I was expected to cry. My crying had been always more out of temper than sadness. Father had laughed my tears away and mother had forbidden them. "Don't you dare to cry!" And so I seldom cried.

31 Afterwards we rode down a broad, but filthy
street in a drozhky between rows of houses all
painted dark red. On the way I asked grandma,
"Can those frogs ever get out?"

32 "Never, God bless them."

33 God came more frequently and familiarly into
her conversation, it occurred to me then, than He
ever did in my father's or mother's.

34 Several days later I found myself, together with
mama and grandma, in a tiny steamboat cabin. On
a table, in the corner, lay the corpse of my little
brother, Maxim, in white trappings held together
with red tape. The porthole had the appearance of
a horse's eye; I climbed up our piled luggage to look
through. All there was to see was muddy froth. It
charged against the glass, at one moment, with such
force that it splashed in, and I scrambled down to
the floor.

35 "There's nothing can harm you," said grandma
lightly, lifting me back upon the baggage in her
caressing arms.

36 Gray and brooding over the water, the fog
thinned, now and then, to let a distant bulk of the
shore loom through like a shadow, only to be lost
again in mist and spume. Everything seemed to be
aquiver except mother. With her hands clasped be-
hind her head she stood rigid against the wall, with
a grim, iron-hard face. Mute and expressionless,
she seemed far away from us, an utter stranger.
Even her clothes looked unfamiliar.

37 Gently, now and then, grandma would say,
"Barbara, have a bite to eat." Mama did not so
much as stir.

38 To me grandma spoke in whispers; to mama
she spoke aloud, but infrequently, and in a timor-
ous manner. Her fear of my mother was something
I understood and made me feel closer to grandma.

39 A sudden, harsh exclamation from mama
startled both of us. "Saratov. Where's that sailor?"

40 Saratov. Sailor. New words to me.

41 The sailor turned out to be a broad-shouldered,
gray-haired man in blue. He carried in a box in
which grandma laid my brother's body. She could
not get through the door with it, being too broad,
and came to a perplexed and ludicrous halt.

42 "Oh, mama!" exclaimed mama angrily, and
took the little coffin from her. Both disappeared
and I was left with the man in blue.

43 "Well, matey," he said, "your little brother has
left you."

44 "Who are you?"

45 "I'm a sailor."

"Who's Saratov?" 46

"Saratov's a city. You can see it through the
porthole." 47

From the porthole, the land seemed to shim-
mer. Dim and crusty, as it steamed in the fog, it
made me think of a slice of bread fresh off a hot
loaf.

"Where's grandma?" 49

"She's gone out to bury the little fellow."

"In the ground?"

"That's right."

Then I told the sailor about the frogs that had
been buried alive with my father. 53

Lifting me up he fondled me, "Poor kid, you
don't understand. Pity your mother, not the frogs.
You don't know what unhappiness is crushing her." 54

From above came a howl that I recognized as
the voice of the ship, so I wasn't frightened. But the
sailor put me down at once and left me, shouting,
"I must be off!" 55

I had an impulse to get away. I looked out—
the passageway was dark and empty. Nearby glit-
tered the brass plates of steps. Looking up the stair,
I saw passengers with valises and bundles, evidently
leaving the boat. I thought this meant I must leave,
too.

But, at the gangway, in the crowd of debarking
peasants, I was met with yells, "Whose boy is he?
Who do you belong to, boy?" 57

Nobody knew me, and I didn't know what to
answer. I was hauled from hand to hand until the
sailor came up, took hold of me and explained, "It's
that Astrakhan boy, the one in the cabin." 58

He brought me back there, sat me on the bag-
gage and went off threatening me with his fore-
finger and the words, "I'll give it to you." 59

The ship's voice, overhead, quieted down; the
vibrations of the boat and its movements in the
water stopped. Dripping walls opposite the porthole
shut off the air and the light, and the cabin grew
stifling and dark. The bundles among which I had
been placed seemed to grow larger and harder, and
I began to feel crushed by them. A fear that I had
been left all alone and for good in that empty ship
possessed me.

I tried the door, but the metal handle was un-
budging. I picked up a bottle of milk and put all my
strength in the blow I gave it to make it turn; but
all I accomplished was to break the bottle and spill
the milk, which splashed over me and trickled down
my legs. Sobbing with exasperation, I cried myself
to sleep on the bundles. 61

62 I woke to find the boat in motion and the port-hole round and glowing like a sun. Beside me sat grandma, combing her hair back from her knitted brows and muttering to herself. Her blue-black hair was remarkable for its abundance. It came below her knees and even reached the ground. She had to hold it up with one hand while, with the other, she drew an almost toothless comb through the heavy mass. The strain made her lips purse and brought an exasperated sharpness to her eyes. There was something almost bitter in her expression; yet, when I asked why her hair was so long, it was in her usual melodious words and with her customary tender intonations that she answered, "God must have given it to me to punish me. It's combed out but look at it! When I was a girl I was proud of that mane but now I curse it. But sleep, child. It's early yet. The sun's barely up."

63 "I want to get up."

64 "Well then, get up," she said. As she braided her hair she glanced toward my mother who lay rigid on her bunk. "How did you happen to break that bottle? Tell me, but be quiet about it."

65 That was her way. Her words were like music

and like flowers. They bloom in my memory like everlasting blossoms. I remember her smile as a dilation of her large eyes and a cheerful flash of her white teeth that gave her face an inexpressible charm. Despite her wrinkles and her weathered complexion she looked young and even glowing. All that spoiled her appearance was her bulbous red nose with its splayed-out nostrils, the result of a weakness for drink and her snuff-taking; her black snuff box was almost always in her hand. Outwardly she looked dark, but within burned a vigorous, inextinguishable flame of which the radiance in her eyes was a reflection. She was so stooped as to be almost hunchbacked, yet her motions were gliding and light like those of a great cat; and she was soft and caressing like a cat.

I felt that I had been asleep and in darkness 66 until she came, and that then I woke and was led into the light. It was she who provided the threads with which my mind wove its multi-colored patterns. And by this she became my lifelong friend, the dearest and most understanding and the closest to my heart. Nourished by her wise love for every living thing, I gained the strength to face a hard life.

suggestions for discussion and writing

1. What concrete visual details in § 1 implicitly convey the child's sense of terror, explicitly mentioned in § 3? Is there anything in the way these details are seen to suggest that we are looking at the dead father from the child's perspective, before the child's presence is even mentioned? Does the author in any way suggest that his perspective differs from that of the child he once was? Is he looking through the child's eyes; or is he looking at the child looking at the father; or does the perspective shift from episode to episode?

2. Why is the narrative juxtaposed with associated memories from the past: the Persian who lived upstairs, the sail filling with wind in a sudden gust, and later, the memory of burial of the frogs when the brother is about to be buried? In § 15 do the child's memories of a happy, secure past, when the father was alive, affect our response to the narrative present with which they are juxtaposed? Does such juxtapo-

sition make us understand more of the boy's terror and anxiety than he himself does? Why doesn't the author simply tell us what the boy is feeling?

3. Is there any thematic connection between the father's teeth, bared in death, and the mother's teeth, bared in the pangs of childbirth; or between the mother's combing the father's hair back from his forehead and the grandmother's doing the same for herself; or between the two occasions upon which the boy huddles behind large boxes? Why does the author employ such parallels? What evidence can you find of the author's selective memory and his manipulation of episodes and images for artistic effect?

4. Is a father's death an effective beginning for his son's autobiography? Why does the boy respond more consciously to the burial of the frogs than to that of his father? Do we understand the boy's attitude toward his father's death more completely than he, as a child, is able to? If so, why?

Vladimir Nabokov (born 1899) is the Russian-born, Russian- and English-writing author of *LOLITA* (1955), *PNIN* (1957), and *PALE FIRE* (1962). The chapters of Nabokov's autobiography, first brought together in 1951 as *CONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE* (so titled as, in Nabokov's words, "conclusive evidence of my having existed"), were originally published in the *NEW YORKER*.

first and last things

VLADIMIR NABOKOV

¹ THE cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Although the two are identical twins, man, as a rule, views the prenatal abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for (at some forty-five hundred heartbeats an hour). I know, however, of a young chronophobiatic who experienced something like panic when looking for the first time at homemade movies that had been taken a few weeks before his birth. He saw a world that was practically unchanged—the same house, the same people—and then realized that he did not exist there at all and that nobody mourned his absence. He caught a glimpse of his mother waving from an upstairs window, and that unfamiliar gesture disturbed him, as if it were some mysterious farewell. But what particularly frightened him was the sight of a brand-new baby carriage standing there on the porch, with the smug, encroaching air of a coffin; even that was empty, as if, in the reverse course of events, his very bones had disintegrated.

² Such fancies are not foreign to young lives. Or, to put it otherwise, first and last things often tend to have an adolescent note—unless, possibly, they are directed by some venerable and rigid religion. Nature expects a full-grown man to accept the two black voids, fore and aft, as stolidly as he accepts the extraordinary visions in between. Imagination, the supreme delight of the immortal and the immature, should be limited. In order to enjoy life, we should not enjoy it too much.

³ I rebel against this state of affairs. I feel the urge to take my rebellion outside and picket nature. Over and over again, my mind has made colossal efforts to distinguish the faintest of personal glimmers in the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life. That this darkness is caused merely by the walls of time separating me and my bruised fists from the free world of timelessness is a belief I gladly share with the most gaudily painted savage. I have journeyed back in thought—with thought hopelessly tapering off as I went—to remote regions where I groped for some secret outlet only to discover that the prison of time is spherical and with-

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out exits. Short of suicide, I have tried everything. I have doffed my identity in order to pass for a conventional spook and steal into realms that existed before I was conceived. I have mentally endured the degrading company of Victorian lady novelists and retired colonels who remembered having, in former lives, been slave messengers on a Roman road or sages under the willows of Lhasa. I have ransacked my oldest dreams for keys and clues—and let me say at once that I reject completely the vulgar, shabby, fundamentally medieval world of Freud, with its crankish quest for sexual symbols (something like searching for Baconian acrostics in Shakespeare's works) and its bitter little embryos spying, from their natural nooks, upon the love life of their parents.

⁴ Initially, I was unaware that time, so boundless at first blush, was a prison. In probing my childhood (which is the next best to probing one's eternity) I see the awakening of consciousness as a series of spaced flashes, with the intervals between them gradually diminishing until bright blocks of perception are formed, affording memory a slippery hold. I had learned numbers and speech more or less simultaneously at a very early date, but the inner knowledge that I was I and that my parents were my parents seems to have been established only later, when it was directly associated with my discovering their age in relation to mine. Judging by the strong sunlight that, when I think of that revelation, immediately invades my memory with lobed sun flecks through overlapping patterns of greenery, the occasion may have been my mother's birthday, in late summer, in the country, and I had asked questions and had assessed the answers I received. All this is as it should be according to the theory of recapitulation; the beginning of reflexive consciousness in the brain of our remotest ancestor must surely have coincided with the dawning of the sense of time.

⁵ Thus, when the newly disclosed, fresh and trim formula of my own age, four, was confronted with the parental formulas, thirty-three and twenty-seven, something happened to me. I was given a tremendously invigorating shock. As if subjected to a second baptism, on more divine lines than the Greek Catholic ducking undergone fifty months earlier by a howling, half-drowned half-Victor (my mother, through the half-closed door, behind which an old custom bade parents retreat, managed to correct the bungling archpresbyter, Father Konstantin Vetvenitski), I felt myself plunged abruptly into a radiant and mobile medium that was none

other than the pure element of time. One shared it—just as excited bathers share shining seawater—with creatures that were not oneself but that were joined to one by time's common flow, an environment quite different from the spatial world, which not only man but apes and butterflies can perceive. At the instant, I became acutely aware that the twenty-seven-year-old being, in soft white and pink, holding my left hand, was my mother, and that the thirty-three-year-old being, in hard white and gold, holding my right hand, was my father. Between them, as they evenly progressed, I strutted, and trotted, and strutted again, from sun fleck to sun fleck, along the middle of a path, which I easily identify today with an alley of ornamental oaklings in the park of our country estate, Vyra, in the former Province of St. Petersburg, Russia. Indeed, from my present ridge of remote, isolated, almost uninhabited time, I see my diminutive self as celebrating, on that August day 1903, the birth of sentient life. If my left-hand-holder and my right-hand-holder had both been present before in my vague infant world, they had been so under the mask of a tender incognito; but now my father's attire, the resplendent uniform of the Horse Guards, with that smooth golden swell of cuirass burning upon his chest and back, came out like the sun, and for several years afterward I remained keenly interested in the age of my parents and kept myself informed about it, like a nervous passenger asking the time in order to check a new watch.

My father, let it be noted, had served his term⁶ of military training long before I was born, so I suppose he had that day put on the trappings of his old regiment as a festive joke. To a joke, then, I owe my first gleam of complete consciousness—which again has recapitulatory implications, since the first creatures on earth to become aware of time were also the first creatures to smile.

To fix correctly, in terms of time, some of my⁷ childhood recollections, I have to go by comets and eclipses, as historians do when they tackle the fragments of a saga. But in other cases there is no dearth of data. I see myself, for instance, clambering over wet black rocks at the seaside while Miss Norcott, a languid and melancholy governess, who thinks I am following her, strolls away along the curved beach with Sergey, my younger brother. I am wearing a toy bracelet. As I crawl over those rocks, I keep repeating, in a kind of zestful, copious, and deeply gratifying incantation, the English word "childhood," which sounds mysterious and new,

and becomes stranger and stranger as it gets mixed up in my small, overstocked, hectic mind, with Robin Hood and Little Red Riding Hood, and the brown hoods of old hunchbacked fairies. There are dimples in the rocks, full of tepid seawater, and my magic muttering accompanies certain spells I am weaving over the tiny sapphire pools.

⁸ The place is of course Abbazia, on the Adriatic. The thing around my wrist, looking like a fancy napkin ring, made of semitranslucent, pale-green and pink, celluloidish stuff, is the fruit of a Christmas tree, which Onya, a pretty cousin, my coeval, gave me in St. Petersburg a few months before. I sentimentally treasured it until it developed dark streaks inside which I decided as in a dream were my hair cuttings which somehow had got into the shiny substance together with my tears during a dreadful visit to a hated hairdresser in nearby Fiume. On the same day, at a waterside café, my father happened to notice, just as we were being served, two Japanese officers at a table near us, and we immediately left—not without my hastily snatching a whole *bombe* of lemon sherbet, which I carried away secreted in my aching mouth. The year was 1904. I was five. Russia was fighting Japan. With hearty relish, the English illustrated weekly *Miss Norcott* subscribed to reproduced war pictures by Japanese artists that showed how the Russian locomotives—made singularly toylike by the Japanese pictorial style—would drown if our Army tried to lay rails across the treacherous ice of Lake Baikal.

⁹ But let me see. I had an even earlier association with that war. One afternoon at the beginning of the same year, in our St. Petersburg house, I was led down from the nursery into my father's study

to say how-do-you-do to a friend of the family, General Kuropatkin. His thickset, uniform-encased body creaking slightly, he spread out to amuse me a handful of matches, on the divan where he was sitting, placed ten of them end to end to make a horizontal line, and said, "This is the sea in calm weather." Then he tipped up each pair so as to turn the straight line into a zigzag—and that was "a stormy sea." He scrambled the matches and was about to do, I hoped, a better trick when we were interrupted. His aide-de-camp was shown in and said something to him. With a Russian, flustered grunt, Kuropatkin heavily rose from his seat, the loose matches jumping up on the divan as his weight left it. That day, he had been ordered to assume supreme command of the Russian Army in the Far East.

This incident had a special sequel fifteen years ¹⁰ later, when at a certain point of my father's flight from Bolshevik-held St. Petersburg to southern Russia he was accosted while crossing a bridge, by an old man who looked like a gray-bearded peasant in his sheepskin coat. He asked my father for a light. The next moment each recognized the other. I hope old Kuropatkin, in his rustic disguise, managed to evade Soviet imprisonment, but that is not the point. What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme: those magic ones he had shown me had been trifled with and mislaid, and his armies had also vanished, and everything had fallen through, like my toy trains that, in the winter of 1904–05, in Wiesbaden, I tried to run over the frozen puddles in the grounds of the Hotel Oranien. The following of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography.

suggestions for discussion and writing

1. Why does Nabokov open his autobiography by identifying baby carriages with coffins? How do the first three paragraphs frame his first "awakening of consciousness" and suggest themes and metaphors appropriate to early childhood?

2. Although Gorky and Nabokov both use the past tense in rendering childhood scenes, are there differences in their narrative perspectives, beyond Nabokov's retrospective and symbolic four-paragraph frame?

3. The memories of §§ 4–6 seem bathed in bright sunlight, which can be taken quite literally as the sun-

shine of a midsummer day in the country. But in its context, does it evoke a nostalgic view of childhood, or suggest escape from the prison of time, or symbolize Nabokov's "first gleam of complete consciousness"?

4. Write a short paper in which you compare Gorky's and Nabokov's perspectives upon their earliest significant childhood memories. Consider such questions as the basis for selection (why the two autobiographies begin where they do, for example), the emergence of a thematic design, and the process by which concrete visual detail gathers metaphorical overtones. Also, establish some basis for comparing the use of adult/child narrative perspective in the two selections.

Henry Adams (1838–1918), son of Charles Francis Adams, grandson of John Quincy Adams, and great-grandson of John Adams, served as his father's private secretary in Congress and in Great Britain, taught medieval and American history at Harvard (1870–1877), and wrote a nine-volume HISTORY OF THE UNITED STATES DURING THE ADMINISTRATIONS OF JEFFERSON AND MADISON (1889–1891). He is better known for MONT-SAINT-MICHEL AND CHARTRES (privately printed 1904, published 1913) and THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS (privately printed 1906, published 1918).

¹ UNDER the shadow of Boston State House, turning its back on the house of John Hancock, the little passage called Hancock Avenue runs, or ran, from Beacon Street, skirting the State House grounds, to Mount Vernon Street, on the summit of Beacon Hill; and there, in the third house below Mount Vernon Place, February 16, 1838, a child was born, and christened later by his uncle, the minister of the First Church after the tenets of Boston Unitarianism, as Henry Brooks Adams.

² Had he been born in Jerusalem under the shadow of the Temple and circumcised in the Synagogue by his uncle the high priest, under the name of Israel Cohen, he would scarcely have been more distinctly branded, and not much more heavily handicapped in the races of the coming century, in running for such stakes as the century was to offer; but, on the other hand, the ordinary traveller, who does not enter the field of racing, finds advantage in being, so to speak, ticketed through life, with the safeguards of an old, established traffic. Safeguards are often irksome, but sometimes convenient, and if one needs them at all, one is apt to need them badly. A hundred years earlier, such safeguards as his would have secured any young man's success; and although in 1838 their value was not very great compared with what they would have had in 1738, yet the mere accident of starting a twentieth-century career from a nest of associations so colonial—so troglodytic—as the First Church, the Boston State House, Beacon Hill, John Hancock and John Adams, Mount Vernon Street and Quincy, all crowding on ten pounds of unconscious babyhood, was so queer as to offer a subject of curious speculation to the baby long after he had witnessed the solution. What could become of such a child of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when he should wake up to find himself required to play the game of the twentieth? Had he been consulted,

the education of henry adams

HENRY ADAMS

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