

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: The President's Pen: A Literary History of American Presidential Autobiographies

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Approximately half of American presidents have produced either a full or partial narrative record of their lives, and recent presidential autobiographies have been released to full-scale media attention. Yet, despite the genre's familiarity, there has been no comprehensive analysis of this set of presidential autobiographies. The goal of this project is to examine a selected number of presidential memoirs in order to chart the development of this genre. Aside from considering the merits of the individual texts through extended readings, this dissertation will trace the history of the publication, marketing, and reception of these texts. In addition, it will trace the formal changes and development of the presidential memoir in the context of the changing relationships between the president and the American people, popular conceptions of public and private, and the confluence of politics and celebrity.

In order to achieve these goals, the dissertation is arranged chronologically and centers on selected texts that mark the genre's evolution. The first chapters are devoted to the earliest presidential autobiographies, those of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Monroe. These three works demonstrate a careful delineation between public and private and ostensibly serve public ends. The second chapter focuses on books by James Buchanan and Ulysses Grant, both of whom sought to market their life narratives in order

to reach the broadest possible audience. The third chapter takes up the autobiographies of Theodore Roosevelt and Calvin Coolidge, two presidents who used the expansion of technology to project carefully constructed public characters to the American electorate. Therefore, their texts take on the voice and character of these public characters, stamping them distinctively and underscoring both men's popular images. The final chapter posits Ronald Reagan as the ultimate blending of celebrity and politics and suggests that comparing his two autobiographies—one the story of a movie star and the other the story of a president—demonstrates the uneasy line between institutionalized power and popular celebrity.

THE PRESIDENT'S PEN: A LITERARY HISTORY OF AMERICAN  
PRESIDENTIAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

by

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[T]his is a book that only a President could have written. That is the sole excuse for its existence.  
--Lyndon Baines Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (ix)

American presidents have, indeed, contributed their share of literary endeavors to the nation's bookshelves, particularly that genre known as the presidential autobiography or memoir. But while these efforts have often been well received by the public, scholarly attention to the merits and faults of presidential autobiographies has been lacking. The purpose of this study is to offer a thorough examination of the presidential autobiography from its earliest examples to the modern day, focusing on selected examples that reflect not only the skills and motives of their authors but also the development of audience expectations for these texts.

Despite the paucity of literary attention paid to presidential autobiographies, President Johnson's admission at the beginning of his memoirs testifies to two sources of exigence for studying the genre. First, the men who have served as president occupy a unique space in American history, giving them a "vantage point" that successful and influential people in other fields cannot precisely duplicate. Second, presidential memoirs are written for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways, and as written texts, they are fair game for the eye of the literary critic, particularly in light of the considerable expansion of autobiography studies, the significance that politics plays in canon formation, and the strong public interest in the office itself. Therefore, I contend that a literary examination of presidential autobiographies as a genre is long overdue.

The uniqueness of the office of President is, as Johnson states, itself a rationale not only for memoirs to be written but also for them to be read and studied. As the only nationally elected official in American government, "the president is in a unique position both in terms of policy and in the more ceremonial and symbolic aspects" of the job

(Stuckey 7). The presidency has evolved over two centuries, from one defined narrowly by the Constitution as an executive office tasked with carrying out the mandates of the national legislature and constrained by the system of checks and balances into an office with broad unwritten powers, a “strong leadership role anchored in public opinion” (Korzi 7). The public’s acceptance of this broadened presidential role gives presidents enormous power to sway public judgment and popular opinion, both contemporaneously and in the future, with their words.

During their terms of office, presidents have access to a wide variety of venues through which to exercise this power, including the White House Press Office, the apparatus of their political parties, a federal bureaucracy filled with potential press surrogates, and friendly special interest groups. Indeed, we see the power of presidential speech exercised every day of our present 24-hour news cycle, as a shrewdly-timed press conference or press release can immediately dominate the public conversation, wiping away any competing stories. But presidents also use words to define not only themselves but also how all Americans see themselves: hence John Kennedy’s call for a new generation to take on a New Frontier, Johnson’s attempts to establish a Great Society, or Richard Nixon’s appeal to the Silent Majority. Clearly, the words that presidents choose and convey carry significant—and unique—import for the nation.

But upon leaving office, presidents lose much of their media apparatus and no longer exercise the ability to shape public opinion as strongly. The one exception to this loss of voice is the publication of an autobiography, especially after media interest in the publication of these memoirs expanded during the twentieth century. Thus the presidential autobiography becomes a last statement, the final opportunity for the former

president to drive the nation's narrative, to celebrate his successes and to defend his shortcomings, to set the record straight. This rhetorical motive adds a greater degree of exigence to the natural questions of subjectivity that accompany all autobiographical texts, although too often these questions are ignored by biographers and historians who rely uncritically on memoirs as source material.

The purpose of this project is to consider some of these questions of subjectivity as part of a thorough examination of the presidential autobiography as a cultural artifact. Such an endeavor is necessarily a multidisciplinary concern. First, there is the matter of bibliography. How presidential memoirs have been produced, published, and marketed to the reading public has changed dramatically over the centuries. From John Adams's memoir, which he left unfinished and remained unpublished until the 1850's, to Bill Clinton's eight-figure contract to write *My Life*, the genre has become an expected—and often anticipated—product of an ex-presidency, complete with advertising blitzes, leaked excerpts, and copious discussion on talk shows and the news networks. Presidential memoir started out as an author-driven genre—the desire of a president to compose his own narrative in his own way to influence posterity's estimation of him—but has become a market-driven one, in which large advances and sizable printing runs are the norm. One segment of this project, then, is to consider the material production of the presidential autobiography.

In addition to addressing bibliographical concerns, this project will consider the motives and objectives that led presidential autobiographers to write and publish. Because autobiography is not merely an exercise in “recalling and recording” but rather an act of “composition and rhetoric,” rhetorical motives and objectives are a crucial part

of understanding the texts themselves (Bjorklund 17). Whether understood in Lejeunean terms as “autobiographical space” (26-8) or Bjorklund’s formulation as “social situation” (16), the nexus between author, fact, audience, and rhetorical purpose is a significant element of all autobiography. I prefer simply to call this nexus “rhetorical situation,” as it captures two salient points: first, that autobiography is always an act of argument, the forceful assertion of a personal narrative for a particular purpose, and second, that the autobiographer must conceive of his audience and his purposes to make authorial decisions. As such, I have attempted as much as possible to examine the rhetorical situations in which my presidential authors found themselves: their personal lives, their goals as autobiographers, the constraints of their images as public men, and the political environment in which they wrote. Both popular period histories and biographies have been helpful in this effort, as have other forms of writing, such as diaries or letters in which concerns or intents are revealed. In order to assess how the autobiography became words on the page, it is necessary to weigh all circumstances surrounding the material creation of the memoir.

Driven by market and rhetorical concerns, the presidential memoir has experienced considerable generic development over time. By starting with the earliest efforts and continuing to the modern day, my study will chart the course of this development and reveal the genre’s evolutionary branches. Some memoirs are artful, displaying a high degree of craftsmanship, while others simply collect and marshal information; some are thoroughly researched and composed by the person whose name appears on the title page, and others are ghostwritten to varying degrees. It is worthwhile to recall that the audience for the memoir is not predicated on aesthetic value; rather,

these memoirs find an audience based on the high position of their authors. However, the changes in voice, style, and content that are apparent from a survey of the genre bear consideration with respect to their meaning in a larger political and cultural sense.

And the genre's development tracks with the evolution of the presidency itself. The history of American politics reveals significant changes in the way Americans interact with the head of their government. Far more than merely the Chief Executive or the head of state, the American president is seen as having a greater purpose. Paige Baty suggests the idea of "representative character," an updated version of Emerson's "representative men," as one way to think about transcendent figures. In *American Monroe* (referring to Marilyn, not James), Baty posits the representative character as "a cultural figure through whom the character of political life is articulated" and which "embodies and expresses achievement, success, failure, genius, struggle, triumph, and other human possibilities" (8-9). This is a useful way to think about presidents and presidential candidates, as those who most successfully embody the desired values of the people tend to win the most public support. What those values are and how they are articulated necessarily change over time, but the requirement that the president serve a representative role as the primary spokesman for such values does not change; if anything, it perhaps becomes greater as communications technology and media coverage become more instantaneous and all-consuming.

The president also has a crucial role not just in political but in popular culture. The president has become a touchstone figure who has engendered a wide array of expression (from satire and parody to earnest iconography) and artifacts (photos, books, paper dolls, and Pez dispensers). Jeff Smith surveys the landscape of fictional presidents

and observes that the “presidency is something that Americans are continually imagining and re-imagining” because the office has become central to not just American political life but its culture (3). The public has over time come to demand more of a personal touch from their presidents, to know more about them as people, and the presidential memoir has had to change to meet the demand, making it a useful artifact to trace the changes in the relationship between the public and the presidency over time.

The presidential memoir, then, serves as part of the effort of these elected leaders to fulfill these heavy political and cultural roles. The fact that roughly half of the American presidents have produced, either in full or in part, some narrative record of their lives testifies to both the desire of this subset of men to produce memoirs and of the public to consume them. This desire for production and consumption stems from the lingering urge of America’s presidents, even after they leave office, to maintain some part of their representative cache and the hunger of both their supporters and detractors to find ammunition for their opinions both favorable and not. In short, many Americans are heavily invested in their president, either in support or opposition, and his ability to command attention even after leaving behind his institutional power is heightened by the creation of a carefully crafted autobiography and the resulting media coverage.

Each chapter of this survey will consider all of the foregoing angles—bibliographical, rhetorical, generic, political, and cultural—in a broad reading of the presidential autobiography: publication and marketing; internal structure; political representation; and popular appeal. By examining a considerable sampling of texts, considering them in relation to one another and across time, my objective is to trace the development of this important but largely ignored genre, find connections between this

generic development and the development of presidency, and to expand consideration of presidential autobiographies by literary scholars.

## II

The American reading public demonstrates a hunger for works about their presidents. One need only peruse the biography bookshelf at the nearest library or bookstore to find (literally) a ton of scholarly material dedicated both to the office and to the individuals who held it. The recent trend has been toward greater production of presidential books; during the 1990's and early 2000's, a "dozen presidential books" by such authors as David McCullough and Edmund Morris "have spent about three hundred weeks combined on the *USA Today* list" of "best-selling hardcover and paperback books" (Brownstein A1). Presidential scholar Robert Dallek expressed amazement at the popular demand; the "number of presidential biographies that make it" to the best-seller list "is astonishing" (qtd. Brownstein A1). And it is important to note that these are overwhelmingly biographical works, not broad analytical works about the office itself, suggesting that the public's interest is driven by personality rather than policy.

The existence of a growing body of public interest in presidential biography makes this an exigent time to consider the autobiographical branch of the genre. After all, as mentioned earlier, historians frequently rely on autobiographies as source material. Yet they often do so without explicitly providing for their readers the necessary critical cautions: age of the subject; quality of memory; the role of editors, collaborators and ghostwriters; ulterior motives; and the inherently self-serving nature of the genre. Understanding these autobiographies from a critical perspective can help adjust the assumptions that underlie their use in creating influential and popular text which, in turn,

shape the American public's image of their leaders. This, in turn, influences how the public will read and understand—and perhaps even select—future leaders.

Image making is inseparable from American politics. In a representative democracy, gaining and maintaining political power depend in large part on creating an appealing public image that reflects the beliefs of a broad coalition of voters. Every step that an individual takes toward the presidency is attended by the necessary image crafting that attends the path: public polling, media accessibility, fundraising, interviews, paid advertising, public endorsements, and the like. The path to power has become more complicated over time. Early candidates allowed broadsides and friendly newspaper publishers to state their public platforms so that they themselves did not have to; hidden away in their private homes and offices, they avoided the public and allowed the printed word to act, in effect, as a substitute for their presence. Understandably, the earliest memoirs are information-driven, full of copied letters and documents, arranged in dry chronological order, focused heavily on the public role of the authors. At one time, this matched the restrained, dignified view of the office as one not to be sought and of its seekers and holders to remain above the fray of partisan politics (which would be left to less-scrupulous underlings).

But this structure has become obsolete. Over time, politicking and campaigning have changed; the way the media covers political figures has changed; the interaction and mediation of presidents and presidential candidates with the public have changed. With these changes, the needs and expectations of the audience have become increasingly important. But public figures no longer have the sort of privacy that they once had; now they are fodder for the paparazzi both professional and amateur. In their desire to test the

candidate's willingness to become a truly representative character, the American public has cast aside many of the older conventions of campaigning, forcing candidates to seek out forms of media that will reduce the distance between themselves and the public. In short, political celebrity has merged with a broader concept of popular celebrity, placing candidates on TV screens with Oprah Winfrey or campaign platforms with musicians and movie stars. American popular culture has subordinated popular politics in ways that the Founders may well have thought unimaginable. In that sense, presidential autobiography is expected to offer some of the same content as celebrity tell-alls: juicy stories, funny anecdotes, catty opinions, and a reader-friendly style with less policy talk and more endearing memories of family holidays or youthful indiscretions.

It is hard to imagine some scenes in recent autobiographies making it to print in earlier times: Ronald Reagan's depiction of his father's drunkenness, Bill Clinton's expansive description of his romance with Hillary Rodham (though not Monica Lewinsky), and Jimmy Carter reflecting on outhouse etiquette in rural Georgia. This breakdown in the separation of public and private in the memoir is a response to new norms and audience expectations, driven by an election process that often pushes aside public issues to ask personal—though not necessarily immaterial—questions of candidates and office holders. (Boxers or briefs, Governor Clinton?) Fundamentally personal questions nonetheless matter to the American public and demonstrate the public's desire to know and relate to their leaders in a personal way, a vestige of the ideal of an egalitarian American politics based in citizen government. Of course, there are still conventions that permit presidential authors to edit or expurgate potentially embarrassing material, but then again, autobiography has always been a self-serving genre.

And, as alluded to above, the personal can weigh just as heavily as the political in both elections and policy-making. My own interest in this field began with my recognition of the usefulness of American presidents as a prism through which to see American history. No historian could ever sit down to produce a comprehensive history of the United States, and any student of the field will be endlessly challenged. Therefore, like many other Americans, I find in the lives of forty-two admittedly non-representative men a glimpse of a nation's history. The American presidents are a specifically designated group comprised of a small and manageable membership. Their lives provide specific lenses through which to view their times and, as the office has changed, to view the maturation, development, and expansion of the United States as a whole.

In a sense, their lives serve as a stand-in for the life of the nation. Learning about the lives, personalities, and challenges of America's chief executives has become a national fascination. Millions of Americans purchase biographies and autobiographies, watch television specials, and visit presidential libraries, museums, homes and gravesites. The allure of presidents stems from the fact that they are singular in their position and, in the course of their political service, become so closely identified with the nation itself that their private lives become co-opted by their public duties. These men, their likes and dislikes, their upbringing, their personal flaws and private values, their successes and failures serve to shape their terms of office, which in turn shape public policy and the direction of American history. And presidents have used their predecessors' stories to assess their own approaches to the office; as Bill Clinton notes, studying the lives of his predecessors allowed him "to find patterns that ran throughout the fabric of our history" (qtd. in Brownstein A16). In this sense, the presidents bind together the personal and the

public to a unique degree.

Because of this consideration—which Michael Rogin’s *Ronald Reagan, the Movie* helpfully considers in light of the doctrine of “the king’s two bodies”—the following chapters will concern themselves with bodies: corporeal bodies, representative and symbolic bodies, bodies of work, bodies of text, and of course the body politic. Historian Ray Raphael posits “the body of the people” as the self-referencing construction of the founding generation; the body became a stand-in for the “collective participation and sacrifice” of the many individuals (ix). Within the American political framework, this body transferred its authority to representative individuals through the electoral process, imbuing them with the right to govern the whole that by “natural law” belongs to the whole itself.

That the president is the only nationally elected office holder—the only person subject to the vote of the entire body of the people—makes his own body the site of the most sweeping transfer of power that the American public may offer. This concept has forged a strong sense of ownership that Americans feel toward their presidents and, therefore, a wide interest in how these individuals use their bodies. They can make us proud (George W. Bush standing at Ground Zero announcing his intention to find the terrorists responsible) or make us cringe (George W. Bush trying to open a locked door after a press conference in China). But they make it incredibly hard to stay neutral. And with this deep interest and sense of ownership comes an unwillingness to accept a clear distinction between public and private life. The construction of a textual body in the form of autobiography must weigh this consideration heavily.

## III

While the historical value of this study may thus appear obvious, the literary value requires some explanation. Precious few American presidents could be widely considered great writers, though Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt could easily make a list of the finest writers America has produced. However, some presidential memoirs are guilty of lacking compelling literary merit; they are rather dry, full of extensively detailed descriptions of arcane parliamentary tactics, thorough recounting of diplomatic affairs, legal analysis, and political justification. Indeed, many of these texts are just plain dull. And although others are more artful, they may be ghostwritten and thus less representative of the putative author's skill or lack thereof. Perhaps as a result of these factors, most presidential autobiographies have received little critical attention from historians and almost none from literary scholars.

The paucity of scholarship about this genre led Robert Sayre to refer to these texts as "bastards whom neither parent would defend": too subjective to be read by historians interested in objective fact and too unimaginative to be enjoyed by literary scholars (12). Even biographers, while they routinely look at autobiography as primary source material, seldom stop to examine their subjects as authors or to offer close readings of the texts themselves. Instead, the presidential autobiography is counted as just another public service and an extension of their political careers. And, aside from Jefferson and Grant, these texts are seldom read or taught as literature, included in few anthologies, and therefore make little or no mark on students of American literature, which in turn makes it easy to discount their potential contribution as literature.

Yet autobiography studies, with its origins spread across the literary, historical,

and cultural, has a tradition of introducing new texts to critical audiences. Autobiography is, of course, a young genre. The Oxford English Dictionary traces the first usage of the word “autobiography” itself to 1797, though Robert Folkenflik places the origin of the term as an adjective in 1786 (1). At any rate, the term was first used popularly by Robert Southey in 1809. Coincidentally, the American presidency was itself inaugurated in 1787 by Article II of the Constitution, placing the origins of both the United States, its Chief Executive, and the word “autobiography” in close temporal proximity. Similarly, the United States is a young nation by any standard regardless of which date one chooses to ascribe to its beginning, and likewise the literary study of autobiography bloomed only relatively recently, beginning with Georges Gusdorf in 1956 and blossoming after 1980, driven in large part by demographic changes in the United States.

During this time, the field has seen an explosion of interest and expansion of possible texts for examination. Gusdorf’s essay, titled (ironically in retrospect) “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” defines the genre strictly in a traditional sense and further suggests that, as a cultural construct, autobiography “asserts itself only in recent centuries and only on a small part of the map” in places where there exists a “conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life” (qtd. in Couser 19). This is a marked contrast to the recent so-called “age of memoir”, in which the genre seems to be open to anyone with a titillating story to tell and the willingness to tell it (Eakin 143-4). Now the field finds itself in the midst of an “unbounded sprawl,” containing not only traditional autobiographers such as Franklin or Rousseau or Edwards but also poems, novels, plays, and nonfiction writing (Spengemann xii). Thus it seems that we rapidly approach the Gertrude Stein standard: “All writing is autobiography.”

This is, in short, a field in which textual recovery and generic arguments are vibrant. James Cox titled his collection of essays *Reclaiming Literature's Lost Ground* specifically because much of autobiography studies consists of bringing texts under scrutiny that had previously been shunned by literary critics (see 32). Stephen Carl Arch establishes literary recovery as a primary goal of *After Franklin*, suggesting that post-conceived critical notions of what constitutes representative autobiography has “obscured” the “importance and relevance” of early American autobiographies (3-4). William Dean Howells referred to autobiography as “the most democratic province in the republic of letters” (qtd. Stone 2)—if this is true, then the impulse of critics to feel “an obligation to historicize all autobiography” is an understandable response (Lee 8). What I am suggesting is that autobiography studies by its nature has grown by leaps and bounds by bringing previously untouched works under critical attention, making textual recovery a key element of its success.

Therefore, the lack of critical attention that many presidential autobiographies have received should not be perceived as a disqualifier for future consideration. Some of the very changes that have driven the expansion of autobiography studies have also worked against this particular subset of texts. Academic historians have found top-down approaches to historiography—sometimes called the “great man” approach”—dissatisfying over the past few decades. The growth of a more inclusive approach to history in the 1960’s and 1970’s led “the so-called ‘great man’ history” to be “pushed aside . . . because you had women and people who were from previously submerged groups,” according to historian Alonzo Hamby (qtd. in Brownstein A16). The singularity of the presidency and the fact that white males have dominated it have, to some degree,

made it somewhat out of vogue for academia. Yet in the niche of autobiography studies, the fact that so many of the texts that qualify for this study have not yet been thoroughly analyzed by other critics—aside, again, from Grant and arguably Jefferson—gives this project a sense of exigence and places it into the tradition of recovery projects that have previously resuscitated the narratives of Puritan religious leaders, American and European slaves, and Indian captives, to name precious few.

#### IV

But even if it is worthwhile to study these texts, how exactly should they be studied? It is not my purpose, like so many before, to attempt to put forward some specific theory of autobiography that fits these texts. James Cox excused himself from this task by writing, “I am no closer to a theory of the subject than I was twenty-five years ago” (2). The quest for a unifying field theory of what autobiography is and what it means has been the Holy Grail for many scholars of the genre, and thus far no completely satisfactory conclusion has arisen. This is not to say that autobiography should be exempt from theory because it “is intended to work on our sympathies”; however, the fact that the form “does not lend itself altogether comfortably to theorization” is clear (Sturrock 21). Indeed, without some sort of theory, the generic study easily degenerates into a catalogue without meaningful analysis. At the core of this difficulty lies the problem of genre, which has frustrated autobiography theorists since Gusdorf.

Rather than wade into the controversies over generic definitions of autobiography, I will recognize major disagreements in autobiography studies and will consider their stake in my project. Most notable, perhaps, is the “desire (and apparent inability) to define the ‘genre’ once and for all” (Arch 3). One helpful way to formulate the genre is

Robert Folkenflik's remark that autobiography "has norms but not rules" (13). French theorist Philippe Lejeune is perhaps best known for attempting to define the genre; his essay on "The Autobiographical Pact" begins with an open question: "Is it possible to define autobiography?" (3). His definition appears simple: "Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality" (4). The essay furthermore suggests that the genre may be understood as a "contract" between reader and author in which the author posits certain accepted formal conventions of autobiography that may in turn be interpreted by the reader, and suggests that to trace the history of autobiography is to trace "a history of its mode of reading" (30). Of course, even this logic has flaws, as John Eakin notes that the "historicity" of a subject—his or her existence in temporal reality—is not always the same as the "nature" of that subject (2). Autobiography is a recognizable and familiar form that, upon close examination, becomes endlessly complex. Perhaps the best approach to define the genre is to follow Justice Potter Stewart's famous remark on pornography: "I know it when I see it."

Autobiography certainly is expected by the reader to bear features that make it distinguishable from other narrative. Lejeune makes much of the oneness of identity between author, narrator, and protagonist and weighs heavily—too heavily, really—the name placed on the title page as author (5, 13-14). While there are certainly counterexamples to Lejeune's premise, the genre as a whole receives a "kind of 'authority' lacking in most forms of literary discourse" that comes from "its grounding in a verifiable relationship between the text and an extratextual referent" (Couser 15). In many cases, the strongest evidence for autobiography are the claims made by the text

itself (for example, the word “Autobiography” in the title) and the recognition of the author/protagonist as an individual existing in time and space (no one thinks Ben Franklin is a fictional character). Yet, of course, these claims can quickly become murky when counterexamples are cited; for one, as Couser notes, the fraudulent *Autobiography of Howard Hughes* (3).

The crucial difficulty of autobiography is that there is no single definition that fits all examples. This has led many critics to arrange their analysis of the genre into types. William Spengemann’s aptly titled *The Forms of Autobiography* captures this problem: it could never simply be *The Form of Autobiography*. As such, he relies on a method similar to Lejeune’s: listing various categories and attempting to fit specific examples into one or the other of them; in his case, the forms are labeled historical, philosophical, and poetic—and he traces them fitfully and with subjectively chosen exemplars along an evolutionary path from Augustine to today (xiv). Another critic, Phillip Greven, offers evangelicals, moderates, and genteels, dividing autobiographers up based on their how inwardly focused their narratives are (qtd. in Imbarrato 91). Susan Clair Imbarrato follows a similar pattern: the spiritual narrative, the social narrative, the political narrative. The sense one gets is that trying to order autobiography into a theory tends to leave one looking more like a cataloguer, as Sturrock notes (22).

Tied in closely to the vagaries of genre is the vagary of the identity or “self” that is found in autobiography. The difficulty of interpreting the subjectivity of the autobiography has become a hallmark of the secondary literature. In his study of American self-formation, Daniel Walker Howe states that thinkers who dabbled in describing the process of self-construction “postulated not only the existence of a self as

the consequence of an individual's personal and social history," but furthermore that individuals maintained the power of conscious "critical reflection" on the self, as well as the ability to "modify" that self (4). Thus, Howe notes that "self-construction is to a large extent accomplished verbally" and through a "conscious performance" (4). Indeed, as a sort of spin-off of the catalogue of types of autobiography, Diane Bjorklund suggests types of "selves" that reflect the way "they consider their own lives and organize their experiences in the light of general ideas they have learned about what it means to be human" (x). Bjorklund thus considers the self as a construct that, in the case of autobiography, is formed in a specific literary space and mediated by language, a "vocabulary of the self" (8). John Eakin's work follows similar concerns and suggests that the self of autobiography is a "double construct": an identity created "not only in the act of writing a life story but also a lifelong process of identity formation of which the writing is usually a comparatively late phase" (ix). What Bjorklund, Eakin, Couser, and others understand is that an autobiography is never simply "a person's life written by that person"—rather, it is the active construction of a self by an author with a specific audience and purpose in mind.

This literary construction is easily obscured by the narrative perspective found in autobiography. The overwhelmingly common use of first person narration in autobiography immediately suggests to the reader that the autobiographical narrative emanates from a particular point of view, a unified "I" who can observe, experience, and later retell the events in a trustworthy manner. This is, of course, a fiction, certainly for the reader and likely also for the author. But the unified "I" "compounds our sense of being in full command of our knowledge of our selves and our stories" and "conveniently

bridges the gaps between who we once were and who we are today” while making our present sense of self “seem more unified and coherent than it possibly could be” (Eakin ix). James Stull traces this inherent contradiction in autobiography to the rise of the New Journalism that cast off the notions of objective reporting and instead privileged “the first person” and “the epistemological authority of the imperial self” (3). What autobiographers do—and I think here especially about those autobiographers who record a public history in their works—similarly fits this bill.

The unity of the “I” is an obvious fiction; in autobiography, the protagonist is presented as a subject in the midst of historical events while the author is outside of them, recalling and reconstructing them through the mediation of language. When a subject makes a written account of events temporally as they happen (or at least as he experiences them) the text is generally assigned to a different genre—the journal or diary, perhaps. Although the reader picks up an autobiography to read the story of a person’s life written by himself and thus expects the “I” simply to be the author, this is never entirely true. While the author, primary protagonist, and narrator will ordinarily be one and the same person who exists in verifiable history, there will inevitably be some distance between each of these entities. Within this distance is a site of literary creation; whether one calls this the site of the creation of a self or the creation and development of a character depends on one’s bent—psychological or literary or historiographic. But the principle—the act of creation—is an indisputable part of the autobiographical act.

Writing autobiography is an inherently literary task. The autobiographer “creates himself as a character”, “decid[ing] on the meaning of his life and the purpose of his book, and he selects traits, incidents, and characters accordingly” (Levin 60). Without

question, these tasks of memoir writing--deciding what material to include or exclude, arranging a collection of memories and research sources into a coherent narrative, developing and revealing characters--are entirely in line with other forms of literary effort. The authorial task of crafting scenes and characters, choosing language and tone, and appealing to the reader in the way most advantageous to the author's intent is the same for memoir as for fiction; the difference is in the constraints imposed by external veracity. I do not assert that autobiography is an offshoot of fiction, as some theorists have come treacherously close to doing. But there is no question that autobiography, with its seemingly pat description--the events of a person's life written by that person--makes it a tempting target for complication, sometimes helpfully but sometimes not. David Levin describes autobiography as an "art," a medium through which "the author tries to understand himself, to evaluate himself, and to see himself, in a sense, from outside" (61). Yet, as with any written task, some authors are more successful than others, and their success must depend not only on how they make sense of their experiences to themselves but also how they represent themselves to their readers. This type of critique could certainly also carry over into fiction. Still, my position is not to argue that autobiography be read as fiction but rather that narrative techniques are fair game for the same literary criticism applied to fictional works, regardless of genre.

## V

While I recognize these problems of genre and self-representation, I have both a conception of the genre and subgenre that I wish to consider and also a plan for analyzing my chosen texts. But I would caution that my purpose is to establish broad guidelines to produce the most interesting results for this study, not to proffer any general theory of

autobiography. First, I have selected the texts that will be included based on some shared characteristics: each has been published under the name of an individual who, at some time in his life, served as president and purports to construct a narrative about that president's life. I will try to avoid the catch-all term "life writing" and exclude journals and correspondence. The major purpose for this is, simply, to make the subject more manageable. Because other types of life writing are not consciously composed as an encompassing narrative, no matter how thorough they may be, the task of a diarist or letter-writer is different from that of the autobiographer.

James Polk's presidential diary is a fascinating work, and the writings published as John Quincy Adams's memoirs are a lengthy and invaluable collection of journal entries. But, for my purposes, I do not consider them autobiography because autobiography is composed through different means and carries a different concept of audience. While some presidents ostensibly wrote for narrow audiences--their children and grandchildren or close friends--and others clearly for a popular readership—for example Bill Clinton's *My Life*--they all clearly wrote for someone other than themselves. While diaries may also be written for public consumption or at least with the realization that posthumous publication would be inevitable, for the sake of narrowing the field of texts and trying to keep some measure of generic continuity, I am excluding such works.

Second, autobiography follows a broad narrative pattern divided by chapters, not by "entries." It may be organized strictly by chronological order, but it is not obligated to do so. Autobiography is therefore more self-consciously literary as a genre, more inclined toward aesthetic design. Autobiography is also intended as an authoritative work, often

relying on--and offering its audience--not just recounting of events but reaction and reflections. Journals lack one of the pleasures of autobiography: the ability of the narrator to recast and reconsider the actions of his protagonist, an earlier self, from the perspective of a later time. Indeed, this quality is a large part of the appeal of the genre. While sometimes fragmented, autobiographies are intended to be read as a complete whole, not as an ongoing, day-by-day record. There is freedom in autobiography from a standard chronological recounting. This is a trickier distinction but, again, one that is necessary to narrow the focus of this project.

Autobiographers tend to recount and organize their lives; this is especially true in the case of this study, as all of the texts are retrospective ones. Some of my texts rely on materials that were written contemporaneously with the events described as source. These material include journals or correspondence, and some of my presidential authors transcribed all or in part of these sources into their autobiographies. I read this grafting of contemporaneously written materials as an authorial choice within the genre of autobiography, not as a violation of that genre, in the same way that I would read an epistolary novel as a subgenre of novel. In essence, the production or reading of letters or diaries is part of the life that is being recounted, so their inclusion in the text helps to serve the author's representation of his life. At the same time, I am interested in the usage of these inserted texts within the larger autobiographical framework, not in closely reading or analyzing the grafted texts themselves.

The significance of the purported authorship of texts is also worthy of examination. Presidential memoirs run the gamut: there are many memoirs that were researched and written entirely by the president himself and others that were ghostwritten

with varying degrees of the president's involvement with a continuum in between. This is a significant issue, but one that is better dealt with at the level of the individual text.

Within my broad classification, I am not particularly concerned with how involved the author was in the actual composition, or whether the work was composed before, during, or after the Presidency, or how much and what portion of the president's life is covered.

While the author may use creative or unorthodox methods beyond the traditional "I" format or may even appeal to amanuenses and ghostwriter, the author is inevitably the person who lived the story, for he or she has created the narrative that is recounted in the written work. For example, Ronald Reagan's *An American Life* was ghostwritten; but by working closely with his ghostwriter, Reagan in my view never ceded his authority over the crafting of his life narrative. And autobiography must reflect the authorial wishes of the subject, as indeed it can, even if the subject never touches a keyboard or touches a pen. The choices inherent in creating and representing a subject to the public would carry the same literary and ethical considerations.

All of my texts meet a key generic qualification: the reader picks them up with the expectation of reading presidential autobiography. It is conceivable that a novel or at least a *mélange* of fact and fiction could be passed off as true autobiography in violation of the reader's expectations. But the popular knowledge that presidents are unique individuals whose existence can be verified in records outside of the autobiographical text would certainly place presidential autobiographies in their proper generic category. Based on their publication and marketing as well as the conventions familiar within the genre, these texts all assert the autobiographical link with their subjects. Therefore I suspect that most readers who would pick up such a volume would be unsurprised to learn that an

individual whose name does not appear on the dust jacket had a substantial role in crafting the text. To the extent that presidential memoirs violate the reader's expectations, the reader most likely is willing to tolerate such generic play. Because the subject is involved, however indirectly, with the production of the text, reading and analyzing presidential memoirs is a fair way of entering the lives of these men and examining how they choose to present themselves (or have themselves presented by others) and their careers to the public whom they once governed. I will therefore not use authorial collaboration to disqualify any presidential memoirs.

Given the slipperiness of the term "autobiography," I would like to make clear one specific instance of word choice on my part. In the previous paragraphs, I have used the terms "autobiography" and "memoir" rather imprecisely, but for a good reason. While memoir and autobiography have different connotations--a memoir tends to restrict itself to a recitation of public activities while an autobiography is more reflective, introspective, and inclusive--I do not believe that a clear delineation of terms is helpful to this project, as after all, these authors are all public men in the strongest sense. I see memoir as a subset of autobiography and a somewhat misleading term; as stated above, the term "autobiography" is of recent coinage and was not popularly used until the mid-nineteenth century in the familiar way that it now is (Cox 33). Indeed, some early works now commonly known as autobiographies--most notably Benjamin Franklin's--were originally titled "Memoirs" and only later, after popular terminology changed, retitled. While some presidential memoirs are so focused on public activity as to fit that narrowly construed definition, others are more properly called autobiography. For simple convenience and because I do not consider the distinction crucial to my study, the

terms will be used more or less interchangeably unless otherwise specified.

Now that I have sketched out the parameters of my texts, let me clearly state the value of presidential memoir as a literary topic. Of the authors--the forty-three men who have held the office--only approximately half produced works that fit my definition of autobiography. By reading these texts individually, a portrait of the author emerges and, reading them collectively, standards of the genre become evident. The autobiographer permits the printed word to act, in effect, as a substitute for their presence. But the political autobiography provides a particularly rich target because it relies on recounting public performance to construct an image or identity. In linking autobiography to performativity, Sidonie Smith looks at the autobiographical task, the assemblage of a “life, to which [autobiographers] assign narrative coherence and meaning and through which they position themselves in historically specific identities,” as no different than any public act carried out by a subject for the consumption of an audience (17). She questions whether the “self” is developed as an interior structure that awaits revelation to the public through various acts of expression—most notably the writing of autobiography—and instead suggests that this “autobiographical self” is in fact narrated into being by the act of writing (17). Specifically, by constructing a narrative in which the self as character is shown performing the tasks, wearing the costume, or speaking the language conventionally associated with a specific type of individual, the autobiographer creates for himself a close identification with that sort of individual.

Because both politics and autobiography are centered on rhetorical performance, the ability of an individual to craft and portray a chosen character, a “persona created by the subject in his own purposeful narrative and illustrated, or established, there through

his use of certain anecdotes and qualities” (Levin 38), is a key element of rhetorical success. From William Henry Harrison’s log cabins and cider barrels to George W. Bush’s “pitcher’s mound” podium at the 2004 Republican National Convention, the men who have pursued the presidency have been practitioners of a politics of popular identity of which memoir forms a part. Furthermore, narrative plays an important role in crafting this public character. As Evan Cornog argues, “The essence of American presidential leadership, and the secret of Presidential success, is storytelling” (1). Stories can simplify complicated subjects, draw out emotional pathetic responses, and provide a convenient context within which to understand the world; they are rhetorically powerful tools. All autobiographers, like politicians and their consultants, create selves or make lives or whatever term one wishes to use with the goal of attaining public approbation to the greatest possible extent. Then the author must organize the events in a manner that embellishes and reinforces this basic character. How these authors in their memoirs go about creating both effective personae and compelling stories is a literary art.

But equally of interest is the tightrope that the presidential autobiographer walks between his public image and what he perceives as his true self. It is simple to think that these powerful men are so accurate in their imagining that there is no gap between the public and private. First, this conception ignores the possibility of “gaps, ruptures, unstable boundaries, incursions, excursions, limits and their transgressions” than arise in the text when the autobiographer finds himself trying to respond to “multiple calls” in the creation through performance of identity (Smith 20). By trying to craft a character—and, by extension, a self—that fits multiple conventional forms all at the same time, the narrative can become strained, leaving the careful reader the opportunity to find seams in

the patchwork of life-telling. The presidency as an office lends itself to this sort of reading. As Thomas Cronin and Michael Genovese argue, contradictions are inherent in the presidency: “[T]he American presidency might be better understood as a series of paradoxes, clashing expectations, and contradictions . . . Presidents, more than most people, learn to take advantage of contrary or divergent forces” (2). Understanding these clashes is crucial to understanding and assessing American presidents, just as in assessing autobiographical craft.

It is also worth noting that the life of the public—particularly the political—man or woman is also partially defined through the role of the opposition and the media in creating a public image. Therefore each of my presidential memoirists must not only work to create his own desired image, the ideal self to project, but also the identity that is forced upon him by his public status. This rhetorical act of negotiation can produce contradictions, schisms, seams in the narrative performance that reveal pieces of a personality either willingly or unwittingly reflected in the text. Such clashes between the assertion of one’s self versus the identity assertively thrust upon one in the public sphere inevitably occur in presidential memoirs. Thus in examining these memoirs, one frequently finds the form of *apologia*, the use of personal material to, in both literal and figurative senses, rewrite history in response to public perceptions—an overtly rhetorical task that melds with the traditional autobiographical narrative structure.

By examining these works individually and comparing them with one another, I can both reveal a portrait of each individual presidential author and establish a line of development within the genre. This process, when conducted with representative texts dating from the early Republic all the way to the global age, gives the reader some sense

of how the presidency has changed over time. As politics and celebrity have merged, and certainly Clinton and Ronald Reagan are superb examples of this development, the expansion of what presidential memoir means, what it must do, and what it must offer the reader have changed. Therefore the successful modern presidential memoir must meet different reader expectations than did early memoirs. Modern presidents must produce more professional, thorough, personal, commercial texts--former President Carter, for example, leads the life of a professional writer. By considering and analyzing these differences—the sorts of material, the narrative arrangement, the expanded marketing—I can trace American's changing views of their presidents and the development of celebrity culture.

Already the canon contains numerous examples of life writing: memoirs, diaries and journals, letters, confessions, and the like. The fact that there is a long American tradition of presidential memoir and that their authors have such obvious significance to American history should be grounds to put these works on the table and allow literary critics to debate their merits and failings just like any other text. The examination of changes in how these books are written and marketed is one that the literary critic has a responsibility to accept.

The texts I have chosen to focus on are as follows, listed in chronological order by date of completion: the *Autobiography* of John Adams (1807), the *Autobiography* of Thomas Jefferson (1821), the *Autobiography* of James Monroe (1831), James Buchanan's *The Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion* (1866), U.S. Grant's *Personal Memoirs* (1885), Theodore Roosevelt's *An Autobiography* (1913), the *Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge* (1929), and three works related to Ronald Reagan: the

memoirs *Where's the Rest of Me?* (1966, the only pre-presidency memoir on the list) and *An American Life* (1990), and Edmund Morris's controversial but fascinating *Dutch* (1999). Although these texts are arranged chronologically, it is not necessarily my purpose to argue that there is a clear, steady line of evolution over time. However, any reader will note the differences in style, methodology, and literariness evident when comparing the earliest texts to the more recent, and as indicated previously, I am interested in how such factors as reader expectations, publishing and marketing demands, rhetorical purpose, and changing conceptions of the presidency and celebrity contribute to these changes.

Adams, Jefferson, and Monroe were the earliest presidential autobiographers. Their works reflect the values of the revolutionary era, a time of careful distinction between public and private life, and were published posthumously, giving them a different relationship with their audiences than that of later works. These men pursued the classical idea of fame, an unchanging immortality that would be beyond the power of their detractors to take away. Francis Bacon declared "founders of states and commonwealths" the highest place in the pantheon of public fame, and the earliest presidential autobiographers used their new genre to stake their claims to that fame (qtd. in Shutz and Adair 3). By coming to exist before the startled eyes of Europe, it could be said that "America had been founded in fame" (Braudy 393). Therefore, her founders could self-consciously position themselves for their deserved shares of glory. As a result, the founder autobiographers focused on the description and defense of their public lives, and their words were meant to influence the construction of an official founding mythology then still being built.

By the mid-nineteenth century, a new mythology was emerging around not the founding of a nation but its defense and reunification. James Buchanan and Ulysses Grant wrote during the post-Civil War era, when that conflict was the focus of broad public interest and its history was still being written. In addition, memoir writing had become a huge segment of the publishing industry, meaning that a memoir could be quickly disseminated into the hands of a reading public ready to consume it. Therefore, both autobiographies are self-consciously aimed at contemporary audiences: Buchanan's is a polemic aimed at changing negative popular opinion toward his administration, while Grant's is a self-consciously literary work (widely regarded as the best of the form) that was designed to be a commercial success. Either way, these two works share an immediate, openly stated public and marketable purpose in contrast to the posterity-building of the previous memoirists.

Theodore Roosevelt and Calvin Coolidge represent the early twentieth century, when the office of the Presidency had expanded, and with it, the demand of the public for larger-than-life personalities to fill it. Roosevelt was certainly one of the best writers among the presidents, with the requisite larger-than-life persona besides, while Coolidge was a notoriously tight-lipped man who nonetheless produced an eloquent and moving text. Indeed, these presidents almost become self-referential as they depict themselves in print so as to match their public personae. The craftsmanship and the carefully modulated construction of these memoirs show a level of literary self-consciousness not found in their predecessors' works. In this respect, the effort to match the memoir to the existing public image creates a contrast to the apologia that had previously defined the form.

Ronald Reagan, I argue, represents the ultimate fusion of politics and celebrity, as

he brings together the image-making power of Hollywood to the White House. His journey from the movies to the Presidency--and certainly some would question how far that move really was--is a fascinating one, and the two memoirs also cross another gap that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century: the self-written and the ghostwritten. I add *Dutch* to the list because of its challenge to generic convention: a factual biography as a formal autobiography. Somehow, Reagan seems the apt subject for mapping out--and challenging--the public and private, the political and celebrity spheres, with an eye to how Reagan embodies institutionalized political authority alongside cinematic cultural power.

With this project, I intend to make several important contributions to autobiography studies. First, and for me most importantly, I want to offer thorough, in-depth readings of a group of texts that have been ignored (in some cases, even in secondary sources that purport to be about these texts). Second, I intend to consider how the issues of genre and of the demarcation of public and private are played out in a group of texts in which such issues are especially significant. And, finally, I hope to trace the history of a small genre and place its development against larger social and political trends. This project should interest several groups: presidential scholars, who would appreciate attention being paid to this underserved area of scholarship; autobiography studies specialists, who may wish to offer presidential autobiographies deeper theoretical consideration and recovery; and American studies scholars, because of the natural interdisciplinary insights that result from examining two deeply entrenched institutions of American life: the autobiography and the presidency.

## Chapter One: Founding a Nation and a Genre

As stated in the introduction, the first extant use of the word “autobiography” occurred in 1797, some eight years after the American presidency began with the 1789 inauguration of George Washington at New York’s Federal Hall. The presidential autobiography’s beginning as a genre came quite soon after, when John Adams took up his pen in 1802. Adams would work intermittently on his autobiography until 1807, when he put aside the manuscript for good, unpublished until finally appearing in print long after its author’s death. A pastiche of personal recollections, reprinted correspondence, apologia, and unvarnished opinion, Adams’s memoir provides the lengthiest and most complete example of early presidential autobiography.

Adams’s successor and rival, Thomas Jefferson, also entered the autobiographical field, beginning a partial text in 1821, as the Missouri Compromise threatened to turn his greatest accomplishment as president—the Louisiana purchase—into a national nightmare. But tempers would (temporarily) cool, and Jefferson’s incomplete autobiography would be set aside by its busy author. Like Adams’s draft, Jefferson’s memoir would have to wait for an enterprising relative to publish it posthumously. But Jefferson’s work, though much shorter and less detailed, has managed to earn a place in the American canon that Adams’s autobiography never enjoyed. Undoubtedly among America’s foremost authors, Jefferson’s memoirs would never match the fame of his Declaration of Independence or even his most famous letters, but its inclusion in literature anthologies and classroom curricula make it one of the most familiar examples of its kind.

Among Thomas Jefferson’s protégés was his fellow memoirist James Monroe, the

fifth American president. Monroe's attempt at memoir, which he began in 1829, brought a new and familiar concern to the young genre: marketability. While Adams and Jefferson were satisfied to put aside their manuscripts for future publication, Monroe had a more urgent need for publication. The former president was destitute, and he hoped that the publication of his memoir would assist him in his never-ending series of claims against the federal government for expenses incurred during his long diplomatic career. Like Adams and Jefferson, Monroe never completed his memoir; unlike his predecessors, Monroe's failure was not a matter of choice: his 1831 death silenced his pen and consigned the text to obscurity for over a century.

These three men—Adams, Jefferson, and Monroe—represent the beginning of the American Presidency, specifically the generation that came of age during the colonial and revolutionary periods. Their desire to produce autobiography fit the times in which they lived. As the official history of America's founding was being developed, there was great demand among Americans immediately following the Revolution for exemplary lives to imitate. Noah Webster observed that “the general character of a nation” was made up of each citizen's character, making individual virtue a microcosm of national virtue (qtd. in Forgie 14). Therefore, the production of autobiography was tied to a nationalistic service—to provide examples—and also to the pursuit of fame—to claim a leading role in American history.

The desire of these three autobiographer presidents to write set them apart from their illustrious fellow Founders. Undoubtedly the man whose character and virtues Americans admired most was George Washington, but although a prolific letter writer, he did not produce an autobiography. After his death, Washington became a popular subject

for biography, his life at once melding the virtues of an individual with the virtues of a nation and used to perpetuate the Union he fathered. However, this agenda belonged to others, among them Parson Mason Weems and John Marshall, not to the man himself. Washington's fellow Virginia Founder James Madison also did not attempt the autobiographical act. Therefore, the student of presidential autobiography is left with the efforts of Adams, Jefferson, and Monroe, and the commonalities among the texts are an apt place to begin examining the genre.

Some of these commonalities demonstrate the humble beginnings of the presidential memoir. All three of these memoirs are incomplete; indeed, all three narratives end well before their subjects ascend to the Presidency: Adams's ends in 1780, Jefferson's in 1790, and Monroe's in 1797. Furthermore, they have never been regarded as the most important or influential American autobiographies of the period—certainly not on the order of Benjamin Franklin's. And, far from the fanfare that surrounds the release of presidential autobiographies today, none of the first three autobiographies were published within the author's lifetime. Jefferson's did not appear until 1829, when his grandson Thomas Jefferson Randolph published and edited *The Memoirs, Correspondence, and Private Papers of Thomas Jefferson* three years after the president's death (Peterson 1532). Adams's autobiography was also published as part of a larger ten-volume collection, *The Works of John Adams*, edited by his grandson Charles Francis and released between 1850 and 1856 (Information 4). James Monroe's manuscript languished in the archives of the New York Public Library until being published in 1959, over a century after his death (Brown, Preface v). Thus, these early presidential autobiographies were private affairs, undertaken quietly by their authors,

without the pressure of exorbitant advances and anxious publishing houses.

In addition to the shared low-key production and unpolished quality of the texts, the content of these early autobiographies were similar. Of course, all three ex-presidents would present their own perspectives on the most significant event of their lives, the American Revolution. The Declaration of Independence bore the signatures of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. And though James Monroe was not present in the debates that led to independence, unlike Jefferson and Adams, he would risk his corporeal being for the good of the same cause: he would serve in the Continental Army. All three men had begun their paths to fame during the Revolutionary period. Adams had risen to prominence as a defense counsel in the Boston Massacre trials, Jefferson had served in the Continental Congress and drafted the Declaration of Independence, and Monroe had served ably alongside General George Washington. All three men had lived through times when it was an open question whether America would become a free and sovereign nation, and then through the establishment of an American system of government which they would each take a turn leading.

The belief of these men that recording their lives could carry broad and lasting influence may have stemmed from their shared Revolutionary experience. The Revolution was a time when the written word carried enormous power. Some authors have referred to this period as an age of “logocracy,” positioning the young United States as a nation that perceived itself as having been formed as “an effect of linguistic action” (Looby 2). Robert Ferguson adds that “the pressure on language to convey understanding”—and provide a medium to hold together a new and conflicted nation—“may never have been greater than in this period of American history” (7). The

Declaration of Independence was the foremost example of this crucial role of language in nation-building, as pro-independence Congressmen argued that “the question was not whether, by a declaration of independence, we should make ourselves what we are not; but whether we should declare a fact which already exists” (Jefferson 15). This ambiguity led Jacques Derrida to remark, “One cannot decide . . . whether independence is stated or produced by this utterance” (9). In both Jefferson’s original draft of the Declaration and the final, Congress-approved draft, the final paragraph contains the following: “And for the support of this declaration . . . we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor” (Jefferson 24). And in becoming autobiographers, Adams, Jefferson, and Monroe would use the power of the written word to offer their lives and examples to their posterity and their fellow countrymen.

And so the final commonality of these texts is a common authorial motive. With their textual bodies and the narrative of their corporeal bodies, they sought to instruct and influence the body politic. Independence did not solve all of the challenges and controversies facing the new nation. And all three presidential autobiographers were motivated by fear of an uncertain future. John Adams feared that the United States would become a radicalized republic like France; Thomas Jefferson saw the sectional conflict over slavery emerging to threaten the cohesion of the states; and James Monroe feared that his nation would forget his services on its behalf. Having given their time, energies, and talents, and risked so much of their personal well-being, these ex-presidents could not remain silent. They had been witnesses of and participants in revolution, and they were deeply concerned that the legacy of their sacrifices not be compromised.

If writing a new nation into existence were possible, then why not also construct

the political virtue of that nation, the emerging American body politic, by writing their own characters and virtues out on the page through memoir? American-ness was still being defined, and these men had much to contribute to the process. Therefore, with their autobiographies—with their textual lives, with the lasting fortune of notoriety created by burgeoning American historiography, with their claims to honor founded within the historical record—these men would submit their lives in an effort to rehabilitate what they saw as a sick body politic and offer their narratives as the curative.

## II

John Adams was the first to take up the memoirist's pen, and his manuscript is the longest and fullest of the three earliest examples of presidential autobiography. What is now published under the title of *The Autobiography of John Adams* consists of three large sections of narrative, divided into titled chapters by Adams himself, and written intermittently: the first portion in 1802, the second begun in winter 1806 and extending into 1807, and the final portion completed the same year. Adams's text is also the most similar of the three to the modern autobiography, in that it contains detailed reminiscences on his childhood and early education, as well as information about his wife, Abigail, and their home life together. Jefferson and Monroe, in contrast, spend little space on these personal topics, instead moving quickly to their public careers. Therefore, Adams's text requires the lengthiest consideration.

First, I wish to describe the structure of the text. It is a *mélange* of narrative constructed from memory, rewritten diary entries and letters (some copied verbatim, others somewhat altered), and portions of the extensive published journals that documented congressional proceedings during Adams's career. Adams placed the

reliability of stated fact above the aesthetic pleasures of a smoothly written text. Some years later, after perusing—and panning—William Wirt’s biography of Patrick Henry, Adams declared that were he (Adams) younger he “would endeavor to become your [Wirt’s] rival—not in elegance of composition, but in a simple narration of facts, supported by records, histories, and testimonies of irrefragable authority” (qtd. in Casper 65). Adams’s autobiography loosely fits this model, and the transcription of correspondence was especially important to his task. During the Revolutionary period, the interception and publishing of private correspondence had become a key tool for “successful propaganda” (Fliegelman 44). The key to this propaganda was to reveal some conflict between an individual’s private correspondence—thought to be more “frank”—and his public statements, thereby embarrassing the target by making him subject to a charge of hypocrisy (44). By relying heavily on his private letters and journals for content, Adams could demonstrate that his “true” character fit his autobiographical claims, and his “natural” self was that constructed within his pages.

But, confusingly for the reader, the structure of the autobiography changes from beginning to end. In a sense, the autobiography is two texts sewn together. Earl Harbert called the first portion the only one that fits the generic expectations of autobiography (101); perhaps somewhat tellingly, that portion was titled “John Adams” by the author himself. It is the portion that contains the most reliance on memory, personal impressions and information, and opinion. The second and third portions--titled “Travels and Negotiation” and “Peace” respectively--could easily have been reconstructed from existing documents by most any author. As such, the first portion generates the most interesting reading, full of anecdotes and opinions. The opening portion--the first portion

Adams wrote—is remarkable for its didactic tone, suitable for a patriarch instructing his potentially wayward progeny. Indeed, Adams knew the pain that a child’s moral weakness could cause; his oldest son, a “bankrupt, faithless” “alcoholic,” had died in 1800, probably the result of liver failure after years of alcohol abuse (McCullough, *Adams* 529, 555). Adams, both a father and a Founding Father, feared that a similar end might befall his familial descendants and that a metaphorically similar fate might await his country.

After the first section, Adams ceases to rely on his memories and personal writings, instead using the recorded *Journals of Congress* (editors’ note 3: 338). This is a crucial moment in the text’s construction, as Adams will become increasingly more reliant on published journals for his content, directly transcribing long passages with very little original comment or addition. Indeed, the modern editors trace Adams’s apparent interest in his project by looking at the percentage of original material included; the more Adams relies on merely copying what already exists in other places, the less engaged and interested he seems. However, as he increasingly relies on public documentation, Adams also takes less authority over his telling of his life. When he titles the first portion “John Adams,” it can be read as an assertion as much as a title. James Grant describes Adams’s interest in copying as “a simple pleasure,” noting that while copying a passage from *Bollingbroke into Defense*, he wrote, “I cannot forbear the pleasure of transcribing it” (3: 332). Perhaps as an autobiographer, Adams was carried away in his enjoyment of transcription, leading to the original material—the language and rhetoric crafted to his own purposes—becoming an increasingly small percentage of the text. The result is that the later chapters are less revealing and personal.

Within the confines of the text, Adams hews to a standard chronological arrangement that many later presidential autobiographers would follow. The Massachusetts Historical Society, which owns the Adams Family Papers, arranges the content of the manuscript helpfully: Part One deals with Adams's life until 1776; Part Two extends through 1777-8; and Part Three contains 1779 and 1780 (Adams Electronic Archive). These three large segments fit into a neat professional chronology: the first deals predominantly with Adams's rise to Congress and career there; the second shifts to his diplomatic career, particularly in France; and the third begins with Adams's diplomacy in Spain. Yet although Adams had many years yet to live, he would not add any further material to the autobiography, which ends with its subject in Paris in 1780. Indeed, the nation had not even been born when Adams's narrative ends.

Why he chose to stop is an open mystery. The closest explanation one can ascertain from recent Adams biographers is an unsatisfying one: he simply lost interest. John Ferling describes the matter thusly: "He had planned to chronicle his activity through his presidential years, but when he again had time for the undertaking, the raging fire that had driven him to the enterprise in the first place had largely been extinguished" (422). David McCullough observes, "Never wholeheartedly devoted to the task of writing his autobiography, he now abandoned the project altogether" to pursue a letter-writing campaign in the *Boston Patriot* newspaper (*Adams* 596). James Grant notes simply that he had family and farming to attend to (431). Whatever his reasons, Adams chose not to resume writing his memoir during the nineteen years before his death in 1826.

And now let us consider the motives that drove Adams to write. While Adams's reasons for ceasing his autobiographical writings are mysterious, his reasons for

originally taking up his pen seem clear. First, he had unfinished business. Adams was unusual among the early presidents for his failure to win re-election. His loss to his vice president and rival Jefferson in 1800 was a traumatic blow, and the deeply felt rejection that accompanies the failure of an incumbent president to win a second term would have given Adams an exigence to write an apologia and defense of himself. After all, he would have a perceived wrong to vindicate and pain to alleviate. Indeed, only two years after his forced exit from the Federal City, he began his new career as memoirist.

But the path that led Adams to produce his autobiography was neither clear nor straightforward. Despite the opportunity autobiography would offer Adams to control and perhaps recast the narrative of his life, he would proceed only fitfully in his writing. David McCullough presents Adams as a reluctant autobiographer who remarked to his son John Quincy, “It is a delicate thing to write from memory. . . . To me, the undertaking would be too painful” (qtd. *Adams* 585). Apparently, however, Adams’s concerns only partially deterred him from autobiography; two years before his son’s suggestion, the elder Adams had indeed begun to write the first section of his memoir, only to abandon it after twelve paragraphs, and, shortly thereafter, he would take up the task again (Ferling 421). One might even say that Adams struggled with the text for some five years, at once indulging and then renouncing, and ultimately producing a model of his truncated political career: an unfinished work.

In addition to a final apologia, Adams’s autobiography could serve as a reclamation project that would benefit Adams’s reputation and that of his family name; his re-election loss not only marked the end of his political career but also was the death knell for his Federalist Party, which never again controlled the presidency. Aside from

personal and political vindication, a memoir would serve abstract verities like truth and liberty that packed such powerful rhetorical dynamite for the Revolutionary generation, serving the moral purpose of upholding religious values and promoting social good. In 1809, after Adams's career had ended and he had abandoned his manuscript, Benjamin Rush would recommend to Adams a course of action that would closely resemble the actual events. He "suggested" that Adams write "the history of your own times" and allow them to "be published by your sons after your death." The basis for such an important project, Rush claimed, would be at once personal and public, motivated by "[a] reverence for religious truth, liberty, family honor, and the interests of society" and a desire to correct past "wrong[s]" and respond to accusations of "crimes and follies" (qtd. Shutz and Adair 141). Little did Rush know that such a text was already partially written and that Adams's grandson would indeed work to ensure its publication after his famous grandfather's death.

For his part, Adams chose to keep the existence of the fragments of his autobiography a secret. In August of 1809, Adams admitted to Rush that he was at work on a defense of his 1800 peace treaty with France but declared that he had neither "the resolution or time" to produce the prodigious text necessary "to vindicate all the actions of my life" (qtd. Shutz and Adair 149). Adams did not mention his prior writing, but his response makes clear that the former president was aware that autobiography possessed the power of vindication, and therefore it is clear that he understood the ability of autobiography to change public opinion. Perhaps he viewed his partial drafts as lacking in the goal of reviving his political standing, or he believed that by 1809—when Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party was in the midst of an astounding twenty-eight year period

of controlling the White House—the task itself was impossible. Whatever the reason, Adams made no effort to disseminate his autobiography.

So why did Adams write a memoir with such clear public purposes without acting to publish it? Let me suggest two broad possibilities. First, Adams believed that the inauspicious end to his political career would also jeopardize a much larger and longer-standing claim: his central role in promoting American independence. The early histories of the American Revolution that emerged in the early nineteenth century gave Adams reason for concern. In his long life, Adams lived to read numerous of these early histories that would begin to “form the American past into a comprehensive whole that was more of a summation of its parts” (Shaffer 14). Although Arthur Shaffer credits these early histories with being politically even-handed, the presence of known political partisans like Mercy Otis Warren and John Marshall on the field of historiography created some anxiety in their opponents (14-15). Exasperated by the inherent biases in these early histories, Adams would eventually write to Thomas Jefferson, “Who shall write the history of the American Revolution? Who can write it? Who will ever be able to write it?” (qtd. Imbarrato 92). By 1809, only some thirty years after the Revolution, Adams already complained of “the extraordinary and unaccountable Inattention” that Americans were paying to the Revolutionary period, inattention that would make them susceptible to any rendering of the events no matter how unfair or slanted (qtd. in Young 21). Adams knew well that the crystallization of a popular narrative of the Revolution would eventually become predominant in the minds of American posterity. What he could not know—and thus felt anxious about—was how his own role would come to be represented.

Adams always felt vulnerable to the attacks of unkind critics. Much as he would come to be known--perhaps rightfully--as a paranoiac and conspiracy-monger as president, the aging Adams realized that, unlike other Founders, he would have no single achievement to keep his name high on the minds of Americans. Jefferson had ensured his everlasting fame by penning the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Franklin's scientific and diplomatic achievements had made him extraordinarily popular, and Washington was still first in the hearts of his countrymen--accepting General Cornwallis's sword at Yorktown left no doubt about that. Adams had no corresponding event that would guarantee his place in the American pantheon.

Aside from personal satisfaction, an autobiography would allow Adams to present a constructed self that would mirror the values he desired for the emerging American body politic. Even before his presidential years, Adams recognized the value of his life story, describing it as both a case of "Success almost without Example" and a series of "Adventures" that formed "a kind of Romance" (qtd. in Ferling 318). The rise of Jefferson's Democratic Republican party conflated both political and religious differences, with Federalist leaders both fearing and demagoguing Jefferson's supposed atheism. During the 1800 presidential campaign and the Jefferson-Aaron Burr deadlock that followed, clergymen argued that a Jefferson administration would force them to hide their Bibles (Chernow 633). Indeed, leading Federalist Alexander Hamilton had been one of the leading proponents of the view, though he himself had long been a lapsed Christian (659). The Federalist publishers and pamphleteers had exploited this opening; the *Gazette of the United States* presented the 1800 choice in stark terms: "Shall [each American] continue in allegiance to God--and a Religious President; Or impiously declare for

Jefferson--and No God!!!“ (qtd. Cunningham 225). While the Republicans recognized the potential weakness of their candidate and had used Jefferson’s authorship of the Declaration of Independence as evidence of his decency and patriotism, Federalists never trusted Jefferson and considered him not just politically but morally unacceptable (Cunningham 226). For many of them, Jefferson’s victory and the power he and his party gained once he took office were a foreboding sign that the nation that began with the Puritans might end with libertines.

What better time, then, for Adams to offer himself on the side of the Puritans. In constructing himself in his autobiography, Adams positions himself as an example of manly virtue based in New England Puritanism, a tradition which, facing its loss of influence, is pitted against the rising tide of the Enlightenment in a battle to define the American body politic. Adams’s autobiography picks up this trope, situating not only himself against Jefferson, but also the American versus the French Revolution, traditional religion and respect for the church against atheism and persecution of the church, and, of course, the Federalist reading of early eighteenth century politics versus a Jeffersonian one. Therefore, the text contains didactic asides and personal anecdotes designed to present not simply the story of a political life but an endorsement of a strong moral fiber that would define the American body politic. Indeed, just as Franklin’s autobiography used its subject’s life as an exemplar, Adams’s autobiography followed a similar pattern, and this important facet of the text helps to reveal Adams’s self-perception, values, personality and philosophy, as will be explored later. Therefore it is important to consider the text as a dual rhetorical act: a refutation of his political enemies as well as an argument for appropriate living.

Finally, aside from personal vindication and the suggestion of a body politic driven by New England Puritan morality, Adams used autobiography to recast his life and the Revolution as a drama with himself in a leading role. Adams well recognized the importance of public performance in achieving public fame. Jeffrey Richards singles out Adams among the founders for his reliance on theatrical terms and tropes in describing his public life. For his part, Adams credited his fellow founders, calling Washington “the best actor of the presidency we have ever had” whose resignation of his commission and later Farewell Address “were all in a strain of Shakespearean and Garrickal excellence in dramatical [sic] exhibitions” (qtd. Shutz and Adair 181). And his jealousy of Jefferson is apparent when he calls the Declaration “a theatrical show. Jefferson ran away with all the stage effect of that . . . and all the glory of it” (qtd. 182). As Larzer Ziff observes, Adams recognized the importance of dramatic setting in historical narrative--referred to by the phrase “the scenery of the business”--and knew that “nothing in [his] career had been so surrounded by the scenery of the business” as Jefferson’s drafting of the Declaration (109). Even the leading candidates--his successful defense of the British soldiers in the Boston Massacre trial or his handing over power peacefully to Jefferson in the nation’s first change of the party in power--were unlikely to excite the sort of adulation Adams craved.

After a long career in public life, Adams still feared that his contributions could be forgotten because they lacked the singular moment, rife with dramatic tension and stagecraft, that would stick in the public mind. His compatriots whom he felt also suffered by this standard—Samuel Adams and John Hancock—had within a generation been consigned to “oblivion” in Adams’s mind (qtd. in Young 21). Adams feared that he

would join them, becoming (or, worse, be excluded as) a minor character in popular histories bearing little resemblance to the Founder and patriot who had enjoyed a long and vibrant career. Obviously, one way to counteract such an outcome was to create his own history, where he could be at once the author of the drama and the prime actor in it. In this respect, Adams wished to follow the example of Voltaire, whom he encountered at a Paris theater watching one of his own plays performed: “The Audience between the several Acts, called Out, Voltaire! Voltaire! Voltaire! And clapped and applauded him during all the intervals,” in response to which he “arose and bowed respectfully” (*Autobiography* 4: 77-78). The crowd had come to see and applaud the author as much as to see and applaud his work. What Adams wanted now was his own chance to bask in public applause out of respect and admiration for his own creation, the United States of America.

The text provides ample evidence of Adams’s concerns about using autobiography to seek personal vindication. Indeed, one major flaw in the *Autobiography* is a defensive tone that, while perhaps understandable given the text’s role as a response to the attacks Adams had endured, certainly does not lend itself to the concept of an individual authoritatively recounting his life. Consider the first statement of the manuscript:

As the Lives of Phylosophers [sic], Statesmen, or Historians written by them selves have generally been suspected of Vanity, and therefore few People have been able to read them without disgust; there is no reason to expect that any Sketches I may leave of my own

Times would be received by the Public with any favor, or read by individuals with much interest. (3: 253)

On the surface, Adams seems to claim that he is writing his memoirs despite no one having any interest in reading them—clearly a spurious claim. After all, despite this initial protest, Adams does not follow to the logical conclusion and immediately cease writing. His true concern, and a legitimate one considering how his political enemies had painted him, lies in the word “vanity.”

Theoretically, this charge could be made against any autobiographer but particularly against Adams, who, like Franklin, had the reputation for taking himself very seriously. As vice president he had presided over the Senate wearing a powdered wig and called for expansive titles to be given to the president, leading opponents to nickname him “The Duke of Braintree” and “His Rotundity (Ferling 304); and Adams himself recognized this flaw in a 1756 diary entry that expressed concern about excessive boldness that “will no doubt be called Self Conceit” (qtd. in Harbert 98). The American Revolution had served as a blow leveled by the united common people against aristocracy, but Federalists like Adams, with their vision of a strong centralized government, were always vulnerable to the charge of being closet aristocrats. By the nineteenth century, he was left wondering how to explain his actions to a public prepared by the Jeffersonian press to interpret them as acts of egotism (McCullough, *Adams* 589). Charges of vanity had haunted Adams’s lengthy public life and damaged his character; the autobiographical act of asserting that his life warranted telling by his own hand could be construed as just another act in the pattern.

Adams’s deep concern about this matter seems evident from the second portion of

the opening, in which he ascribes “disgust” to the readers of memoir. Certainly this is an overstatement--surely Caesar, Augustine, and Rousseau were not met with universal disgust. It raises the question of why Adams would produce something that, in his own words, would be disgusting. This obvious contradiction is expounded in the second clause in which, having attacked his own genre, he next questions his fitness to record his life. Adams had previously written similarly dismissive conclusions about his career. Earlier in his career he had written, “I am but an ordinary man . . . The times alone have destined me to fame” (McCullough, *Adams* 399). He later asserted to Benjamin Rush during his memoir-writing period, “I could never bring myself seriously to consider that I was a great man, or of much importance or consideration in the world” (qtd. McCullough, *Adams* 590). Taking all of these assertions at face value gives a picture of Adams as a humble, self-deprecating--almost unbecomingly so--man.

And herein lies the contradiction that exposes Adams’s rhetorical ruse. In attempting to vindicate himself against charges of vanity, he presents himself as unbelievably humble. There simply are too many recorded instances--some of them listed earlier--to believe that this portrait of the author is accurate. Even if there weren’t, the contradiction inherent in the opening lines--that Adams is undertaking an act of vanity despite having lived a life of no popular interest that nevertheless should be recorded for a posterity that will be disgusted by it--would be sufficient to arouse the reader’s suspicion. Rather than embrace his vanity and seek to present it in an appealing way--a Franklinesque approach--Adams insists on committing, for the autobiographer, a mortal sin: he has given his reader reason to distrust his narration even before reaching the second sentence.

The next portion of Adams's opening statement directly addresses his need for vindication. His justification for recording his life is, he claims, to correct the "Misrepresentation" that he has been subject to, a gift to his "posterity" as a response to a "Mass of odious Abuse of my Character, with which News Papers, private Letters and Public Pamphlets and Histories have been disgraced for thirty Years" (3: 253). Adams is motivated not by vanity but by anger and hurt, of which the allegation of vanity makes up a part. An examination of Adams's statement also reveals the extraordinary difficulty of his task: to single-handedly respond to thirty years of voluminous calumny. Given the long odds, autobiography alone offers Adams the authority to rewrite history and construct an apologia that can stand in contrast to other documentation.

One example of Adams's rewriting of himself involves his emphasis on personal sacrifice. Despite his stated concerns about vanity, Adams is unafraid to present himself as America's own suffering servant. Recounting his early law career, Adams asserts, "I believe no Lawyer in America ever did so much Business . . . in the seventeen Years [of his practice] . . . for so little profit" (3: 272). His election to the state legislature yielded this response: "I considered the step as a devotion of my family to ruin and myself to death . . . and had devoted myself to endless labour and anxiety if not to infamy and death, and that for nothing, except, what indeed was and ought to be all in all, a sense of duty" (3: 294). His appointment as a diplomat to France brought about similar angst. Not only would he be subject to bad weather and possible capture by the British during his voyage, but his family--"a dearly beloved Wife and four young Children"--needed him (4: 4). Nevertheless, because his "Country was in deep distress and in great danger . . . I resolved to devote my family and my Life to the Cause" and accepted the position (4: 4-

5). Thus one finds the pattern of Adams's career: rather than driven by ego and self-importance, his motivations are instead self-sacrificing, dutiful, and obliging.

But even Adams's effort here can be questioned. One may read his actions as ambitious, and by clearly stating the sacrifices he has made--monetary, physical, emotional--Adams certainly risks his old concern, vanity. For example, he claims to have received only eighteen Guineas for his defense of the Boston Massacre soldiers, "all the pecuniary Reward I ever had for fourteen or fifteen days labour, in the most exhausting and fatiguing Causes I ever tried" (3: 293). He later called it "one of the most gallant, generous, manly, and disinterested actions of my whole life" (qtd. McCullough, *Adams* 68). He thus suggests that his actions as a defense attorney demonstrate his devotion to principle above all, and standing up for the hated Redcoats should not be used to tar him as a monarchist or at least excessively Anglophilic.

But do his claims truly stand up to scrutiny? Despite Adams's insistence that the case did permanent damage to his popular reputation, McCullough notes that "John Adams's part in the [Boston Massacre] drama did increase his public standing, making him in the long run more respected than ever" (*Adams* 68). It may have been no coincidence that Adams received the immediate dividend of his initial election to the state legislature that same year; John Ferling suggests that "Adams must have been enticed" to serve as a defense attorney "by a promise of immediate gain. In all likelihood, he was encouraged to take the case in exchange for political office" (67-68). Furthermore, the editor's note below Adams's "eighteen Guineas" claim notes that "[t]his statement cannot be readily squared with the entries for legal costs in a bill of costs" dated 1770, which indicates that Adams and the soldiers' two other attorneys split a much

larger sum (3: 293n). This contradiction serves to challenge Adams's presentation of himself; it suggests that Adams the author is creating--even inventing, to an extent--a character Adams who represents an idealized exemplar.

Therefore, Adams's objective of personal vindication must be accompanied by an effort to weaken the reliability of other forms of documentation. Indeed, Adams challenges the ability of history to be recorded accurately, even while he relies heavily on official journals to construct his narrative. In one example, Adams describes the debate in the Continental Congress over a port measure. Throughout this entire section, Adams simply transcribes almost verbatim the text of the official congressional journals, which were kept by the secretary, Charles Thomson. At the same time, Adams accuses the "Party against me" (namely, those who opposed declaring independence) of using "Art and Influence" to "evade, retard, and delay every Motion that [Adams and his supporters] made" (3: 364-5). Yet none of this portion of the debate is found in the official journals, leaving only Adams's accusations to assert that these unsuccessful motions ever existed at all.

Adams thus resorts to attacking Thomson, accusing him of omitting mention of all of Adams's unsuccessful motions--an "Arrangement . . . convenient for the Party in Opposition" to avoid having disagreeable arguments on the record (3: 365). Adams, as is implied in the passage, saw Thomson as a political conspirator, an opponent of declaring independence who willingly suppressed information and thereby warped the official narrative. Later, during discussion of a trade bill, Adams notes another "extraordinary Liberty" taken by Thomson "to suppress . . . the many Motions" that were "disagreeable" to his party (3: 375). Adams blames his political opponents for "instigation" of

suppression (3: 375) and “manifest artifice” (3: 377); he suggests that independence opponent John Dickinson swayed his cousin Thomson to elide important material with the approval of Congressional President John Hancock (392); and he suggests that only the publication of the “secret Journals” will complete the record—which they were, in 1820 (3: 432). His heated critiques suggest a conspiracy of jealous opponents who have rigged the historical record to their own advantage. Ultimately, he even claims that the enmity of Dickinson and Thomson, which he had earned in the Continental Congress, was “one of the most considerable Causes of Mr. Jefferson’s success in 1801”—Adams’s only direct allusion to his electoral defeat (3: 316). By claiming that historical misrepresentation can have long lasting and direct political consequences, Adams justifies his need to offer a corrective. The form of his corrective is, of course, the autobiography, where his unsuccessful motions can be entered into the historical record without the consent of Thomson or anyone else.

But any corrective project focused on redeeming Adams’s public character would face a mountain of evidence on the other side and, at the time Adams is writing, an entrenched Anti-Federalist power structure that would only get stronger. This may help explain Adams’s stated conception of his audience: “It is not for the Public but for my Children that I commit these Memoirs to writing” (3: 253). After all, Adams certainly will find a readership more inclined to accept his explanations rather than the claims of his enemies among family than among the general public. He continues to state that he writes to discourage his progeny from public life and encourage them to personal morality (3: 253-4). Again, Adams seems to face a contradiction that requires reinvention. On the one hand, he presents himself as an exemplar of the “Moral

Sentiments and Sacred Principles” that “at all hazards and by every Sacrifice I have endeavored to preserve through Life” (3: 253-4). At the same time, he suggests that the (in his mind) unfair and damaging criticism he faced in his public career is an example that would lead his children not to choose to follow in his footsteps. He suggests that his private life is one to be emulated while his public career is one that should be avoided. But how would this be possible?

One explanation is that the autobiography itself is intended to correct the flaws of his public career by making his public and private virtues compatible. Indeed, the construction of the text somewhat undercuts Adams’s claim to a narrow, familiar audience. First, the text was subject to extensive revision, including two previously abandoned “false starts” (Adams, *Autobiography* 3: 253 n.1). Throughout each part, Adams has altered wording and left copious and intrusive blank spaces, apparently to leave open the possibility for future additions. Such a level of concern about revision seems more compatible with the idea of publication than a family heirloom.

Second, the nature of the revision merits notice. The editor’s note mentions that the original “false start” begins with “the early history of the Adams family in America” (3: 253 n.1)--a family genealogy of sorts. The final version contains some material on this subject but only after the lengthy paragraph of “justification” at the beginning. The portion dealing with family history begins: “The Customs of Biography require that something should be said of my origin” (3: 254). The statement itself implies that Adams has no real interest in describing his family’s origin, that it is only included as a generic necessity. This would be compatible with the idea that Adams’s primary purpose in the text is not to record his life for his children and grandchildren; a genealogy takes up

valuable space that could be spent on other tasks, like answering his political critics. The topic of the Adams family history--which would likely have been of interest primarily, perhaps exclusively, to his family--seems less important to the author than responding to his critics, a topic that would have not only familial but broad public interest as well.

Despite any protests to the contrary, Adams must have known, as per Benjamin Rush's suggestion, that any attempted memoir would inevitably be published by his family. And in this Adams was proven correct by his grandson Charles Francis, with editorial consequences that will bear further consideration. The younger Adams would collect the autobiography along with other of his grandfather's writings into a collected works that would mirror the public/private division that Adams the elder alludes to. On the one hand, John Adams's writings were of enormous historical importance, as they would serve posterity as an insider's history of the American Revolution. But, on the other, they were the personal writings of the family patriarch, and their content would reflect not only on John Adams but his entire family. Thus the publication of Adams's works would be accompanied by a level of editorial license befitting a wide audience.

It seems fair to conclude that John Adams intended his autobiography to serve as a corrective to unfair representations of his character and career in Revolution historiography and that he recognized that his work would reach and possibly influence a broad audience. So the next matter to consider is what sort of self Adams creates in the pages of his memoirs to carry out these objectives. Adams's created self bears qualities that indicate a conflation of the corporeal body and the body politic, a theme which will recur throughout presidential memoirs. In the beginning, the text consists of relatively simple prose, a list of memories recorded by an older man looking back on his past.

However, a deeper reading reveals that Adams's narrative carries a message for the nation that he helped found.

The earliest presidential memoirs spend little time on childhood years, and Adams is no exception. He explicitly claims, "I shall not consume much paper in relating the Anecdotes of my Youth," a promise he keeps (3: 257). Far from the mythologized figure that many Founding Fathers became, Adams presents himself as a typical boy, enamored with sailing model boats, flying kites, "Wrestling, Swimming, Skating, and above all in shooting" with only scant attention to his studies (3: 257). Hardy, adventurous, and vigorous, the youthful Adams resembles the young, expanding United States more than the scholarly adult Adams eventually becomes.

He is also a young man not immune to the temptations of youth. In a revealing segment, Adams recalls his "amorous disposition" and being "very fond of the Society of females" (3: 260). Adams is remarkably earnest about this subject when compared to other presidential memoirists. Though he modestly refuses to "give any enumeration of my youthfull [sic] flames" lest they "be considered as no compliment to the dead or the living," Adams assures his readers that nothing untoward has come of his passions (3: 260). He asserts strongly that "[m]y children may be assured that no illegitimate Brother or Sister exists or ever existed" (3: 261). One could read this as a veiled criticism of some of his contemporaries (Franklin? Hamilton? Jefferson?), but even on its face it is remarkable that Adams would choose to include this assertion in print.

So why is it there? Adams explains his ability to temper the natural carnal urges of youth with a strong and careful moral upbringing: "My Parents held every Species of Libertinage in such Contempt and horror . . . that my natural temperament was always

overawed by my Principles and Sense of decorum” (3: 261). Thus Adams presents himself as an example of how even a young man with the natural temptations that accompany youthful vigor can avoid falling into “libertinage”: by having a staunch moral compass instilled by his parents. This passage therefore introduces one of the strongest components of Adams’s created self: a traditional Puritan morality. A product of Puritan New England (and therefore, unlike members of the Virginia dynasty that supplanted him, not subject to the lustful temptations of the slaveholder), Adams suggests as a Founding Father to a young nation the same course to avoid future difficulties that his own father offered him as a young man.

The significance of a strongly moral father figure is borne out in Adams’s recollection of his father, Parson John. Like other idealized presidential fathers that will follow, Parson John is described as “the honestest [sic] Man I ever knew” with qualities of “Wisdom, Piety, Benevolence, and Charity” without “Superior” (3: 256). He was “beloved, esteemed and revered by all who knew him” and especially in “the exalted Opinion” of his son (3: 276). One memorable scene seems almost Weems-esque: upon declaring that he should not have to get an education because he only wants to be a farmer, John is set to a full day of onerous farm chores by his father. At the end, when asked how he enjoyed being a farmer, Adams replied, “I like it very well Sir.” His father then ends the argument thusly: “I don’t like it so well, so you shall go to School” (3: 258). This journey will lead Adams to the courtroom, to Independence Hall, and the White House. By contrast, the Jefferson and Monroe memoirs lack these types of references to parental affection; even Martin Van Buren’s memoirs observed that his father was a financial failure (Appleby 172). Adams’s open warmth toward his father is

unusual by comparison, and I believe that it lends itself to a political reading.

The drive for American independence made the father a locus of tension in many other period narratives. In her study of a wide variety of autobiographical texts produced by the first generation after the Revolution, Joyce Appleby observes that “[w]hile some fathers were remembered with affection, no more vivid personality emerges from the pages of [first generation] autobiographies than that of the unsympathetic patriarch trying to block the exit of his son” (170). Appleby suggests that this may have been a case of “the private move mirroring the public drama,” in which the sons of the Revolutionary generation breaks away from their parents to re-enact the War for American Independence as a personal and social act (173). Thus the rejection of patriarchy and the use of fathers as controlling impediments to freedom come to be closely associated with the rejection of a paternalistic British government.

And yet Adams, with his impeccable pro-independence credentials, presents the opposite viewpoint. The contradiction is significant in two ways. First, it establishes that the father is not one to be feared as an arbitrary autodidact, which allows Adams to be didactic without becoming overbearing. In his memoir, Adams wishes to assume the role of Founding Father without arousing the suspicion of his readers. Deacon John provides a corrective to King George III: a powerful yet benign father figure in contrast who treats his readers as beloved children rather than as ruled subjects. Indeed, like Hamilton and other Federalists, Adams supported both a centralized American government and close economic and diplomatic ties with Britain. Adams’s Federalist philosophy therefore fits nicely with his respect for patriarchy. The clarity and passion of his description of his parents, even while writing many years after their deaths, indicates that Adams’s

sympathy to a strong patriarchal government stems from the helpful example of his father. Throughout his political career, Adams would be viewed as too attached to the mother country just as he is still, even as an accomplished adult, so clearly devoted to his own parents. In contrast, the anti-Federalist/Republicans—Jefferson, Monroe, and eventually Van Buren—practically ignore their parents in their memoirs.

Aside from mirroring a Federalist idealization of the father-child relationship, the passage serves to emphasize the connection between Adams's body and the American body politic. As mentioned earlier, the Jeffersonian Republicans were largely inspired by French philosophy and sought to move the American body politic in a Francophilic direction. But when Adams recounts his service as a diplomat to France, he connects the influence of moral and religious values with the pursuit of good government. He transcribes this passage from his period diary into the memoir: "Oh, Mores! said I to myself. What Absurdities, Inconsistencies, Distractions, and Horrors would these Manners introduce into our Republican Governments in America: No kind of Republican Government can ever exist with such national manners as these" (4: 59). In Adams's mind, there exists a powerful conflation of personal morality and the security of republican government. Personal morals, grounded in the traditional Puritan values instilled by Deacon John, therefore become a vital inheritance for Adams to pass along to his young nation's body politic.

And the morality of women lies at the center of his thinking in a later passage as he claims that "the Manners of Women were the most infallible Barometer, to ascertain the degree of Morality and Virtue in a Nation" and that women's behavior is "the surest Criterion by which to determine whether a Republican Government is practicable" (4:

123). He further observes: “The foundations of national Morality must be laid in private Families. In vain are Schools, Academies and universities instituted, if loose Principles and licentious habits are impressed upon Children in their earliest years. The Mothers are the earliest and most important Instructors of youth” (4: 123). Adams’s observations on women--from his own dealings with them in the opening passage of the autobiography--take on a new context: they are linked inextricably in Adams’s mind to the health of the body politic.

Adams’s recognition of the lure of women in his vigorous youth therefore has a double meaning: giving in to lustful passion is dangerous for both the young man and the young body politic. The figure of the loose, immoral temptress fits Adams’s conception of the French nation and those (Jeffersonian Republicans) who would champion its example. As such, Adams spends considerable energy recounting in a disapproving manner the behavior of women in France and the sexual mores of the French. One such example is an “elegant” lady at a dinner party asking Adams, since he shared the name of the first man, if he could explain how Adam and Eve discovered sex (4: 36). After stumbling through a decidedly unwitty response, Adams recommends that the United States “take great care not to import” such elegant ladies into America (4: 37). If these women are symbolic of their nation, then France is a depraved temptress, seeking to degrade any foolish soul who chooses to consort with her. No doubt Adams feared that Jeffersonian values infused into the American body politic would place the new nation in jeopardy of falling under France’s spell with the moral consequences that follow.

The dinner party incident is just one example of a substantial accumulation of anti-French opinion throughout the autobiography. In contrast to the Puritan ethic of self-

discipline that defines Adams's self-creation, the French laugh at their faults, perhaps "a proof of the last degree of depravity" (4: 81). He also finds that in France extramarital affairs are "universally understood and Nobody lost any reputation" from them (4: 47). Adams's Francophobia expresses a long-held belief; indeed, the so-called "quasi-war" with France occurred during the Adams administration. But it also serve to define the antithesis of Adams's idealized body politic: rather than virtuous and aimed at self-improvement, the French people are morally lax and therefore not to be trusted with the responsibility of self-government.

Ironically, the former revolutionary saves his kindest words for the French monarchy. Like many Americans, Adams admired King Louis XVI, who had formed an alliance with the fledgling United States that "would have reflected Glory upon [France] in all future Ages, if she had known how to improve it" (4: 93). Adams's first impression comes from first meeting Louis during Adams's initial diplomatic appointment: "I was deeply impressed with a Character of Mildness, Goodness and Innocence in his face. It seemed to me impossible that an ill design could be harbored in that breast" (4: 92). The Queen, Marie Antoinette, is also singled out for praise during an incident in which a procession of prostitutes passes through Paris during a feast week. The parade had become a tradition, increasing in decadence each year until "one of the most infamous Prostitutes in Paris . . . appeared in the most costly and splendid Equipage . . . [with] more numerous Servants and richer Liveries than any of the Nobility or Princes" (4: 63). Adams, consistent with his other commentary, dismisses the incident as "an Insult to all modest Women and indeed to the national morality and Religion" and approves of the Queen's immediate order that the prostitute be jailed should she appear in public again

(4: 63). Adams sees in Louis and Marie figures who exemplify the moral character he had learned from his New England upbringing.

In these passages, the contradiction between Adams's status as revolutionary and admirer of monarchy is most striking. Adams approves of the royal response to the popular depravity, concluding that French mores "would not accord with out American Republican Institutions . . . [I]t had never yet entered my thoughts, that any rational Being would ever think of demolishing the Monarchy and creating a Republick in France" (4: 63). Of course, Adams's generation did just this in America. For Adams, the morality of the body politic determines the acceptable limits of self-government. Should the American body politic take on the mores of the French, the implication is that a powerful, oppressive monarchy would be necessary. Throughout his political career, Adams was regarded as a crypto-monarchist; his *Thoughts on Government* suggested that a hereditary monarchy could be compatible with republicanism (McCullough, *Adams* 375). His Vice-Presidency was dogged with the charge, leading opponents to dub him with such pseudo-aristocratic titles as "His Rotundity" (407-8). The Adams of the autobiography contains and displays this very contradiction, using morality as the fulcrum to decide between republicanism and monarchy. Surely Adams did not want to see the young country slide toward monarchy, but neither did he wish to see the degeneration of the body politic that might require such a change.

A major part of what defined the French Revolutionary body politic in Adams's Mind was deism. During the 1750's a young Adams debated his Deistic neighbors and acquaintances. Recalling these events, he remarks, "[Ephraim Doolittle] and [Nathan Baldwin] were great sticklers for Equality as well as Deism: and all the Nonsense of

these last twenty years, were as familiar to them as to [Marquis de] Condorcet or [Jacques Pierre] Brissot” (3: 265). The “Nonsense” is clearly the French Revolution, which occurred within the two decades prior to Adams’s writing in 1804. Condorcet and Brissot are anachronistic to his memory; he is describing events that occurred well before they attained their revolutionary fame. But Adams’s choice to interject them demonstrates his strong urge to present himself as an opponent of French philosophy.

And, as mentioned earlier, Adams had reason to fear that the rising tide of Jeffersonian republicanism, with its closeness to French philosophy, would infect the American body politic. Hence his controversial notion that a nation governed by a king of “Character” and a queen who will actively respond to “Insults” to morality and religion is better off perhaps than a republican nation that is at the mercy of the weak character of its people. Adams indeed seems to tread dangerously close to monarchism, but one must recall that Adams had long since dismissed the moral right of the English crown to govern America. Indeed, his deep concern about American character did not exist at the time of his appointment to France; only later did he see French immorality as a potential threat to “American Republican Institutions.” And Adams would seek to counter this threat when faced with the rising tide of Jeffersonian Democracy that turned him out of the White House.

Adams’s choice for the antithesis of his idealized body politic is, interestingly, not his old rival Jefferson but another Francophile revolutionary, Thomas Paine. Paine takes a rhetorical beating in the memoir; Adams calls him a “Disastrous Meteor” that landed on Philadelphia (3: 330). Adams had secured Paine a clerkship out of appreciation of his support for independence, and once believed him to be “a ready Writer and an

Industrious Man” (3: 334). Instead, in direct contrast to the Puritan work ethic that Adams learned in Massachusetts, Paine proved “very intemperate” and incapable of writing without alcoholic consumption; indeed, after receiving the job, Paine was removed for “obnoxious” behavior (3: 334). Adams concludes, “At this day it would be ridiculous to ask any questions about Tom Paine’s Veracity, Integrity, or any other Virtue” (3: 335). Paine also “surprised [sic]” Adams during a private meeting by “express[ing] a Contempt of the Old Testament and indeed of the Bible at large” (3: 333). Paine is symbolic of personal libertinism and deist rejection of traditional Christianity, as well as the undesirable political positions that come along with them.

In addition to attacking the body of Paine himself for indolence and impiety, Adams also assaults Paine’s body of work, criticizing the pamphlet *Common Sense*. Adams denigrates the originality of *Common Sense*, declaring that it contained arguments “which had been urged in Congress an hundred times” and regurgitated material sent to Paine by Benjamin Rush (3: 330). Adams appropriately lauds Paine’s support for independence--a position that Adams shared--but criticizes Paine’s ideas of government as a “foolish plan” that, considering the pamphlet’s popularity, could lead to public support for imprudent measures (3: 331). Adams not only asserts that Paine was an uncreative thinker with poor ideas but that *Common Sense*, while believed by “general opinion” to have been “of great Importance in the Revolution,” was actually ineffectual: “I doubted [the pamphlet’s importance] at the time and have doubted it to this day” (3: 333-4). The extent to which this vitriol is connected to Adams’s personal dislike of Paine is unclear. But the focus on Paine’s text is interesting.

Part of Adams’s dislike for Paine appears to stem from envy. During the

Stamp Act crisis, Adams produced a set of Instructions calling upon Braintree residents to lobby their elected Representatives. Although he admits that “I have not seen them now for almost Forty years and remember very little of them,” Adams nevertheless remembers that “their Effect was astonishing to me and excited some serious Reflection” (3: 282). Adams’s instructions were published and drew considerable attention at the time, yet, as Adams himself admits, they made little lasting impact. The contrast that Adams draws is with “the worthless and unprincipled Writings of the profligate and impious Thomas Paine and in the French Revolution” (3: 282-3). Therefore, Paine’s body of work is subject to the same moral standards that Adams applies to both the corporeal body and the body politic. Though lasting and influential, Paine’s writings are dismissed as “worthless and unprincipled” because of the flaws in Paine’s own character. To Adams, Paine’s wildly popular writings used the power of the pen to attempt to recast America in the French political and philosophical tradition: rationalist, anti-religious, Enlightenment-driven and, in Adams’s view, unsustainable. Thus Paine could offer an alternative to Adams’s vision of the American body politic.

Adams therefore seeks to undercut Paine’s ability to emerge as a competitor for the definition of Americanism by puffing up his own entry into the so-called pamphlet wars. Pamphlets—some, like *Common Sense*, published anonymously—were a common way to conduct political warfare in the public eye during the eighteenth century. The popularity of *Common Sense* led to Adams producing “a small pamphlet” of his own (3: 331). It was titled *Thoughts on Government*, and though it was never as celebrated as *Common Sense*, Adams implies that it may have been more influential in the formation of state governments than Paine’s pamphlet: states that received copies of his plan (Virginia,

North Carolina, New Jersey) formed stable governments, while states that followed Paine's model (Georgia, Vermont, Pennsylvania) soon found it unworkable and remade their governments to be "more conformable with my plan" (3: 333). Adams presents Paine as deeply concerned by *Thoughts*, enough so that Paine visits Adams, which in turn leads to both a political and a religious argument—an example of Adams doing rhetorical battle with the impious (3: 333). The suggestion is that *Thoughts* had more impact on shaping the new nation than *Common Sense*. The problem, in Adams's mind, is that comparatively few people have come to believe that Adams's pamphlet was responsible for independence, an error that he seeks to correct.

Though *Thoughts* was indeed a strongly influential pamphlet, the public perception that *Common Sense* was more influential irritates Adams enough that in his memoir he takes the time to undercut it, its author, and the entire Francophile philosophy that produced it. In 1775, a set of Adams's letters would be intercepted by a British Man of War and published, spreading Adams's opinions in favor of independence. Adams considered the event "a fortunate Circumstance" because of his belief "that in a little time the whole Continent would be of my Mind" (3: 319). Then, Adams concludes triumphantly, "from this time at least if not earlier, and not from the publication of 'Common Sense' [the next year] did the People in all parts of the Continent turn their attention to [independence]" (3: 319). Adams thus articulates a history in which his own body of work—his 1775 letters and *Thoughts*—preceded and even exceeded that of Thomas Paine, accomplishing more for the cause of advocating American independence than even the Francophile radical. In memoir, unlike in life, Adams can write historical memory the way he felt it should have been--and give himself credit where both due and

lacking.

While Adams saves his most choice remarks for Paine, he also finds impiety in other figures, which he promptly denounces. John Ferling expresses dismay that in the autobiography, Adams only wrote of Jefferson that “he was a poor public speaker and debater and that he once had heard him deliver a speech that was ‘a gross insult on religion’” (422). While Adams never attacks Jefferson in the frank language he reserves for Paine, nevertheless the accusation of impiety against Jefferson carries resonance. Ferling omits the fact that Adams is no passive listener when Jefferson utters the alleged “insult.” The full account in Adams’s words reads thusly: “[Adams] never heard [Jefferson] utter three Sentences together. The most of a Speech he ever made in my hearing was a gross insult on Religion, for which I gave him immediately the Reprehension, which he richly merited” (*Autobiography* 3: 335). The immediate and deserved “Reprehension” delivered by Adams is every bit as important as Jefferson’s original insult, because it underscores Adams’s positioning himself not merely as the holder of traditional morals but as their zealous defender.

Adams records other examples of his defense of traditional morality against impious individuals; Jefferson’s fellow Virginian Benjamin Harrison is compared to Falstaff, described as “a great embarrassment”, and accused of carrying on “Conversation . . . Obscene, profane, impious, perpetually ridiculing the Bible, calling it the Worst Book in the World” (3: 367, 371). Even Bolingbroke receives a rap for his religious beliefs, which Adams calls “a pompous folly”, “superficial”, and “impious” (3: 264). And those are just the famous examples; early in Adams’s life, he records, he had seen outbreaks of Deism in his community and had argued spiritedly with its proponents, most notably his

law tutor James Putnam (3: 264-5). Thus, the mention of Jefferson fits into a pattern of Adams expressing concern over impiety in others and not holding his tongue in response. But, with Jefferson, there is one key difference: neither Harrison nor Paine nor Putnam ever became president, standing atop the ascendant majority party in America.

These accumulated incidents are symbolic of the broad political conflict over the future of the American body politic during the early nineteenth century: Adams, positioning himself as the defender of tradition and religious orthodoxy, spars with skeptics and deists, including Jefferson, who became the most powerful man in America. The 1800 election had become, in the eyes of many partisans, a referendum on America's direction. The Jeffersonians saw themselves defending the spirit of individual freedom against an overreaching government; they saw the Federalists as Anglophiles obsessed with re-establishing a British-style monarchical system. The Federalists saw in the Francophile Republicans the "anarchy" of the French Revolution and saw victory as the only way to guarantee social order (Sharp 227). Most importantly for the task at hand, the Jeffersonians saw themselves as protecting the inheritance of the American Revolution while Federalists saw them as attempting to advance the causes of the French Revolution, and it is this backdrop against which Adams writes. Adams's loss was not merely personally devastating but was perceived by him and his partisans as potentially ruinous for the nation. Autobiography allowed him to construct a self that mirrored his ideal body politic, based in Puritan tradition and biblical morality.

Alongside his goals of vindication and self-creation, Adams also had a strong awareness of the value of dramatic presence. Therefore, in crafting his autobiographical self, he sought to place himself at center stage as much as possible. Consider his

discussion of his rival Jefferson's greatest public performance: the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. For much of Adams's record of his involvement in the conferences that led to independence, he relies on transcribing the accounts of other sources (despite his derision of the secretary Charles Thomson). But Adams's final statements on July 1776 make two audacious claims. First, he states that, after the drafting committee met to set the parameters of a possible declaration of independence, "Mr. Jefferson desired me to take them to my Lodgings and make the Draught" (3: 338). Second, Adams reveals that he declined the offer and "insisted" that Jefferson should be the author of the draft (3: 338). Adams's writing--or rewriting--of history is at its most breathtaking here: he is asserting that he was offered and declined the opportunity to produce the Declaration of Independence, chosen for the task by Jefferson himself. This is a remarkable allegation, but there are, however, problems with this account: Jefferson contradicted parts of this story, and Adams's story lacks textual evidence.

But the purpose of this particular story hardly depends on providing a record of the facts. The significance is that Adams wished to diminish Jefferson's greatest achievement on the public stage. At this point in Adams's post-Presidency, Jefferson is still first and foremost the political enemy who took the office from Adams. Ferling notes that Adams and Jefferson had only a frosty relationship during the first decade of the nineteenth century; Adams famously left the federal capital and avoided Jefferson's inauguration (413), wrote a letter to his successor shortly thereafter that went unanswered, and generally harbored bitter feelings about the public attacks on him during the 1800 campaign (431). So as Adams sat down to produce his memoirs, his principal thought of Jefferson would have been of a man who "in those [Congressional] days never

failed to agree with me, in every Thing of a political nature” but had become his nemesis and the leader of a triumphant opposition party (*Autobiography* 3: 410). And Jefferson’s greatest accomplishment was writing the Declaration of Independence.

By implying that he himself was responsible for Jefferson having the opportunity to draft the Declaration, Adams elevates his role in the drama of American independence. And by suggesting that Adams himself could easily--perhaps selfishly--taken on the task and the future glory it brought for himself, the autobiography diminishes his rival Jefferson. Adams certainly knew that his version of the events of July 1776 would be sought after and potentially used as political fodder by both the Federalist and Jeffersonian parties. By using his life story as the basis for making his claims, he makes his memories politicized. While Jefferson--or, indeed, any other living witness--may challenge the Adams version of events, it ultimately will remain a “he said, he said.” This reading of the passage also might help explain the opportune shift in narrative structure that accompanies it; while Adams had previously relied on memory, he shift to reliance on published journals; after all, the autobiography is becoming less a personal and more a political document.

Giving himself a center role in the creation of the Declaration of Independence may be Adams’s most striking revision of his role in the drive for independence but hardly the only one. Another example of his desire to play up his dramatic importance is his reimagining of himself as a military man. Adams never formally served in the military, but he repeatedly proclaimed his desire to do so. During the French and Indian War, which would launch George Washington’s later career, Adams did not enlist, instead remaining a law student. This decision was to haunt Adams, as he later wrote to

his wife, “I longed more ardently to be a Soldier than I ever did to be a Lawyer” (qtd. in Ferling 21). During the Revolution, Adams regretted that his age and lack of experience would make him useless on the battlefield, writing to distinguished soldier and statesman Charles Lee, “Oh that I was a Soldier . . . Every Body must and will, and shall be a soldier” (qtd. in Ferling 133). Indeed, by placing their bodies on the line, such military figures as Washington, his decorated aide Alexander Hamilton, and James Monroe would create for themselves significant roles in shaping the American body politic.

How could Adams make a plausible case for himself as a military man? Bear in mind that American independence was proof of the transformative power of language, from the anonymous pamphlets to the fruits of the committees of correspondence to the Declaration itself. Just as language could turn colonies into states, it could also turn civilian into soldier. Adams’s views on the subject are revealed in a well-known essay published in the *Niles Weekly Register* in 1818, in which he stated, “The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people . . . This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people [toward British rule] was the real American Revolution” (Adams “Meaning” 2,5). By carefully separating the War for Independence from the American Revolution, Adams shifts the reader’s focus from the period between 1775 and 1781 to the 1760’s, when Adams argues that “an awakening and a revival of American principles and feelings” grew into the military actions that followed (12).

This act of redefinition suits Adams’s larger purpose well. It places legislators and diplomats in the role of soldiers in bringing about American independence, their words taking the place of bullets and cannon shot. Or, as John Ferling says it, “The American

Revolution, [Adams] believed, had occurred before the first shots of the war were fired at Lexington and Concord” (156). Thus it is the spread of words and ideas that is responsible for the founding of an independent United States, not merely--or even primarily--military victory. Adams was certainly not just a foot soldier but a leader in what he called the “real” Revolution. This is a convenient argument for Adams, as it opens the door for glory through debate to trump that won on the battlefield and elevate statesmen like himself above military heroes like Washington or Hamilton in the popular imagination.

Adams also used words and language to carry out—to perform, as it were—some of the actions required of a military leader. First, he had dedicated himself to studying military tactics. Adams had indeed read quite a substantial amount of military literature, and with some justification declared himself to have “read as much on the military Art and much more of the History of War than any American Officer” (3: 446). He had written to Abigail during his Congressional term that he had “bought some military Books and intend to buy more” lest he have the opportunity to lead an army (qtd. in Ferling 133). And he willingly (and immodestly) shared his learning with field officers: “I was too well informed that most of the Officers were deficient in reading: and I wished to turn the Minds of such as were capable of it, to that great Source of Information” (3: 446). Thus, while he had not become a military expert by service, he had--at least in his own mind--become one by reading.

Second, as alluded to above, Adams had written freely to those who held military power and offered his suggestions. In a long letter to Colonel Daniel Hitchcock, transcribed by Adams into his autobiography, he complains, “Your Army, Sir, give me

leave to say, has been ill managed in two most essential points” (3: 443). He then goes on to criticize Hitchcock’s lack of emphasis on inspections and maneuvers, asserting that using energy on digging trenches “keeps them constantly dirty” and “not having Wives, Mothers, Sisters, or Daughters” to clean them leads to poor health and physical condition (3: 443). In addition, Adams complains of too much caution in battle, asserting that “Officers and Men should be permitted to acquire fame and honor in the Army, which will give them a real fondness for fighting” (3: 443). In another letter to no less an officer than General Henry Knox, Adams expresses embarrassment that New England soldiers would perform so poorly in contrast to Southern militiaman. He writes, “[I]f the New Englandmen are a Pack of Cowards, I would resign my place in Congress . . . and have a chance of learning some time or other, to be part of an Hero myself” (3: 441-2). By educating himself on military matters and visiting with and writing extensively to the officers in the field, Adams saw himself as every bit as military in nature as actually raising a sword or musket. And his autobiography became the site where he could stake this claim.

As much as Adams’s artfulness of composition reveals his interests in vindication, self-invention, and performance, the most modern element of the text is the narrative voice. Adams the narrator brings Adams the man to life: cranky and contemptuous certainly, but somehow compelling. Consider the apparently unintentional irony of this statement transcribed from a letter regarding Adams’s mission in France: “I am not disposed to find fault with any thing . . . in this Country. Such a Disposition . . . I should esteem a Mark of a littleness of Mind” (4: 98). Of course, Adams offers little information about France apart from “finding faults.” Time also does not diminish Adams’s negative

opinions; his schoolmaster, one Joseph Cleverly, is libeled as “the most indolent Man I have ever known” and blamed for Adams’s early “disgust” with going to school (3: 257). These critical passages provide some of the more memorable parts of Adams’s texts, as he weighs in on individuals like Alexander Hamilton, institutions like the Catholic Church, and the entire nation of France. Though these narrative digressions consume little paper, they help reveal not merely a person but a personality that is entirely human: amorous, adventurous, energetic, opinionated, and morally strict.

But as much pleasure as the spicier portions of Adams’s commentary brings the modern reader, the autobiography is filled with opinions and commentary that could also reflect poorly on him. Adams’s more acerbic and biting comments could harm rather than recover his fallen reputation. While Adams did little to edit his own text, his grandson Charles Francis inserted his own editorial authority into the production of the final published text. Charles Francis was driven to make his remarkable family’s private letters public; his 1840 edition of collected letters between John and Abigail Adams was, in Charles’s own words, “[T]he first attempt, in the United States, to lay before the public a series of private letters, written without the remotest idea of publication” between husband and wife (qtd. in Harbert 92). Charles also harbored ambitions of following in his family’s political footsteps. He served in the Massachusetts House from 1840 until 1845, then ran unsuccessfully for the United States Congress—specifically, the seat his father John Quincy once held—in 1852 (Shepherd 350). Charles doubtlessly realized the value of keeping his family’s name and past services fresh in the minds of the public; his efforts not only burnished his proud ancestry, they helped keep his own political aspirations alive.

But, in his editorial duty, he would face difficult decisions. He had to strike the proper balance between allowing his famous grandfather to speak for himself while not permitting John Adams's excessive candor to tarnish the family's sterling image.

Charles's stated intention was to present his famous ancestor as a case study for "students of human nature" (qtd. in Harbert 91)--but he would exercise discretion in the task. John Adams could speak for himself so far as would not embarrass his family—including his ambitious grandson. And by choosing what to include and exclude, would he not in some respect stack the deck toward a particular reading of his father's "human nature"? And might John Adams have written so freely with the safe knowledge that his progeny would edit his words to protect him?

Consider one example of Charles Francis Adams's editorial role in reshaping his grandfather's text. John Adams's hatred for Alexander Hamilton was as boundless as his dislike for any of his rivals; Hamilton had published a vicious pamphlet during the 1800 election that not only challenged Adams's fitness for a second term but, perhaps even worse, questioned his psychological soundness (Ferling 397). When Adams lost New York, Hamilton's home state, he blamed Hamilton's opposition for dividing the Federalists and handing the Anti-Federalists a key victory. In the minds of both John and Abigail Adams--and the president's admirers and defenders--Hamilton had cost him the election (404-5). Thus we may understand some of the nastier comments that Adams reserves for his old opponent.

But Hamilton had died in 1804, the victim of Aaron Burr's famous bullet at Weehauken. Therefore, Hamilton presents a sympathetic character. But this does not deter Adams from a scathing repudiation of his old adversary, and the nature of the

attacks are simply too harsh to bring about any other response in the reader than revulsion. One of Hamilton's published criticisms of then-president Adams dealt with the use of the military under his administration. Adams emphatically denies the accusation. The tone of his denial, though, is striking: "Although I have long since forgiven this Arch Enemy [sic], yet Vice, Folly, and Villainy are not to be forgotten, because the guilty wretch repented, in his dying moments" (3: 434). After comparing Hamilton's sins to those of David, Mary Magdalene, the thief on the cross, and the Prodigal Son, Adams adds:

Nor am I obliged by any Principles of Morality or Religion  
to suffer my Character to lie under infamous Calumnies,  
because the Author of them, with a Pistol Bullet through  
his Spinal Marrow, died a Penitent. (3: 435)

Adams is not done, as he accuses Hamilton of "disappointed Ambition and unbridled Malice" likened to Henry IV (3: 435). He then associates Hamilton with the French Revolution, lauding Napoleon in the process (3: 435). Adams is not yet finished, later writing of Hamilton, "The world has heard enough of him since. His Petulance, Impertinence, and Impudence, will make too great a figure in these memories hereafter" (3: 447). Aside from clearly implying that Adams saw his autobiographical project extending much farther than 1780, the remark is a rather fitting one; the reader is most likely also tired of reading personal attacks on a dead man.

These rhetorical excesses were of great concern to Adams's progeny, his alleged target audience, as well. Charles Francis omitted both sections from the original publication of his grandfather's text (3: 435, 447, notes). The younger Adams, who had

appointed himself editor of his illustrious family's archives, had been driven by a deep concern for how future historians would see John Adams. Indeed, he was deeply concerned that his grandfather's inner character would be lost to posterity without the extensive publication of Adams's writings (Harbert 91). He feared that, over time, the prominent Founders would come to be seen as "heroes of a mythological age," their words and deeds taken out of the context of being public men, always choosing their acts and deeds with an eye toward their public audiences (qtd. Harbert 91). What Charles Francis realized was that public and private lives can be two entirely different things, that the life as presented for public consumption may not necessarily be representative of the true character of the subject. Yet, if Adams's goal was to present his father's private thoughts and feelings, then why excise some of the juicier, if unflattering, parts?

The answer, I argue, is rather complex. The editing task requires a serious division of loyalty. On the one hand, Charles Francis felt a responsibility as a historian and an American to make the contents of his grandfather's private writings public. He believed that primary sources, when placed alongside other historical records, could "transmit to posterity the details for a narration in as complete a form" possible given the "imperfect faculties of man"--a conglomeration of public and private writing that would become a perfected hybrid historiography (qtd. Harbert 92). Yet, as a member of the Adams family, he also had a responsibility to his ancestor. Collecting the papers a decade and more after John Adams's death, Charles Francis had to use his own discretion. What if Adams had let his outbursts appear on paper unrestrained precisely because he knew that they would remain private until a progeny made them public and counted on that progeny to exercise discretion? Charles Francis, in one respect, split the difference; the

original manuscripts are still as his grandfather wrote them; only the public version is “sanitized.”

But the issue also hints at the extraordinary difficulty of autobiography for a man as public as Adams. One could easily argue--as I would--that by excising any of the material, the grandson has taken on a role of shaping the text beyond that of an editor. He cannot consult with the author; he must act on his own. And removing an entire paragraph and a half of material is not the same as correcting spelling errors or transcribing manuscript into print. In that sense, John Adams’s autobiography is co-authored by his grandson, which would, it seems, defeat his stated purpose of allowing his grandfather’s character to be revealed to “students of human nature” (qtd. Harbert 91). After all, students of human nature are interested in character flaws as much as in virtues. Charles Francis could have, as the modern editor has, left the text intact with occasional notes when necessary rather than altered the text. Clearly, John Adams intended to blast the dead Hamilton in print, and he surely had at least an inkling that his writings might eventually be made public. Therefore, the grandson has in some respect considered the potential fallout too damaging to publish exactly what his grandfather wrote. It is hard to blame him for his discretion; however, it certainly discredits his seemingly disinterested desire to make the private part of the public for the good of future historians.

In this respect, Adams’s autobiography prefigures the modern presidential memoir, which is subject to the influence of collaborators and ghostwriters, libel lawyers and marketing experts. In its fullness of content and richness of voice, Adams produced a work that, despite its shortcomings, remains a fascinating read. His work is even more

remarkable when compared to the relatively prosaic style of his successors in office. One of those successors, also his greatest rival, would turn to autobiography for a reason similar to Adams's: a crisis threatened his nation. But the threat would not come from Francophile philosophy; it would not need to be imported at all.

### III

In January 1821, Thomas Jefferson could certainly have been in a celebratory mood. The 1820 election saw his protégé James Monroe swept to a second presidential term unopposed, the only president since Washington so elected. Monroe's victory was the high-water mark of the dominance of Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party; added to Jefferson's two terms, Madison's ensuing terms, and Monroe's first, the presidential chair had completed twenty consecutive years in Republican hands. But despite President Monroe's "Era of Good Feelings" in foreign affairs, domestic strife was threatening the future of the nation. And, in an oblique way, Jefferson himself was responsible.

His masterstroke as president had been the Louisiana Purchase, which doubled the territory of the United States at a relative pittance. But with the expansion of American territory came the question that would emerge to threaten the union over the next sixty years: would chattel slavery be allowed to expand as well? The 1820 application to add the new state of Missouri to the union forced this controversy to the forefront. The United States Senate was delicately balanced between free states and slave states, of which Missouri would certainly be one. Opponents of slavery's expansion would go to any lengths to prevent this shift of power, and proponents would do the same to effect it. Therefore, by January 1821, the Missouri question threatened the future of the union

Jefferson had once practically written into being.

Twelve years removed from the White House, Jefferson found his faith in America's future shaken by the sectional unrest over Missouri statehood; he would tell John Adams that it was a crisis greater than any the Founders had faced during the Revolution, a so-called "firebell in the night" (qtd. Malone 6: 328). The Missouri contest excited sectional tensions, pitting North versus South over the issue of slavery; even Jefferson's own *Notes on the State of Virginia* was used in the debates (329). He wrote to Congressman Hugh Nelson, "In the gloomiest moment of the revolutionary war I never had any apprehension equal to what I feel from this source" (qtd. 332). Jefferson was an elderly man facing the potential ruin of the nation that had consumed so much of his life. He could not stand by as a spectator.

In an effort to throw his influence behind a peaceful solution, Thomas Jefferson turned to autobiography. Like John Adams, Jefferson would offer his life as an example for the American body politic, not of manly virtue but of how to contain and survive the contradiction of American chattel slavery. Jefferson faced that contradiction in his own dual identity as slaveholding plantation owner and liberty-loving patriot, as a Founding Father and the father of slaves. And in his autobiography, Jefferson took on his mantle as Founding Father to suggest to his struggling nation how to manage the explosive slavery problem by acknowledging the failure of his generation to resolve it, suggesting colonization as a peaceful alternative to potential violence, and urging his American progeny to learn from the mistakes of the past.

The work, which was titled *Memoirs* when first published in 1829, begins with a conventional dose of modesty. Dating his manuscript 6 January 1821, Jefferson opens,

“At the age of 77, I begin to make some memoranda and state some recollections of dates & facts concerning myself, for my own more ready reference & for the information of my family” (3). This simple declarative statement contrasts with the relatively insecure opening of Adams’s autobiography. Jefferson emphasizes the modesty of his project; the manuscript is intended for his “own . . . reference” and “the information” of his “family.” But if the manuscript were intended only for use by the Jefferson family, the statement would be superfluous; doubtless Jefferson wrote it knowing that his family would publish the memoir. By downplaying the potential public reception of his autobiography and its rhetorical influence, Jefferson shares Adams’s concern about the appearance of vanity even though Jefferson had enjoyed immense and sustained political success and thus had less need than Adams to be defensive.

Despite the initial insistence that the memoirs are for himself and his family, there is no question that the audience for the autobiography is the American people. Jefferson’s other writings reveal that his principal concern at the time was not simply for members of his family but for the nation he had helped father. He had written to John Holmes that “the useless sacrifice of the generation of 1776”--Jefferson’s own revolutionary generation--were inevitably to “be thrown away by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons” (qtd. Hitchens 184). In a broad sense, the American public was his “family,” at least for the purposes of the *Memoir*. He saw the potential failure of the union through the eyes of a patriarch disappointedly watching his progeny waste their birthright.

In addition, the structure of the text does little to bear out Jefferson’s claim of a private motive. His nod to traditional generic form proves perfunctory, limited to three bland paragraphs dedicated to his upbringing and family: the first traces the history of the

Jefferson family up to Thomas's parents; the second traces his father's life and his own education, though more space is dedicated to Jefferson's teachers than to himself; and shortly thereafter is a mention of his marriage to Martha Skelton, which focuses mostly on her wealthy lawyer father. By his almost entirely external focus in these paragraphs, Jefferson establishes immediately that he is not interested in delving into his personality or recording that of his family. This pattern of thorough examination of his surroundings with little of his inner personality will prove typical for the text.

Thus the content of these paragraphs suggests a lack of authorial interest in any detailed or reflective consideration of Jefferson's family history. If anything, he seems almost ashamed of his lineage. Almost certainly owing to his antipathy toward pedigreed aristocracy and perhaps also his dislike of England, he remarks of his parents, "They trace their pedigree far back in England & Scotland, to which let every one ascribe the faith & merit he chooses" (3). This statement implies that Jefferson himself attaches little faith or merit himself, and the tone seems unfitting for progeny who would share the same heritage. One learns very little of Jefferson or his family before being rushed into the political setting of the late 1760's and 1770's; there is no Deacon John Adams here, no warm childhood memories. Jefferson goes through the conventions of family memoir, including his ancestry, childhood, education, and marriage, but in neither length nor detail does Jefferson's consideration of these personal subjects compare to Adams's. Clearly, Jefferson is little interested in recording family history and hurriedly rushes to his primary concern: his political public life.

And despite Jefferson's celebrated writing skill, the rare examples of the emergence of Jefferson's personal life are jarring to the reader, briefly stated and often

added almost as an afterthought. Consider this spare mention of wife Martha's death. While describing his initial mission to France, Jefferson alludes to having "two months before that lost the cherished companion of my life, in whose affections . . . I had lived the past ten years" (46). Jefferson's emotional response to Martha's death is buried in this brief mention, which serves mainly to help explain the course of his public career: "With the public interests, the state of my mind concurred in recommending the change of scene proposed" (46). Thus, like Adams, Jefferson becomes a reluctant diplomat, but his cause is not self-sacrifice; if anything, it appears to be therapeutic. Yet Jefferson himself seems uninterested in analyzing his motives or feelings; he merely states the facts, implies that his "state of mind" was an issue in his decision, and quickly shifts focus back to his public career. And having been at best a minor character in the text, Martha is summarily dismissed.

As remarkable as the near-absence of his wife from the text, Jefferson's mention of his daughter's death is even more disturbing an aside. While in Paris, Jefferson recalls receiving his daughter Maria, "the youngest having died some time before" (66). Though he does not name his "youngest," presumably he refers to one of the two daughters he named Lucy Elizabeth; according to Monticello's website, the two girls both died young (Jefferson Timeline). In contrast, Jefferson has just described a trip taken to inspect French rice farms that took him through fifty-one locations (or at least fifty-one individually listed locations), which makes the relative brevity and placement of his daughter's death at the end of the paragraph striking to the reader; by the next paragraph, Jefferson has turned his attention entirely to recounting the political situation of the Netherlands. By taking personal tragedy in stride to continue with his public service and

by adding the death of his daughter as an afterthought to a paragraph recording a rather banal public service, Jefferson emphasizes where his mind is: on the public, not the private.

When Jefferson turns to the construction of his public self, he focuses largely on his contributions to the legislative and diplomatic side of the War for American Independence. Because of his imperative to follow the controversy over slavery back to its origin in the founding, Jefferson's recollections emphasize the responses of the Continental Congress to royal actions that roiled the times. He is particularly interested in revisiting his greatest legislative accomplishment: the production of the Declaration of Independence. Jefferson's narrative of the Declaration's creation serves his contemporary purposes in two important ways. First, implicitly addressing the impending division of the nation, Jefferson reminds the reader of the founding document that provides a strong tie that binds together all states and all Americans. And, second, Jefferson's narrative of the Declaration's drafting proves that sectional divisions over slavery are as old as the nation itself.

Apart from Jefferson's rhetorical purposes, his discussion of the Declaration offers the reader a rare historical treat; just as Adams used autobiography to bring to light the machinations of the Continental Congress, so also does Jefferson. He includes the text of his original draft, juxtaposed with the version that was approved by the full Congress, including the additions and deletions that were made. As an autobiographer, Jefferson becomes a committee of one, no longer subject to the overruling majority. He justifies this inclusion by arguing its necessity in revealing the public policy opinions not of himself but of his fellow legislators: "As the sentiments of men are known not only by

what they receive but what they reject also, I will state the form of the declaration as originally reported” (18). In a manner, then, Jefferson offers a small tell-all account of the Declaration’s birth.

This account fits well with Jefferson’s rhetorical motives. A comparison of these dual (and dueling) declarations reveals the fundamental divide at the start of the young nation’s history: on one side are opponents of slavery who believe in the ideology of complete freedom, while on the other are those who believe that liberty without the absolute right to property is untenable, and finally there is a group that simply wants all sides to coexist peacefully. Despite its unifying qualities, the Declaration was itself formed in a crucible of controversy, a point that Jefferson makes clear by helpfully placing dark lines through text excised from the final draft, placing committee insertions in the margins, and using parallel columns for concurrent text. In this manner, Jefferson makes the points of contention as clear as possible.

One lengthy paragraph that was removed from Jefferson’s draft accuses the Crown of “wag[ing] cruel war against human nature itself” by “captivating and carrying . . . into slavery” a “distant people” which, though not named, can only be the Africans submitted to chattel slavery (22). In addition, Jefferson accuses the Crown of “suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or restrain” the slave trade and of “exciting” the slaves in captivity in America to “rise in arms among us” (22). According to Jefferson, then, the British monarchy is responsible for the horrors of chattel slavery, those experienced by the African slave (the capture, the deadly Middle Passage, the lifetime of servitude in a strange land) as well as the American slaveholder (the fear of a violent uprising by an oppressed people). Slavery was not only at the heart of Jefferson’s

memoirs; it was at the heart of the Declaration as well.

This revelation comes out only under the privileged auspices of autobiography. Jefferson's original text had been twisted and altered by the Congress, whose members were motivated by fear of offending the British citizenry (because of "[t]he pusillanimous idea that we had friends in England worth keeping") or offending those who benefited from British importing African slavery (not only representatives of pro-slavery colonies South Carolina and Georgia but also "northern brethren" who "have been pretty considerable carriers of them") (18). These are the same sectional contentions that are threatening America in 1820: fear of causing offense, and the demand by the slave states that the peculiar institution's expansion never be criticized or curtailed. Now that Jefferson can make his own text known to the public, he is, in a sense, able to rewrite history to suit his agenda.

And part of Jefferson's agenda is to revisit the founding and demonstrate the failure of the revered Fathers to resolve the slave problem. As stated earlier, the ability of the reader to judge "the sentiments of men" does not refer to Jefferson's sentiments; after all, he did not "receive" or "reject" the text. His fellow members of Congress did. Thus the passage explicitly invites and encourages the reader to form some opinion of the Congress as a whole who are the authors of the final text just as much as Jefferson. By including both texts, Jefferson invites the reader to compare not only the committee draft with the final draft but also Jefferson's intentions and ideas--with their frank challenge to the tyrannies both of the crown and the slave power--with the meeker Congressional draft. Although Christopher Hitchens has noted tartly that the Declaration is the rare example "apart from the King James version of the Bible, in which great works and

concepts have been fused into poetic prose by the banal processes of a committee" (23), Jefferson recognizes his Declaration, his act of authorship, as a separate one from what eventually was published. The antidote to this problem of authorship is autobiography, a genre that discourages committee writing.

Slavery lies at the center of Jefferson's autobiography. The role of slavery in the crafting of the Declaration and the congressional strategy of ignoring the matter in the interests of unity are by themselves a revelation that make Jefferson's memoir well worth reading. Jefferson explicitly draws attention to the removal of slavery from the Declaration, though he leaves the reader to understand the larger meaning: that the 1776 failure to confront the contradiction between freedom and slavery has led to the 1820 Missouri controversy. But slavery continues to play a role throughout the text, as the autobiography returns several times, both obliquely and overtly, to this divisive topic.

When Jefferson returns to the topic while recounting his service in the Virginia legislature, he makes clear that the controversies of the past have not faded with time. He recalls a bill that would have established an age of emancipation for slaves with gradual manumission as the ultimate goal, a proposal unacceptable to the public, either then or "even at this day," and concludes:

[T]he day is not distant when [the public] must bear and adopt [an emancipation plane], or worse will follow.

Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free. Nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government. It is still in our power to direct the process of

emancipation and deportation peaceably, and in such slow degree as that the evil will wear off insensibly, and their place be . . . filled up by free white laborers. If on the contrary it is left to force itself on, human nature must shudder at the prospect held up. (44)

Jefferson's palpable concern that the slavery problem would inevitably be resolved either by planning or by force is apparent from the Declaration onward. Note that his fear of violent uprisings, not a sense of justice, was the basis for the excised bit of the declaration in which he accused the British crown of "exciting [slaves] to rise in arms among us" (22). By the time Jefferson became an autobiographer, this fear of violence had become a primary motivation for him, because not only did the possibility of a slave uprising exist, but even the specter of a civil war between North and South.

Like his fellow Founders, Jefferson had already experienced one violent uprising by a subjugated people: the American Revolution. Like Adams, Jefferson never served in the military, and consequently Jefferson's history of the American Revolution is a decidedly non-military one. Nowhere does Jefferson follow Adams's example of trying to play the paper soldier. Yet, unlike Adams, Jefferson found himself directly in the line of British fire, which surely must have impressed on him a fear of conflict that Adams never knew. Jefferson's recounting of his two-year term as governor of Virginia, which occupies only two paragraphs of text, omits and downplays the role that he played in the war torn state—with good reason.

Jefferson's account greatly diminishes his gubernatorial term, which began in 1779, two years before the war's end in the Virginia city of Yorktown. The content of the

first paragraph of his account deals not with his service as a war governor but rather as a Visitor of William and Mary College, his alma mater located in the then-capital, Williamsburg. To emphasize which of the two positions hold the higher place in his thoughts, Jefferson spends the first paragraph listing his achievements for the school: “abolishing the Grammar School, and the two professorships of Divinity and Oriental languages, and substituting a professorship of Law . . . Anatomy, Medicine and Chemistry, and . . . Modern Languages” and so forth (45). Clearly, Jefferson believed that promoting education and intellectual advancement were his greatest lasting accomplishments as governor; with the superior placement and detailed recounting of his list of proud accomplishments, Jefferson places educational achievement literally before any of his political achievements while in office. This decision fits neatly with his recounting of the Revolution in terms of language and debate rather than war.

The second paragraph of the account is made most striking by its scrupulous avoidance of detail. Jefferson begins by noting the deep intertwining of the personal and political: “Being now, as it were, identified with the Commonwealth itself, to write my own history during the two years of my administration, would be to write the public history of that portion of the revolution within that state” (45). This sentence establishes Jefferson’s awareness of the power of his words: by recounting his “own history” he inevitably co-opts “public history”--there can be no clear dividing line between what belongs to Jefferson and what belongs to the public, to the state itself. Yet he also realizes that this high status is a purely social construction; if others did not “identify” his history with that of the state, this effect would not occur. Indeed, the tone of the sentence is almost apologetic, as though Jefferson feels burdened by the assumption of unidentified

consumers of his history that his history and Virginia's must be one and the same.

Jefferson uses the power of his life narrative as a convenient dodge to avoid detailing his gubernatorial years, instead throwing the job of recounting the history of the period to historians, specifically Louis Gerardin, who "had free access to all my papers" and "has given as faithful an account as I could myself" (45). He therefore declines to address his governorship, concluding that "I refer altogether to [Gerardin's] history" (45). All that remains is his resignation, which is remarkably introduced thus:

From a belief [by Jefferson himself] that under the pressure of the invasion under which we were then laboring the public would have more confidence in a Military chief, and that the Military commander, being invested with the civil power also, both might be wielded with more energy, promptitude, and effect for the defense of the state, I resigned . . . (45)

While Adams clung to notions of himself as gentleman soldier, Jefferson ran from them; the distance he places between himself and a "Military chief" or "Military commander" is obvious from his statement. So one might ask, why does Jefferson feel that he should conceal the details of his governorship, and why even mention it at all in his memoir?

First, Jefferson's experience as Virginia's governor was perhaps the worst of his public career. Dumas Malone, a respected and sympathetic Jefferson biographer, presents Jefferson as a dutiful but joyless public servant when the war came to Virginia for the first time in 1779. Despite Jefferson's significant efforts to round up troops and supplies without bankrupting the state, an overwhelming British invasion led Jefferson to abandon

the capital and left him “now only the shadow of a governor” (Malone 1: 351). The story of Jefferson’s resignation is also much cloudier than his memoir suggests, as the state legislature elected a new governor, invested with more broad military powers, to the point that Malone accuses them of going “a considerable distance toward military dictatorship” (1: 361). Malone later defends Jefferson against allegations that his disastrous governorship led to personal reverses, public discredit, and a rise in conservative power in state politics (1: 367). Whatever the specific details or interpretation of events, it is clear that the former president had little from his governorship of which to boast.

His gubernatorial experience was arguably his most intense exposure to the battles that attended the independence he helped bring into being, the moment when founding an independent nation became not an act of writing performed in a committee room but a military action performed on bloody battlefields. But Jefferson’s apparent reluctance to placing this experience in his own words--especially following the insistent statement of his original Declaration draft--begs the question why. In fact, why would he not merely exclude his story of the British invasion of Virginia during his governorship entirely rather than grab the reader’s attention by referring specifically to it immediately thereafter? After all, omitting material that could be damaging is the autobiographer’s prerogative.

The question of Jefferson’s autobiographical handling of his governorship has challenged historians. Malone takes a stab at explaining this authorial decision, claiming that Jefferson used the term “resigned” rather “loosely” and that, writing some forty years later, “his remembrance of his own state of mind had doubtless become hazy” (Malone 1:

360). But this does not explain why, if his memory is fuzzy, Jefferson does refresh it by picking up his Girardin history from the shelf. Cox observes the obvious point that Jefferson's "career as governor was not so successful as his work in Philadelphia and in France" but dismisses the conclusion that Jefferson's omission stems from embarrassment (43). But Cox nevertheless finds Jefferson's non-recollection worthy of close scrutiny, even connecting this passage specifically to Jefferson's contemporary authorship of his epitaph: "Author of the Declaration of American Independence, and of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom & Father of the University of Virginia" (43). Yet Cox neglects an obvious connection: the first paragraph that substitutes Jefferson's accomplishments as a Visitor of William and Mary for accomplishments as governor. It would seem to underscore Cox's point that contributing to education, not serving as a state bureaucrat pushing papers, was a crucial part of the essence of Jefferson's public life.

The key to understanding this confusing passage may well lie in Jefferson's assertion that his life has become "identified with the Commonwealth itself." Keeping in mind the context of the Missouri Compromise and the specter of civil war, Jefferson notably rewrites his governorship as one of placid understanding instead of violence. The political intrigues that led to his leaving office, the debates over what sort of chief executive the state needed, the details of the British invasion that placed the state under British rule again are all gone. He instead offers a picture of himself calmly agreeing to step aside once the needs of the state have changed--a deeply statesmanlike move--and with it a tacit acceptance of whatever historians have chosen to write about him. With the exigent need for military guidance, Jefferson recognized that he is a man of words and

not war and steps aside for a more suitable candidate. Thus Jefferson suggests that his governorship was an example of self-sacrifice, marked most notably by contributions to education, his office surrendered willingly for the greater good of the state.

In a time of sectional disagreement and turmoil, with the threat of a military resolution to the slavery issue, such an example would carry special meaning. Jefferson may well have envisioned a day when an abolitionist army would, like the British, capture another Virginia capital. That day, of course, came in 1865 when Richmond fell. Thus Jefferson's governorship acts as a warning to intemperate parties on both sides, a reminder that war can lead not only to destruction but humiliation. Far better, then, to create a history defined not by fighting but by political bargaining and the elevation of the public good. It was an approach that one of Jefferson's successors, James Buchanan, would employ when trying to rewrite the Civil War as a legal dispute.

So if Jefferson's governorship reminds his readers of the horrors of (what was then) a civil war and warns them away from using violence to end the slavery controversy, then one should ask what alternative solutions the text offers. Rhetorically, Jefferson tries to hew a middle ground, reinvent himself neither as a champion of abolition nor of compromise. Even the passage from his Declaration draft implies that the colonists are themselves slaves to the crown as much as the imported Africans are. In addition, Jefferson never mentions what might be considered a salient fact: Jefferson himself was, of course, a slave holder, which could help explain his fear of violent unrest even though it raises the obvious contradictions in his character that are so familiar and confounding to historians. Considering Jefferson's inability even to address the personal contradiction of owning slaves, what solutions can he offer his nation as slavery threatens

its existence?

Recall the opening line of the autobiography. Jefferson has reached 77 years of age, some thirty-three years older than the United States, without resolving the inner conflict of slavery. Why, then, cannot the American body politic follow his example? Instead of a pat resolution, Jefferson's life offers an example of mere survival. His proposed solutions, emancipation and deportation, are peaceable—but, by his own admission, “slow.” They are not new suggestions, and they are no more likely to shift the tide of public opinion in 1820 than they did before or after. Jefferson does not suggest a grand philosophical re-imagining of Americanness that includes slave, slaveholders, freedmen, and abolitionists; rather, he suggests a strategy of survival, the gradual removal of a potential threat to the body politic. In this way his nation can enjoy the long life that he himself has received.

That Jefferson saw his autobiography as his most potent tool to soothe the conflict and avoid violence is, in the final scenes of the text, underscored by a cameo appearance from America's foremost autobiographer. In 1790, while traveling from Monticello to New York to begin his term as Washington's Secretary of State, Jefferson stops in Philadelphia to call on his fellow Founder, the “venerable and beloved Franklin” (99). The bedridden Benjamin Franklin, who died later that year, discussed the situation in France with Jefferson until, after “a pause took place,” Jefferson turned to the subject of Franklin's memoirs: “I told him I had learnt with much pleasure that, since his return to America, he had been occupied in preparing for the world the history of his own life” (99). Franklin is presented as disinterested in discussing his work and instead decides to let it speak for itself: directing his grandson William Bache to a table, Franklin provides

Jefferson with “a sample of what I [Franklin] shall leave” (99). Jefferson assumes that the sample is to be read and returned, but, upon Franklin’s insistence, he keeps it until after Franklin’s death.

The next episode provides an insight into the significance of autobiography and the role of family in posthumous publication. After Franklin’s death, Jefferson offers the piece of memoir to William Temple Franklin, who (much like Charles Francis Adams or Thomas Jefferson Randolph) is preparing his grandfather’s papers for publication. Unimpressed with Temple Franklin’s “careless” treatment of the material, Jefferson begins to wonder: had Franklin “meant it as a confidential deposit” not to be handed over to public sight (100)? The autobiographer Jefferson then reconstructs from (now some thirty-year-old) memory the contents of the sheaf of papers, which dealt with negotiations between Franklin and Lord Howe and asks, “If this is not among the papers published, we ask what has become of it?” (101) He then draws an even more striking conclusion: that, if this material is not included among Franklin’s published work, then grandson Temple is guilty of a heinous crime: “[C]ould the grandson of Dr. Franklin be in such degree an accomplice in the parricide of the memory of his immortal grandfather” (101)? Though he backs off and suggests only that the possible suppression of the material would arouse “hard suspicions” in the minds “of some” (101), the fact that the autobiography ends just one short sentence later—with Jefferson arriving in New York—certainly places his accusations in an emphatic light.

There was just one problem with Jefferson’s accusation: it was wrong and, moreover, Jefferson should have known that at the time of writing. The publication history of Franklin’s *Autobiography* is convoluted, with French “bootleg” copies

emerging as early as 1791 and subsequently in English in 1793 (Labaree et. al. 27-8). Fragments of the autobiography appeared all over the world, but Temple Franklin's version, complete with the portion given to him by Jefferson, would appear in 1817 and 1818, well before Jefferson took up his pen in 1821 (30). Although Temple had taken a fair amount of editorial license with his grandfather's papers (see 31-34), as Cox observes, Jefferson's account of the scene was "remarkably accurate," yet his voiced suspicion was wrong despite having "ample time and opportunity as well as every reason" to check it first (53). Just why Jefferson would end on such a curious note is a puzzle, but unfortunately for historians and scholars, he never revisited the text.

The only suggestion I can make is that these scenes be read as a warning to Jefferson's family. To suppress or omit Jefferson's words from publication, as the Continental Congress had once done, is an act of parricide. And by forgetting or whitewashing the words of the Founders about slavery, the current generation risks a parricide that will bring down the United States. When Randolph came across these words of his grandfather, he could see in Temple Franklin a warning. While the younger Franklin is innocent of the charge, it still lingers to accuse Randolph and his generation should they prove unworthy of the sacrifices of their elders. Although by the 1829 publication the Missouri controversy had died, Jefferson's example would remain relevant, for yet another generation had failed to solve the problem of slavery.

#### IV

If Adams and Jefferson represented the rise of the American state, then James Monroe represented the end of the Revolutionary period. His military patron had been Washington and his legal patron, Jefferson. Yet after he left the Presidency in 1825, he

would be replaced by a man strikingly of another generation: John Adams's son John Quincy, who had been a child when the Revolutionary War occurred. In his inaugural address, the second President Adams would state what was already obvious: the torch had been passed to a new generation (Forgie 51). Therefore, Monroe was the last of the Founder presidents.

Monroe the autobiographer would usher in a new approach to producing autobiography: the idea of "cashing in." While Adams and Jefferson produced works as a service to their nation, Monroe's purpose was primarily to collect from his nation what he believed was due him. By 1825, the year Monroe left the Executive Mansion, he was nearly bankrupt because of his excessive debts (a trait he shared with his mentor Jefferson). He was a relatively small landholder, and his lengthy political career had led him to give up his law practice long before. Therefore, Monroe had become reliant on loans from the Bank of the United States, Baring Brothers, and private individuals, and his property had largely been sold off to pay his creditors (Wilmerding 6-7). But Monroe had come to believe that the nation owed him for his long service as a soldier, diplomat, bureaucrat, and president--at least enough that he might live comfortably for the rest of his life. His memoirs were produced to meet this financial need.

Monroe's first autobiographical endeavor was an 1825 document describing his past duties and consequent expenditures. His audience consisted of members of the select Congressional committee formed by Pennsylvania Congressman Samuel Ingham for consideration of Monroe's monetary claims (Wilmerding 9, 53). The memoir that Monroe provided for the committee members formed an embryonic basis for his later, longer autobiography: a "preliminary recitation" of Monroe's history in public office

followed by a thorough list of expenses inflicted by his diplomatic service in Paris and, to Monroe's mind, not properly remedied by the federal government (53). The structure of this brief memoir was a combination of memories backed up with external supporting documents, such as letters and contemporary reports (55). By May 1826, Congress approved and President John Quincy Adams signed an act that paid Monroe every penny he had requested--with interest (84). His foray into memoir had been an unqualified financial success. The only problem was that Monroe wanted more.

As Lucius Wilmerding thoroughly recounts, no amount of money ever satisfied Monroe; even the generous sum his original memoir had helped persuade Congress to give him quickly proved inadequate for his expenses. Therefore, Monroe pursued the possibility that a fuller autobiography could bring him greater remuneration. By late 1827, Monroe was considering the possibility of producing "a memoir, remarks, and documents" as "a pamphlet" that would emphasize his political career and the sacrifices that were attached to them (qtd. Brown, Preface v). By 1829, Monroe reported that he was active of mind, having taken on the "employment" of writing "a review of past occurrences in which I have acted, and to which I have been a witness" (qtd. Brown, Preface v). He notes, however, that "I do not know that anything will appear to the public during my life" (v). Thus Monroe presents himself as an actively involved writer, investing much of his time and energy in crafting a memoir that is intended for consumption by a public audience.

Despite Monroe's clear intention, his observation would prove prescient: he would not live to see it published. Monroe was living his final days in New York City with a son-in-law and nearing collapse: weak of health, pained by the 1830 death of his

wife Elizabeth, and politically impotent after the rise of Andrew Jackson had decimated the factions in Congress most inclined to support the former president (Wilmerding 117, Brown, Introduction 2). He died on July 4, 1831, exactly five years after Adams and Jefferson. He left behind several lengthy fragments that were “intended in part to raise money through sales and in part to persuade the Congress to act” in his relief (Brown, Introduction 2). Unfortunately, at Monroe’s death, his narrative ended with the end of his service in France, leaving his career as Secretary of State, President, and even negotiator of the Louisiana Purchase unexamined. Though these fragments would eventually be published under the title *Autobiography*, the work would not see publication for over a century.

The *Autobiography* itself begins with distinction from its forerunners. Unlike Adams or Jefferson, Monroe does not offer the familiar pretext of writing for himself or his family. His audience is a public one from the beginning, and his objective is to win their sympathy. Therefore, Monroe’s memoir must be read as an act of therapy, a method of alleviating his pains, personal, political, and financial. The emphasis is on sacrifice, and Monroe is not above detailing the material expenses of his political career. But Monroe’s memoir should also be read as the last public statement of the last Founder president, who feared that at the end of his long career, he would inevitably die in poverty.

Apart from the change in focus, Monroe also differed from his fellow autobiographers in the employment of third person narration, a highly unusual form for the genre. Contemporaries Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin used the traditional first person. In context, third person was preferred for exceedingly formal correspondence; as

a long-time diplomat and high-ranking government officer, Monroe may have believed that the public nature of his work demanded such a high level of formality. But the use of third person creates a tone different from first person; it obscures the perspective involved in the narration. Stuart Brown's introduction observes that Monroe's narration gives the text an "impression of objective review" from the perspective of an aging, retired public servant (2). However, as Brown also notes immediately thereafter, Monroe hardly fits this mold, as his motives are obviously self-interested and part of an active, ongoing effort to keep his name--and service--in the public eye. Still, had Monroe kept to this format, the text would have felt oddly detached, but still, on its face, consistent. However, he does not. By the fourth paragraph the third person narration is compromised for the first of a few times.

These shifts in focus and style do not, however, change some conventions established by other memoirists. Monroe follows the traditional pattern of initially describing his family lineage; indeed, the autobiography begins with the straightforward sentence: "James Monroe, late President of the United States was born in Westmoreland County in 1758 on Monroe's Creek, which empties into the Potomac River, between Maddox and Mosier's Creeks" (21). Other than an unusual fixation on specific geography, a simple statement of birth, time, and place, it is a conventional opening. The remainder of the paragraph is the familiar genealogy: an ancestor from Scotland, a "very worthy and respectable" father, and a mother "possessing the best domestic qualities" (21). The portrait Monroe paints is of a landed, well-to-do family with a long history of service.

This nod to convention does not distract Monroe from quickly turning, like

Jefferson, to his public career. The focus of the end of this opening paragraph is on an uncle, Joseph Jones, who “was a distinguished revolutionary patriot” and served as a judge in Virginia and spent six years in Congress (21). In Monroe’s description of his uncle as a man held in “confidence and esteem” by “his fellow citizens” is more than an echo of Monroe’s own career as successful soldier, lawyer, and politician (22). The next paragraph describes Monroe’s education and ends with his entry into the Revolutionary army, the move that launched his long career (22). Thus, in three paragraphs, Monroe has dispensed with his entire pre-public life and is ready to focus entirely on his career.

Because of his rhetorical purpose, Monroe conflates his life and his public career—not difficult, as most of his adult life was spent in government service. Monroe observes that his term of service from that day of enlistment in 1776 to his exiting the Presidency in 1825 composed, “with little intermission,” a forty-nine-year life in service to his country (22). By becoming “employed . . . in the most important trusts abroad and at home,” Monroe had been both a “party . . . to the great events that occurred” and a “spectator of many others on the interesting theater on which he moved,” personally “well-acquainted with almost all which mastered that very interesting epoch” (22-3). Monroe asserts his experience in three roles: as agent, an actor who helped to bring about the tumultuous changes of that forty-nine year period; as spectator, closely observing events that happened around him and in which he was no party; and as witness, personally interacting with the powerful individuals of his age.

As a result, Monroe offers three layers of experience: that of his actions, that of his observations, and that of his personal relationships, all of which must add up to a memoir that would be of interest to the reader. This layering of Monroe’s subjectivity is

evident from the rather confused ending to the paragraph. He concludes:

In this work I shall present his view of those events, noticing those of each class and referring to the records and other documents which support them in every instance. The sketch will be partly historical and partly biographical, commencing with his entrance into the army, and pursuing it in all the most interesting details through his whole career. (23)

Examine the pronouns employed in this remarkable statement. It begins with the first person “I,” which identifies Monroe as the author. But then, without grammatical reason, Monroe changes to the third person “his” (*his* entrance and *his* career rather than *my* entrance and *my* career). There is disengagement here between Monroe the author and Monroe the subject, and Monroe speaks of himself not merely in a deeply formal tone but as if he is divided in two. There is a self under construction here; how much of it will be “I” and how much “him” will remain to be seen.

One of the most important parts of Monroe’s autobiographical self, with its emphasis on sacrifice, is his identity as a soldier, which sets him apart from Adams or Jefferson. Monroe’s service in the Revolutionary War would, like Alexander Hamilton, begin a long public career. Like Adams, Monroe divided his draft into titled chapters; Adams’s first chapter was titled “John Adams.” In contrast, Monroe’s is titled not with name but service: “Soldier in the Revolution.” While Adams early on indeed seems interested in trying to put down in writing “John Adams,” his full identity, Monroe’s orientation is toward his career. Serving as a soldier in the war started Monroe’s political

career, and it begins his public memoir as well. Monroe places himself immediately in the category of a military hero, linking the origins of his rise to power closely to the origins of the country. A scant two pages into his text, Monroe is already in service and beginning to accumulate the debt he feels his country still owes him.

Monroe, like other autobiographers, is ambivalent about vanity, although his purpose certainly demands a measure of immodesty. He rather proudly notes that the “favorable opinion entertained of his previous conduct” by his superiors was evidenced by an offer of an appointment as lieutenant colonel “before he had attained the full age of twenty-one” (29). Even his exit from the military, he emphasizes, was not a choice but rather a necessity; unable to raise his own command, he retires “without any impeachment of his patriotism” (29). Even after becoming a full-time lawyer, Monroe is less interested in recounting his law career than mentioning two other occasions “of rendering service to his country”: an intelligence mission in western Virginia (instigated by then-Governor Thomas Jefferson during the British siege) and joining a militia to ward off an invasion through Norfolk (32). While he certainly does not wish to appear overly proud of himself, he also must assert to the reader that his career of service is so exemplary as to warrant his receiving compensation for it some fifty years later.

In downplaying his own accomplishments, Monroe writes an extended passage that does much to define his textual self. He willingly and modestly gives full credit to his commanders, calling himself “a mere youth,” and he claims that he “counted for nothing in comparison with those distinguished citizens who had the direction of public affairs” (26). He makes clear that he is speaking of the high moral standing of his commanders, “the high character of that epoch and of those into whose hands its destiny

fell” (26). Yet there is also no shortage of reflected glory; for Monroe, these men whom he lauds were also his educators, men who helped to bring the “mere youth” to manhood even as they brought the American colonies to independence. His military career becomes “a school of practical instruction . . . of which it is believed that history has furnished no equal example . . . in the knowledge of mankind, in the science of government, and what is of still great importance, for inculcating on the youthful mind those sound moral and political principles on which the success of our system depends” (26). How does this passage with its emphasis on reflected glory and the role of military experience in inculcating character and a sense of rightful government help create the textual Monroe?

The passage’s content places Monroe in the tradition of Franklin, shaping his memoir as a story of education, of the molding of a youth through experience. Comparing the space invested in his formal schooling (one full and one partial paragraph) to that of his military service (some eleven paragraphs), it is clear which form of education Monroe wanted to place foremost before his audience. Calling the war a “great theater,” Monroe emphasizes the educational qualities of the war: he entered the service “at the earliest moment at which the mind is capable of expanded exertion” and acquired “practical instruction . . . eminently useful to him” (31). In short, though trained as a lawyer, Monroe wishes to put forth primarily his identity as a military man. His service as a soldier for the United States made his character what it is and invited his future success, not the law career that preceded his swift political rise.

Second, the placement of this paragraph, with its remarkable humility and positioning of himself as a student and observer of “great events,” is unusual. Though the

editor claims that the paragraph is misplaced (note 224), it is exactly where Monroe placed it. In the previous paragraph, Lieutenant Monroe has led his corps into battle at Trenton, after the commanding Colonel, William Washington, was injured. A teenager leading his men into battle after seeing his commander shot, Monroe never seems more courageous in his memoirs. Soon, he, too, is felled, by “a musket ball which passed through his breast and shoulder” (26). He joins Washington in the surgeon’s office where his wound is bandaged. And here the paragraph ends. After the paragraph on “practical instruction,” Monroe returns to his wound: he is carried to a nearby house for ten days of recuperation, at the end of which he finds it “not improper” to observe that he paid the local physician himself, and “never asked a remuneration of it or received any pension on account of his wound, although it was such as to have entitled him to it” (26).

The scene is one that could easily rouse pathos: the brave youngster called into a duty beyond his years who serves bravely and suffers bodily harm, yet never receives any compensation. While Monroe clearly does not forego this angle—his mention of paying the doctor bill and never receiving reimbursement is more than a little self-serving—neither does he seem to overemphasize it. The insertion of the “school of instruction” paragraph reduces the passage’s impact by taking the reader’s attention away from the wounded lieutenant carried off the field. Furthermore, his insistent shift in focus from the wounded young man to the “great epoch” and “distinguished citizens” in the background is modesty carried perhaps to a fault. In this moment when Monroe has a strong rhetorical opportunity to emphasize his corporeal being and make the obvious connection to his condition at the time of writing, he proves ambivalent.

Yet the reader knows that Monroe’s military service led more or less directly to

his political career. Indeed, even some forty years later as president, Monroe “would on ceremonial occasions appear in his old Revolutionary War uniform” as though to add the legitimacy of his role as Founder to that of president (Forgie 49). The sacrifice of his physical body leads eventually to his crucial role in maintaining the body politic. The implied distance of Monroe’s organization, from the literal interior (the bullet passing through his shoulder) to the broad exterior (the “grand epoch” that provides the backdrop against which he is a small part), creates a shift from inside to outside that is at variance with the implications of the scene. The promotion he receives as a result of his courageous action—and, not incidentally, his severe wound—proves to be another step upward for Monroe.

It soon becomes clear that the Continental army served in Monroe’s mind as a metaphor for the nation. His experiences working among the established generals serve to teach him how to collect individuals with divided loyalties among the states and still “to break down local prejudices and attach the mind and feeling to the union” (32). The end of his experience is to attempt to raise his own command, a Virginia corps, at which he could stand at the head. He won the backing of the state legislature “but failed” (29). Monroe’s ambition and desire to develop and maintain loyalty and cooperation among his officers are the first signs of the skills that marked his political life. It furthermore becomes clear that the bullet that wounded Monroe served a double purpose, both as a threat to his corporeal body and the instigator of his political self. Monroe’s close relationship with George Washington and his military heroism “stood well to his advantage in his political career” (Brown, Introduction 3), and he would capitalize quickly.

But despite Monroe's rather interesting construction of himself as soldier-politician, the autobiography is ultimately a plea for money. Unlike the soldier who paid his own medical bill, the autobiographer Monroe dispenses with any degree of subtlety at the end of a lengthy chapter on his French diplomacy, the chapter which would unfortunately prove the memoir's last. "It is certain that this mission"—which lasted approximately two years—"subjected [Monroe] to debts which have embarrassed him through life" (145). Because of the extraordinary nature of his mission, Monroe necessarily expended "three or four times the aid necessary in ordinary missions" (145). Included in Monroe's list of expenses requiring remuneration were "three or four assistant secretaries," a private residence purchased "at the insistence of his fellow citizens" and later sold at a loss, payments to needy private citizens including Thomas Paine, and the loss of a season of work because of a delay in his return voyage (145).

Whatever one thinks of these expenditures, Monroe makes clear that he links his claims "with his character" (145). He had trusted the Department of State to settle his accounts fairly, which obviously did not occur to his satisfaction. Instead "all the extra charges fell upon" Monroe, which he paid through "the sale of property" and private loans (147). And out of pride—again, "from a respect to his own character"—Monroe refused to press for any further payment (147). When Monroe concludes the chapter with the utmost confidence that his narrative is "founded on consequential documents in every detail," he turns to "other instances of his public service" (147). He never lived to start the next chapter. Sadly, the end of Monroe's memoir is much like the end of his life: one final view of the old patriot seeking financial relief to rescue him from destitution. Had he only known that future presidents would sell their memoirs for enormous sums!

Monroe was right that his narrative was the only item of real value he had left; unfortunately for him, he was a man before his time.

So how did Monroe's autobiography come to evade publication until 1959? Part of the explanation lies with Samuel Gouverneur, the son-in-law in whose home Monroe died in 1831. He took possession of the dead president's accumulated papers with the intent to publish or sell them, though his responsibilities as Postmaster of New York City and theatre manager took precedence (Eaton vi). Gouverneur gave the bulk of Monroe's papers to Henry O'Reilly in the mid-1840's with the understanding that O'Reilly would publish or sell them and split the profit. The United States government entered the business of purchasing historically important papers (Hamilton's and Madison's among them), and by 1849, a deal was struck to obtain Monroe's, with Gouverneur and O'Reilly sharing the proceeds (vii-viii). But the government was in no hurry to organize much less publish the papers, and they were destined to languish for decades to come.

However, the manuscripts that contributed to the 1959 *Autobiography of James Monroe* were not part of the federal government's purchase. They remained in Gouverneur's possession until his death in 1865, when his wife Mary (Monroe's daughter Maria Hester had left him widowed in 1850) inherited them and gave them to her nephew, James Cadwalader. Mary died in 1898, and Cadwalader arranged with the permission of her executor to donate them to the New York Public Library, where Cadwalader was a trustee (Eaton x). This provided the trove that eventually yielded a published text. However, as an addendum, I should note that, like Adams and Jefferson, Monroe had a doting grandson who published a portion of his grandfather's work. In 1867, Samuel Gouverneur, Jr., published *The People the Sovereigns*, a comparative

history of governments that Monroe composed contemporaneously with his autobiography (ix). Unfortunately, the younger Gouverneur was not given the chance to do the same with his ancestor's memoir.

After Monroe, few presidents took a turn at memoir-writing. John Quincy Adams produced some limited autobiographical sketches but nothing to rival his famous father. Andrew Jackson, John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, and Franklin Pierce never took up the pen despite enjoying lengthy post-presidential careers. Martin Van Buren produced an ambling, unfinished text that, despite its length, never gets past his career in the New York Legislature; only his recounting of the story of Stephen Van Rensselaer and the 1824 election warrants much interest. William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor died in office, James Polk only months after leaving Washington. Just as the American Revolution and founding would spark a wave of memoirs, it would take another major event in the nation's life to produce the next one: the Civil War.

## Chapter Two: The Civil War and the Emergence of Presidential Autobiography

If James Monroe's memoir, produced for a contemporary audience with a pecuniary motive, provided a new way of thinking about the genre, then several developments during the nineteenth century helped to make presidential autobiography mainstream. Among the most significant changes were: first, the industrialization of book publishing and improved methods of transportation and distribution; second, the explosion of popular interest in memoirs related to the Civil War; third, the rise of presidential elections as popular cultural events aimed directly at the electorate; and finally, the consolidation of executive power under the Lincoln administration that made the president a unilateral head of state. The two presidential autobiographies that emerged from the Civil War would reflect these changes, and their publication history foreshadows the modern presidential memoir. One of these works was written by the man blamed for starting the war, the other by the man credited with ending it. And unlike Adams or Jefferson, neither James Buchanan nor Ulysses Grant could wait to see their work released to the American reading public.

By the time that Buchanan and Grant made their authorial debuts, book publishing had evolved since the time of the Founders. The mid-nineteenth century saw not only a broad Industrial Revolution in America but also a tremendous expansion of the publishing industry. Paper was produced by machine; powerful printing presses replaced handicraft; plates replaced hand-set type; a variety of bindings, type designs, and illustrations were readily available to the publisher and, by extension, the consumer (Winship, "Manufacturing" 68-9). The emergence of national railroad lines and express delivery companies connected publishers to consumers spread across the expanding

United States (Winship, “Distribution” 120). Credit networks made book “jobbers,” who purchased quantities of books at a discounted rate from publishers, useful middlemen for distribution to retailers (121). Publishers expanded their field of business to include retail establishments other than bookshops, and after the Civil War, amateur agents were employed to solicit subscription sales (128). In short, by the Civil War, authors had many avenues to market their books to a contemporary audience of readers, then deliver them quickly and efficiently. For Buchanan, who wished to persuade his contemporaries to reconsider his record, and Grant, who was in dire financial straits, speed and access were vitally important to their authorial aims.

Any books dealing with the war would find a market because the war had produced its own popular literary culture. In the wake of this unprecedented national event, the reading public avidly consumed narratives of the war, “creating a demand for the unvarnished accounts of soldiers’ wartime experience” (Fabian 411). Of course, the proliferation of periodicals during the mid-nineteenth century had already opened the door for amateur authors who could cheaply fill empty pages, and would do so enthusiastically in order to see their names and words in print (409). But unlike many other publications, Civil War narratives would be judged not by “literary polish or philosophical insight” but by the author’s ability to bring readers as close as possible to the deprivations and horrors of war—without, of course, the danger (412). This thriving marketplace provided a tempting target also to presidential memoirists with war stories to share. James Buchanan sought to explain how the war began, while Ulysses Grant would take readers on a journey to the war’s end. And in a rather unexpected twist, Buchanan—the man criticized for refusing to act—would aggressively marshal an apologia that

offered no apologies, while Grant—famously though perhaps apocryphally described by Lincoln as a man who fights—would provide a narrative almost fatalistic in its acceptance of the events that surrounded and shaped his remarkable military career.

In addition to the changing literary marketplace, the method of conducting presidential campaigns had become more accessible to the broad public electorate. Richard McCormick notes that while local politics once carried greater public interest than federal elections, presidential contests eventually became “the great focal point of all American politics,” leaving legislative and state races far behind (qtd. in Nelson 86). The 1840 election pitting incumbent Martin Van Buren against challenger William Henry Harrison has been widely seen as the precursor to the campaigns that are familiar today, featuring “the first true use of ‘handling,’ or public image making, in an American presidential race” (Harrison Entry 6). The 1840 election was organized around popular entertainment: campaign songs, social gatherings, and political imagery: the Whigs’ log cabins and cider barrels (Harrison Entry 8, 12).

The end result was an unprecedented level of voter turnout, and by the Civil War, “Americans continued to revel in politics, thronging rallies, loyally affiliating with one party or the other, and voting in overwhelming numbers”—some 82% in 1860, the last election before hostilities (Holzer 16). With this new popular appeal in presidential politics, the distance between the personal and the political was largely bridged, and candidates were tasked with the careful crafting of a popular image in order to accumulate the necessary public favor first to be elected and then to carry out their party’s agenda. The myth of candidates as disinterested public servants was dispelled in favor of a new vision of candidates as products to be marketed and sold to the public.

Finally, the office itself had changed dramatically, thanks to the efforts of Abraham Lincoln. First, Lincoln proved a transformational figure in the public perception of the presidency. Dana Nelson describes the emergence of a “superhero” presidency during the nineteenth century, reserved for powerful leaders who were unafraid to act unilaterally when necessary; the initial recipients of this reverence were George Washington, Andrew Jackson, and Lincoln (47). But Washington and Jackson were already revered military heroes before entering the Executive Mansion. Lincoln, in contrast, demonstrated that the presidency could make even a country lawyer with no executive experience into a powerful leader. His death in office only added the allure of martyrdom to the public’s regard for his leadership.

In addition, Lincoln’s political life exemplified the power of marketing oneself—not necessarily one’s policies or platform—directly to the public. As Ronald White describes, the changes to Lincoln’s public persona based upon the needs of his political career provide an example of his canny sense of public relations. As a young man seeking state office in his home county of Sangamon, he was “Honest Abe,” the man who refused to leave behind his frontier debts like so many other pioneers. When he became a rising national figure in the Whig and Republican parties, he was branded “Old Abe,” the familiar storyteller and country philosopher. As the Republican Presidential nominee, he was the “Rail Splitter,” the defender of free white labor against Southern slave power, and as the commander-in-chief during the Civil War, he became “Father Abraham,” who treated his soldiers with the compassion of a loving parent. Finally and perhaps most importantly, to millions of freed African American slaves, Lincoln was “The Great Emancipator” (3-4). Through clever manipulation of his image and its delivery to the

public, Lincoln became a familiar and well-defined figure to Americans who never met him.

But another transformation Lincoln brought to his office would prove deeply controversial. No president did more to consolidate sweeping power in the office than the sixteenth president. Lincoln would drive the agenda of Congress, working behind the scenes to accomplish his ends, rather than passively awaiting legislative orders to carry out (Nichols 22). The military procurement requirements of the Civil War expanded the federal bureaucracy enormously, requiring Lincoln to exercise extensive and labor-intensive administrative skill. Lincoln invoked broad war powers to make policy unilaterally—the suspension of *habeas corpus* and the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation were among the most notable examples—in the name of saving the Union (22). Even the concept of the president as an engaged commander-in-chief making military strategy arrived with Lincoln; not even experienced generals-turned-Presidents like Washington and Jackson did more to make the White House into a war headquarters than did the former colonel in the Black Hawk War (Nelson 114). After Lincoln, presidents who simply carried out the will of Congress and implemented their party's platform would inevitably be seen as weak, while those who expanded the power of the executive and promoted their own agendas would be viewed as strong. No longer simply the head of government, the president would forever be seen as the head of state and the unitary symbol of Americanism.

As a result of Lincoln's presidency, Americans looked to the holder of the office for strong but compassionate leadership. Lincoln actively cultivated public opinion, reading dozens of newspapers and corresponding with their editors (White 501). He

called the war “a People’s contest” and worked assiduously to keep the people on his side (qtd. White 426). That included, even as President, responding to their letters and meeting them personally during scheduled hours. As a result, the American people believed they knew Abraham Lincoln the man, even as he exercised a degree of power that placed him above his fellow countrymen. That balance—combined, of course, with the eventual military success of the Union—would make Lincoln a “superhero” in Nelson’s estimation. Perhaps no politician proved less capable of understanding or duplicating that path to presidential apotheosis than Lincoln’s predecessor, James Buchanan, who watched the Union dissolve and then retired to Pennsylvania. In contrast, Lincoln and his most successful general, Ulysses Grant, would emerge from the Civil War as heroes with narratives to be savored by the public.

It is literature’s great loss that Lincoln never had the opportunity to become a memoirist of the war. Instead, he would be a casualty, the first President assassinated. His one foray into autobiography was, from a literary standpoint, minor. Lincoln had been urged in December 1858 by his friend Jesse Fell to produce an autobiography for distribution to friendly newspaper publishers ahead of the 1860 Presidential election (Ecelbarger 4). Lincoln declined, stating that his “early history” could scarcely prove of “interest [to] you or anybody else” (qtd. Ecelbarger 6). Little did Lincoln realize that his childhood would become the stuff of American legend, his image as a self-made frontiersman and virile rail-splitter his calling card. In 1859, Lincoln sensed his political fortunes rising and produced a multi-paragraph autobiographical sketch, then forwarded it to Fell for distribution (111). Urging Fell to restructure the few paragraphs into third person narration and adding excerpts of his public speeches, Lincoln would make his

only foray into memoir (112). Considering the enormity of Lincoln's life and presidency, as well as his gift for language, the potential Lincoln presidential memoir might also be considered a casualty of the war.

And what of the two presidents who did in fact produce memoirs? A copy of James Buchanan's *The Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion* (1866) sits alongside George Washington's Revolutionary War uniform and Thomas Jefferson's writing desk in the Smithsonian's Museum of American History. Though obviously not the first to be written, it was the first to be completed and published during the author's lifetime. Like Monroe's before and modern presidential memoirs after, it was written and marketed for prompt publication, but unlike its predecessors in the genre, it was completed and released during the author's lifetime. Its ulterior motive was to save the author's flagging reputation, which makes it an inherently rhetorical work that must be understood as such. Buchanan attempts to distance himself from his own narrative, taking on the guise of objective historian. The work proved a failure, as Buchanan's reputation has never recovered from the damage incurred by the war.

While Buchanan's goals were rhetorical, Ulysses Grant's were pecuniary. Grant's *Personal Memoirs* was written for the solitary goal of rescuing his family from serious financial reversals. Like Buchanan, Grant had become an unpopular figure during his presidency, but by reaching back to his military career, he would find a surfeit of heroic capital that he could invest in his autobiography. This gambit would prove extraordinarily successful, both literarily and financially, as Grant's work has become accepted as the finest Presidential memoir and also among the best-sellers of the genre. Why did Grant succeed where Buchanan failed? Perhaps Grant understood the lesson of Lincoln:

Americans love men who fight and overcome.

## II

Unlike Lincoln, James Buchanan consistently has been regarded as among the lesser White House occupants, and his fame has faded with the years. Since the onset of presidential rankings in 1948, he has ranked at or near the bottom in every survey. How could he have gone from winning election in 1856 to leaving office one of the most despised men in the United States in four short years? Part of the reason was somewhat beyond his control: he was a convenient scapegoat for a conflict that had been brewing since the founding, and bore the misfortune of occupying the Executive Mansion during the crucial months leading up to the Civil War. Any fair-minded person would concede that the war was not all Buchanan's fault. But a major part of Buchanan's unpopularity stemmed from his insistence on the constraints that the Constitution placed on his office, an acceptable assertion in times of peace, perhaps, but not in a time of crisis. And this, unquestionably, was his own failing.

Buchanan failed to be a savior when the nation most needed one. While Lincoln claimed expansive powers to save the Union, Buchanan adhered to a restrained view of his office that jibed with his limited view of the Constitution. Slavery, in his view, was a constitutional right, however deplorable, and could not be stopped. Executive power, in contrast, was limited only to those functions defined in the language of the founding document. In short, Buchanan's view was that the Constitution left him no alternative than to stand by helplessly while slavery tore the Union apart. But once out of office, the salvation of his own reputation sparked the passive Buchanan to action. His 1866 memoir *Mr. Buchanan's Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion* was an ambitious effort to

reshape contemporary public opinion. Unfortunately, the book would serve only to underscore that he was the wrong man in office for the times.

Buchanan's motive is to produce an apologia, to rewrite history to explain his own beliefs and actions and thereby to reshape national historical consciousness to improve the public's opinion of his administration. Therefore, the text seeks to win readers' confidence with meticulous research, extensive footnoting, and persuasive argument. But this approach also has shortcomings. As a writer of somewhat limited skill, Buchanan—perhaps because of his legal background—is overconfident about his reasoning and rhetorical skills. His cool, distant voice relies on the ability of language, whether a Supreme Court decision or his own manuscript, to alter the beliefs and actions of the American populace. Buchanan recognized that the war elicited high emotions from his fellow Americans, and he believed that reason and distance could soothe them. But his rigid conception of reason and distance likewise prevented him from revealing his humanity to an audience torn by four years of war. The book's failings ultimately stem less from what Buchanan writes than what he omits: his failure to respond emotionally to the terrific loss of life for which he was blamed counteracted his impressive documentation. He simply misreads his audience.

The revisionary story of *Mr. Buchanan's Administration* begins in 1861, when the newly discharged president began to seek public vindication. Philip Klein, Buchanan's most thorough biographer, paints the "Sage of Wheatland" as an author obsessed, setting out with vigor to take his life in his own hands. The record Buchanan compiled from government documents and memoranda was strengthened by "pester[ing] his friends for extracts of letters he did not have, or for confirmation of minor points, or copies of

fugitive pamphlets and committee reports” (Klein 417). Working exclusively from Wheatland, his estate in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Buchanan corresponded widely to request copies and texts of documents and relied on amateur investigators (his nephew James Buchanan Henry most prominently) to do the legwork. But even his friends warned him that publishing his defense during the war would cause backlash from the public and the Republican Congress (417). He would, however, not be dissuaded.

Throughout 1861, Buchanan worked quietly and methodically, waiting for the right opportunity for publication. By November, he bragged that his assembled materials could create “not merely a good defense, but a triumphant vindication of my administration” (Buchanan to King 227). Buchanan needed the right opening to place his “defense” before the public, but with the war proceeding badly for the Union, none was immediately forthcoming. By January 1862, he insisted that he had no “intention of writing a history of my administration” although he had gathered a “reference . . . as would fully justify me” (Buchanan to Lane 247). However, he denied any intention of seeking publication and repeated in March that, despite reports that he was working on a complete autobiography, he had only collected documents to justify his actions “which might be put in form at any moment” (Buchanan to Toucey 262). But when would this right “moment” come?

He prudently decided to wait until the war’s conclusion. Much of the public blamed Buchanan for the conflict, and his apologia was likely to receive a hostile response. In 1865, Buchanan at last submitted his manuscript to the D.S. Appleton publishing house in New York (Klein 418). In September of that year, Buchanan declined an offer from his friend William Reed, a judge and historian, to write the preface, instead

choosing to write it himself. Carefully constructed to try to avoid backlash, Buchanan's preface notes that while the "historical narrative" was "prepared soon after [the war's] outbreak," it "was delayed to avoid the possible imputation . . . that any portion of it was intended to embarrass Mr. Lincoln's administration" (*Administration* iii). Lincoln's martyrdom in April 1865 was a major hurdle. Buchanan paid the late President due deference by explicitly crediting the delayed publication to the war and assassination, though noting that the text had been originally written "substantially in the present form" (iii).

But Appleton, which would eventually publish Civil War memoirs by notables including Joseph Johnston and William Tecumseh Sherman, was in no hurry to publish Buchanan's tome (Tebbel 205). By October 5, 1865, Buchanan's patience with the publisher was wearing thin. He observed, "I believe my book will be published in the course of the present month. It has been delayed much longer than I desired or expected" (Buchanan to King 5 October 1865 401). He did not have to wait much longer. By November 25, he wrote, "You will have seen ere that my little book has been launched on a stormy ocean" (Buchanan to Capen 408). Still, Buchanan was confident that, though "severely criticized," it would survive because of the strength of its "facts and authorities cited" (408). "Thank God I have lived to perform this duty," he exulted (408). He expressed undiminished confidence even when "[a] strong attempt" was made "to cry it down in New York", concluding, "[I]t will make its own way" (Buchanan to Lane 30 November 1865 408). In January 1866, Appleton released *Mr. Buchanan's Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion* into the "stormy waters" of public opinion.

Buchanan the author faced a dual task: to write his own personal history and to

(re)write American history. Like his predecessors' efforts, *Buchanan's Administration* fell under what Jared Sparks called historical biography, the life and letters format that constructs personal narrative through "copious selections from letters and other original papers" and that, thanks in large part to Sparks's efforts, would become a standard form in published nineteenth century biographies (Casper 140-1). Indeed, reliance on "authentic" and "authoritative" documents would lend biography an intellectual and scholarly heft that it had lacked in classical times (140-1). Therefore, Buchanan knew that he must balance his own views with a standard and expected level of scholarship.

Thus Buchanan came to see his text less as a conventional memoir and more as "a historical narrative." As such, it is composed largely of speech transcripts, news articles, public correspondences, and a connective and somewhat alienating third-person prose, all of which combine to give little appearance of familiar autobiographical form. Its dry, straightforward style relies so heavily on the authority of outside documents to recreate its subject that Buchanan hardly seems a living being or a complete character.

Buchanan's efforts to invert the traditional, inward-focused form of autobiography by constructing a historical context outside of himself detach him as author from his former self as president to appeal to rational readers who would appreciate his argument. This approach failed miserably, perhaps in no small part because of a lack of such readers.

The decision to use third-person narration, in the mold of Caesar and Napoleon, was a poor choice for such a non-imperial figure. The use of third person can help create the appearance of objective history, but for a President who had been accused of despotism, excessive detachment from the audience was unlikely to arouse much sympathy. Why did he do it? Perhaps Buchanan believed that demonstrating sensitivity to

maintaining distance between his roles as autobiographer, subject, and historian would prove persuasive. By replacing “I” with “Buchanan,” the “President,” or the familiar “Mr. B,” he can play both roles of observer and observed. As a controversial figure, Buchanan found it appealing to write “about [himself] as if [he] were other,” and “in a literal but nontechnical sense defaced,” only a figure of his times (Egan 73). Positioning himself outside of himself could entice the reader to distinguish his emotional reactions to Buchanan from the argument of the text. By obscuring his authorship, Buchanan can shift attention from the messenger to the message, allowing for a veneer of objectivity as he reconstructs the history of his administration.

The success of this tactic can be measured because, unlike James Monroe’s third-person narrative, Buchanan’s work made it to the marketplace. The style’s defining characteristic of distance must therefore be considered not just in light of authorial intention but also in its effects on the contemporary audience. Autobiography theorist Phillip Lejeune states that third person puts “distancing . . . out in front . . . to express an articulation (a tension) between identity and difference” (36). Buchanan’s goal is “to dissociate [him]self from the person” he once was and pretend “to talk about [him]self as if he were another person” (36). However, even Lejeune assumes the use of a “title (or a preface) . . . to impose an autobiographical reading” (42). Yet the title page obscured the book’s authorship; the Appleton edition does not specify Buchanan as the author, while that of the British Sampson and Low edition does so prominently. In addition, the preface is unsigned. This is not just textual distance but near-complete alienation of the autobiographer from his text.

By permitting such complete dissociation, Buchanan hopes to step away

from the controversial actions of the past and separate Buchanan as character (who breeds controversy) from Buchanan the elder statesman narrator (who extols reason). Klein suggests that the book “manifested the anxiety of the author, in common with everyone else of his day, to escape all appearance of agency in promoting the conflict” (419). In the confines of his own text, Buchanan can easily shift this agency to everyone from abolitionists to slaveholders to the Republican Congress to his own federal officers. The narrative style minimizes his personal insertion into the narrative and allows other figures to take responsibility for the events described. By standing outside of his own history, Buchanan distances himself from the role of agency in that history.

Having positioned himself as a restrained, unemotional recorder of plain fact, Buchanan expects to find an audience receptive and willing to consider his arguments. Therefore, he saw little need to reveal his inner self in his text. Indeed, Buchanan proudly proclaims that he is “abstain[ing]” from using any “private correspondence” (vi). After all, Buchanan’s explicit goal was to defend his public actions. In this limited sense, the text was well-constructed. Klein notes that he “marshaled the evidence in orderly array, documented it from official records, and produced a powerful case” (419). Even the *Dictionary of American Biography* calls it “an unusually careful document” (214). The construction of the text would have to walk a fine line between creating an argument and creating, however obliquely, a reliable self who can thwart the public’s charges against him.

As a swipe at critics who labeled him a traitor, Buchanan immediately and purposefully strengthens the rhetorical ties between Buchanan the man and Buchanan the historical figure in an effort to exalt Buchanan the patriot. He moves early not only to

establish himself as a true-blooded American but also to imply a chronological parallel between his life and the life of the nation. He notes that he drew “his first breath soon after the adoption of the Federal constitution and the Union it established” (iii). James Buchanan was born in 1791, ten years after Cornwallis’s surrender at Yorktown, four years after the Constitutional Convention, and the very year the Bill of Rights was adopted. The birth and first breath of the man are temporally linked to the birth and first breath of the United States. Buchanan’s career as “an eye-witness of the blessed effects” of the Union makes him a fit and reliable historian of national as well as personal history, and his personal narrative also becomes national narrative.

It is also fitting that four events followed closely between the years 1865 and 1868: the end of the Civil War, the assassination of Lincoln, the appearance of *Mr. Buchanan’s Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion*, and finally Buchanan’s death in 1868. Though Buchanan asserts that “[h]e never doubted the successful event of the war, even during its most gloomy periods” (iii), his autobiography, the metaphorical taking of his own life as first coined by Henry Adams, was substantially completed by 1862, at the height of the war when a Confederate victory seemed a distinct possibility. The autobiographical “suicide act” could be read as a form of *hari kiri*, timed with the apparently imminent death and dissolution of the Union. As his successor Grant observed in his own memoirs, Buchanan not only did not act to save the Union but also believed that it could not act in its self-defense (114). The Union, once in dire jeopardy despite Buchanan’s revisionist optimism, survived the challenges and by 1865 had finally been preserved.

Now that the Union had been pulled back from the brink, Buchanan attempted to

do the same by using his autobiography to restore his ruined reputation, to use his textual suicide as a tool for his own regeneration. Unfortunately for him, the war's result had already been sealed in a President's blood; Lincoln's transformation from humble hero to Christlike martyr dwarfed any of Buchanan's attempts at redemption. The Union survived Buchanan, who succumbed in 1868, three years after Appomattox and Ford's Theatre, and two years after the Thirteenth Amendment ended the peculiar institution that Buchanan had once defended. Buchanan's final breath came as the nation's brush with death was at last behind it.

While tying his personal history to the nation's history may have seemed a clever ploy, the content of Buchanan's argument revealed that he still held resolutely to views that recent events had repudiated. Unlike Lincoln's example of adapting his public persona to meet the needs of the public, Buchanan seems so unchanged by the late rebellion that readers must wonder to what extent he comprehends its gravity. He strikes a politically tone-deaf line of defiance with his opening line:

That the Constitution does not confer upon Congress power to interfere with slavery in the states, has been admitted by all parties and confirmed by all legal decisions ever since the origin of the Federal Government. (9)

Though Buchanan is accurate writing in 1862, his statement is an odd one to read in 1866 after tens of thousands of men died for the right of Congress "to interfere with slavery in the states." In fact, the Thirteenth Amendment, which rendered Buchanan's argument forever moot, was ratified several weeks before the book reached the public. The change to acknowledge slaves as human beings and American citizens was by far the most

dramatic outcome of the war, but Buchanan refused to evolve with his country. With this opening salvo, he regresses to defending positions fashionable before but meaningless after the war, a public relations disaster waiting to happen in a book designed to improve its author's image. Buchanan's failure to reflect recent changes taints his claim of analogy between his life and the nation's history.

Buchanan's general argument was simple: blame anyone and everyone else. In a tour de force of unabashed triangulation, he blames the war on "the long, active, and persistent hostility of the Northern Abolitionists . . . against Southern slavery" and "the corresponding antagonism and violence" of "the advocates of slavery" (iv). As for Buchanan himself, he is the man in the middle, practically an innocent bystander. He moves well outside the scope of his personal narrative to present the history of sectional discord from the Nullification Crisis of 1830 to the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. Not only were powerful interests at work, but also a quarter century of intensifying controversy awaited the winner of the 1856 election. The mess was thus not of Buchanan's doing but rather left for him by his predecessors. The final result was that "all [Buchanan's] efforts to avoid the Civil War would be frustrated by agencies far beyond his control" (v). True, the roots of the war ran far too deep for any one man or action to be held wholly responsible, but it was also clear that Buchanan was not the man to meet crisis head-on, except perhaps in the safe confines of autobiography.

Buchanan's attack situates his opponents as contrary to reason itself. Calling the abolitionists "misguided fanatics," later upgraded to "numerous and enthusiastic partisans," Buchanan found the origins of agitation in the New England pulpit (10). When he traces the growth of anti-slavery societies from Boston to New York to

Philadelphia, he conveniently omits the history of those cities for producing freedom-obsessed zealots when the American colonists were the subjected people (11). In a move that may hint why he was the “bachelor president,” Buchanan tips his cap condescendingly to the use of women in abolitionist societies. He marvels that as public speakers they managed “harangues . . . as violent and extreme as those of their fathers, husbands, and brothers” (10). Buchanan wants to set aside such emotionally-charged rhetoric based on religion or gender in favor of a simple argument that slavery, “if sinful in itself,” was a “domestic institution” under the control of the states (10). The sins of Georgia and Texas were not the sins of Pennsylvania or Ohio. For Massachusetts’s citizens to move for the abolition of slavery in South Carolina was as inappropriate as calling for abolition in Brazil (10). Cool reason would reveal that the responsibility for slavery lay exclusively in the laps of the states that practiced it.

Buchanan’s assumption of a voice of reason against fanaticism is further linked to religious fervor in a rather uncomfortable passage. He advocates a hands-off policy toward slavery not only on states rights but also religious grounds, leaving the sins of slavery to the “Supreme Governor of nations” instead of the “spirit of interference” which motivated abolitionists (64). Buchanan defends his inaction against slavery not just through his constitutional beliefs but also by his embrace of the “peace and charity” of Christianity, comparing the agitators’ methods to Catholic-Protestant or Christian-Muslim warfare (65). Buchanan’s conceptions come from a religion based on faith in a “superintending Providence which never acts rashly” and which could have eradicated slavery without endangering “the benign principle” (64-5). Reason and inactivity are not merely linked but part of an ordained plan. This inversion of the animating religious

fervor of the abolitionists defends slavery with ease, if under the “humane treatment” advocated by scripture (65). But the naive argument ultimately collapses on itself, even as Buchanan makes it with a straight face. He cites the conquistador Cortez as a man of “perfect sincerity” who sought only to save the souls of the Aztecs (65). Thus, Buchanan presents a concerted strategy throughout his narrative to present a reasoned alternative to his enemies’ positions, thereby painting them as fanatics.

The reader must have confidence in Buchanan’s trustworthiness as a historian to accept his explanations, and Buchanan actively courts that trust. When General Winfield Scott accused Buchanan of a lack of decisive action that allowed the cotton states’ secession, Buchanan responded by claiming that Scott’s report to President Lincoln “evidently proceeded from a defective memory prejudiced by a strong bias”—the implication, of course, is that Buchanan suffers from neither (170). Buchanan questions both the general’s knowledge, which was based on recollection, and his motives. To strengthen his own case, Buchanan offers the contrast between his own carefully researched text, with its ample outside verification, and Scott’s writing style, which “rests mainly on vague and confused recollections of private conversations” that are “strictly confidential” and thus not subject to independent verification (170-1). Because Scott’s evidence is inherently private and unavailable, the reader can only take him at his word. Buchanan thus offers Scott as an example of an unreliable historian while convinced that the ready availability of his own external sources buttresses his own credibility, since any interested soul can inspect them for distortions.

Curiously, the paragraph demolishing Scott for using private sources follows on the same page Buchanan’s refutation of the charge that he prepared inadequate security

for the 1861 inauguration, which was marred by death threats against Lincoln.

Buchanan's argument ends with this statement:

It is due to President Lincoln to state, that throughout his long progress in the same carriage as the late President . . . he was far from evincing the slightest apprehension of danger. (170)

Buchanan finds himself squarely in Scott's predicament. Just as Scott needs Buchanan to confirm the events of their meetings because they were confidential, Buchanan needs Lincoln to confirm his own assertion that the new President felt no danger of violence at the inauguration; only Buchanan and Lincoln rode in the carriage. Of course, by 1868, Lincoln too was a "late President" and unable to testify, but Buchanan himself cannot verify the statement (hence, "It is due . . .") and only the deceased Lincoln's unavailable confirmation can make it believable. Buchanan is, after all, subject to shortcomings of memory, and his bias in recollecting the events is obvious (170-1). So, much like Scott, Buchanan also expects his readers to take his word for what happened, relying on the strength of the supporting material elsewhere to win their confidence.

The availability of independent verification further arises as an issue when Buchanan describes an exchange of letters with representatives from South Carolina on the eve of the Fort Sumter assault. Buchanan's flat refusal of the state commissioners' request to remove federal troops from the fort provoked a response "so violent," "confounded," and "disrespectful" that Buchanan returned it without reply (183). The "disrespectful" letter, which was of course extremely embarrassing to Buchanan, was "published at length in the 'Congressional Globe'" (184). His strong initial response, in contrast, was "never published in this so-called official register" (184). Because of the

record's selectiveness, the "offensive letter was scattered broadcast over the country" while Buchanan's response "was buried in one of the . . . volumes of executive documents" (184).

Demonstrating the shortcomings of the "official record" is crucial to Buchanan's project, for he must not only write history but rewrite the existing record that condemns him. Buchanan wants his readers to know that he stood up to the South Carolina commissioners, a stance that might counteract the accusations of weakness. But the letter incident also strengthens his case for the unreliability of the official record because it is an example of a part of that record which is misleading and thus in need of correction. Much like Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration, the letter's contents appear in a personal record, allowing what had been previously unprinted to at last enter the national transcript. This is a benefit that Buchanan, like Jefferson, enjoys as a president autobiographer: the ability to make personal narrative part of the nation's history.

Nevertheless, one fact of the historical record is certain: Buchanan's official strategy, however apparently reasonable, failed to prevent the Civil War. Similarly, his authorial strategy fails to mask a core problem: his denial of bloodshed. Not long after his portrayal of Northern Abolitionists as "misguided fanatics," Buchanan turns to the actions of the South (28). Heretofore "the assailed party . . . far more sinned against than sinning," the pro-slavery forces took the aggressor's role by pressing the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 (28). Some historians claim the Civil War began in Kansas, not at Fort Sumter, when pro-slavery and anti-slavery groups flooded the territory to take part in the referendum on slavery in the territory. Buchanan admits that "scenes of bloodshed . . . were enacted by both parties, disgraceful to the American character" (29). But the

generally long-winded, meticulous narrator concludes, “It is not our purpose to recapitulate these sad events” and instead begins a narrative about his own response to allegations of voter fraud lodged by slavery opponents in Kansas (29).

The recapitulation of events is a major component of Buchanan’s narrative. In his opening chapter, he recounts the history of slavery agitation in America since 1789, much of which is irrelevant to the history of his administration. Why, in such a carefully researched book, omit much of the Bleeding Kansas conflict that was so pressing when he took office? The text does what Buchanan’s policies could not: it contains the bloodshed in a tidy little paragraph, three sentences in five lines of text. This paragraph stands out visually because it is surrounded by lengthy paragraphs which deal with the congressional wrangling and underlying legal and constitutional issues. In place of acts of war and terrorism, Buchanan posits debate. Arguments about property rights, equality, and state sovereignty take the place of weapons and ammunition. The history of Bleeding Kansas that Buchanan wishes to write takes place far from the killing fields of Lawrence and Osawatomie in the safe, civil confines of Washington, where the worst obstacles are “extreme rancor and many threats” but “nothing more” (28).

President Buchanan’s initial response to the crisis is indicative of his faith in constitutional law. Upon entering office, “he indulged the hope that the anti-slavery party would abandon their hostility . . . and obey the laws” (30). Specifically, Buchanan hoped that abolitionists would recognize the pro-slavery territorial government, which had been buttressed both by the Supreme Court and Congress. But Buchanan admits he was “destined to disappointment” in “this reasonable hope” (30). His hope seems anything but reasonable. Entire families had been slaughtered in Kansas, and Buchanan believed that

the stroke of a pen could cause such bitter hurt and hatred to dissipate overnight. His hope was not only unreasonable but unrealistic. Given Buchanan's faith in his beloved Constitution, its failure to provide a peaceful resolution to the Kansas conflict must have been a deep disappointment. Unable to face the gory results of this failure of the American system of laws, he corrects his failure to contain and control the violent agitation that led to war. Autobiography provides the forum in which he exercises the complete control he never did as President. And his handling of the violence in his text is much like it was in office: brief, distant, and dismissive.

In the midst of his account of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, Buchanan makes a strange comment: "It would be a waste of time to detail the history of this raid" (62-3). The comment comes near the middle of a lengthy paragraph that describes Brown's "career" as an agitator, then details the plot of the invasion even to the point of including the number and types of the raiders' weapons and the number and racial makeup of their party. Buchanan then recounts how the townspeople awoke to find Brown in control, and finally he recalls the capture, conviction, and execution of the raiders and lists the casualties of their lawlessness. Nowhere else does Buchanan consider details "a waste of time." In fact, the comment itself is a waste of time both to write and to read. The narrative is complete without it. The sentence only draws attention to itself and in turn to what Buchanan is declining to include. Buchanan is concealing the bloody details, substituting dry numbers and statistics, putting the number of rifles carried by the raiders at equal emphasis to the number of citizens killed.

Buchanan's omission does not completely disguise bloodshed, but perhaps the sentence can be of some use as a window into Buchanan's construction of history. John

Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry is a major event of the administration, and as a historian Buchanan naturally feels he must mention it. But his tone of declaring the excluded material not only outside his purpose but a "waste of time" strongly asserts his authorial power, his right to pick and choose what to include or exclude. Because he is writing personal as well as historical narrative, Buchanan takes control of his own life story while still relying on historical accounts to provide the framework. With a brief sentence, Buchanan asserts his ownership of his history at the same time that he defies the role of the traditional historian, who certainly would include what Buchanan excludes.

Buchanan's most bizarre statement occurs in the penultimate chapter, summarizing the Buchanan administration's policy in foreign and domestic affairs unrelated to the war. He claims of the administration, "Both its domestic and foreign policy proved eminently successful" (231). Other than handing the Union over to Lincoln with six fewer states than had been handed to him, perhaps Buchanan could claim some success. But obviously, no matter the brilliance of Buchanan's Utah policy or his treatment of Paraguay, his policies are and should be judged on his handling of the one event that forever changed American history: the secession crisis. For Buchanan to think his readers would accept such a claim of success is a sign of his prideful overconfidence in his own reasoning, debating, and historical skills.

Buchanan wants not mercy but justification, and his book demands nothing less. In an overarching context of constitutional constraints and partisan politics, some sense might be made of Buchanan's policies. But to a nation still stinging from the decimation of its lower half and the loss of so many lives, Buchanan's reasoned approach resembled a lack of concern. The nation needed healing, not argument, and an emotional appeal

might have allowed Buchanan to “share their pain” and join the mourning. Perhaps had he exhibited humility and sadness, he could have gained acceptance, but his dry, logical approach did not wear well. Like so many of his decisions, it was simply the wrong approach at the wrong time.

Buchanan’s belief in rational argument is both his greatest strength and fatal flaw. But perhaps the most compelling “evidence” in his favor is the one small sequence in which the author becomes almost fully human. The possibility and consequences of a civil war weighed heavily on the president. If author Buchanan conceals bloodshed, then President Buchanan was all too aware of it. He knew the enormous stakes: a “long and bloody war,” “immense sacrifice of kindred blood,” “enormous debt” compensated by “oppressive taxation,” and the destruction of “commercial, manufacturing, artisan, and laboring classes” (112-3). When Buchanan acknowledges the horrific results of the war and shows his human side, he becomes almost a pitiable figure. He is not overstating the case when he observes, “No public man was ever placed in a more trying and responsible position” (109). He was one man facing an impossible task, to choose between the appeasement of allowing secession or the violence of preventing it.

His acute awareness of the war’s devastation is far more compelling than his attempts to shift the focus away from it. By throwing himself on the mercy of the audience, taking responsibility for his mistakes and asking who among them could have done better under the circumstances, Buchanan might have obtained a measure of public sympathy. Yet he never makes a direct plea for understanding and seldom presents himself as a living human being instead of a relic from the past. He reins in his emotions quickly, and the “immense sacrifice of kindred blood” is soaked up completely within the

text.

The *New York Times* opened the critical attacks on the memoirs with a severe personal assault in the December 1, 1865, issue. Calling Buchanan a “self-apologist for his own imbecile and disastrous administration,” the *Times* suggested that his “profound silence” would have been more appropriate to “[g]ood taste” and “the best service he could possibly have rendered to his own blighted fame” (4). The editors suggested that Buchanan should have allowed his enemies to tell his story and then “appealed for forgiveness or forbearance from his outraged but humane countrymen” (4). The article continues with a lengthy personal attack that includes accusation and unfavorable comparisons to other presidents. It even claims that Buchanan hoped to assure his place in history as the last President of the United States by allowing the Union—and with it, the office—to dissolve. Brushing aside Buchanan’s claims of being the victim of bitter partisanship, the *Times* accuses him of “deliberately betray[ing] the constitution of his country into the hands of his enemies” and violating his oath of office (4). The “stormy waters” had begun churning even before the book reached the public.

Still, Buchanan claimed that interest in the book was strong. In mid-January 1866, just two weeks after the release, Buchanan reported, “Several thousands have already been sold, & the Appletons inform me the demand is still increasing” (Buchanan to Blake 412). Horatio King, Buchanan’s future biographer, bought the book “as soon as it was offered here for sale” and “read it with great pleasure” (414). In a massive overstatement, King called the “chapters on the occurrences in the closing months of your Administration . . . thrillingly interesting” (414). After passing along the approval of former Secretary of War Joseph Holt, he claimed to have lent his copy out “to one and

another ever since I read it myself” (414). Perhaps out of respect for the book’s “very high price,” Buchanan cheerfully sent a second copy to replace the much-lent one (Buchanan to King 21 April 1866 416). Several friends received free copies, but the well eventually ran dry. Buchanan ruefully wrote to R. B. Rhett, a South Carolina fire-eater who had served in Congress with the future President, that he would forward a copy “had I any copies on hand” (Buchanan to Rhett 443). The author’s pride knew no bounds. “[I]t is an honest book . . . no fact therein has been specifically contradicted” (443).

The January 1866 issue of *The New Englander* offered a much lower opinion. The reviewer called the book “[s]mooth, specious, apparently logical” before moving on to the real attacks (170). Listing Buchanan’s justifications, including lack of congressional support and lack of troops, the reviewer sarcastically concludes, “[T]his is no joke, nor series of jokes, but serious argument” (171). Strikingly, *The New Englander* does not criticize Buchanan for breaking his silence, admitting that “no other human being is capable of writing such a production” (170). Of course, this is not intended as a compliment. He dismisses Buchanan’s entire case because it omitted “the fundamental and comprehensive” fact that the Democratic Party’s southern sympathies interfered with the protection of national interests (172). Concluding that the book constitutes nothing more than an “appeal to our charity,” the reviewer dismisses it as an “argument [which] disingenuously suppresses the truth,” written by a “man whose connivance with evil precipitated the rebellion” (172).

*The Nation* was no kinder, deriding *Buchanan’s Administration* as “an ingenious autobiography” of “imbecility” (723). Critical of Buchanan’s defense of the Supreme Court’s infamous *Dred Scott* decision, his support for the pro-slavery Lecompton

constitution of Kansas, and his faith in the Compromise of 1850, the reviewer asserts that Buchanan's desperation to become a peace-maker made him "bound by an unwarranted armistice" with the secessionists of South Carolina (723). As in the other reviews, attacking the book is almost if not completely secondary to attacking the author. Buchanan is called a "tool" of secession and accused of "compromise in self-defense" (724). The reviewer concludes that if *Buchanan's Administration* becomes "his last intrusion upon public notice, he has written for himself an epitaph under which few men would care to lie" (724). The book garnered so many scathing reviews that by mid-January 1866, Buchanan urged his friend John Blake not to send him another such review, noting, "If there is anything disagreeable in it, *as is doubtless the case* (italics original), some person will be sure to send it to me" (412). If the book is indeed Buchanan's "epitaph," it would be fair to conclude that "Buchanan's Testament," as *The Nation* called it, fell flat and with it any hopes of reclamation.

Although his memoir contains no material regarding his childhood, family, or other non-official activities, Buchanan wanted very much to reveal his inner, private life, just not through his own pen. To that end, he formed an agreement with an author named James Shunk to write an "anecdotal biography" designed to present the ex-President as a complete human being rather than a government official (Klein 419). Both Shunk and his wife moved into Wheatland and spent several months taking notes, drawing on Buchanan's papers and memories. After leaving Wheatland, Shunk began to write the manuscript but, despite Buchanan's investment, the book was never completed. In 1867, Buchanan turned to his friend William Reed, whom he paid a fee to recover Shunk's notes and complete the book. Although Shunk apparently completed a portion of the

work, a trip by Reed to Philadelphia to collect the notes proved fruitless. Even today Shunk's notes are absent from the Buchanan papers. Buchanan knew Reed to be a notorious procrastinator, so he made a separate agreement with Mrs. Reed which would pay her five thousand dollars at the manuscript's completion. Buchanan hoped she would nag her husband to finish it faster (419). This effort, too, ultimately failed. In 1867, Buchanan wrote to his niece that Reed's writing had faltered "on account of his wife's death [and] professional engagements" (Buchanan to Johnston 457)—which included defending Jefferson Davis at the former Confederate president's treason trial. Buchanan never saw his hopes fulfilled; the first complete biography based on his papers did not appear until 1883, well after his death.

Still, the value of the book is not just as character rehabilitation or a strongly documented record or a forgotten work to be rediscovered. All presidential life-writing carries some inherent value simply as a record of the office, and even if it is the final testament of a failure, Buchanan's effort was the first of a genre that has become a cultural touchstone. Only in that memoir can Buchanan, not the reviewers or historians, have the last word. The final words of Buchanan's book are also the final words of his final address as President, delivered on January 8, 1861, included in complete form in the closing Appendix. Let them be his final words here as well:

I feel that my duty has been faithfully, though it may be imperfectly, performed; and whatever the result may be, I shall carry to my grave the consciousness that I at least meant well for my country. (296)

### III

If James Buchanan's memoirs represent a failed attempt at the recasting of a

public life through autobiography, then Ulysses S. Grant's must provide the strongest counterexample. Grant's 1885 work *Personal Memoirs* was a triumph of both commerce and literature. Edmund Wilson called the text "the most remarkable work of its kind," adding, "The thick pair of volumes . . . used to stand, like a solid attestation of the victory of the Union forces, on the shelves of every pro-Union home" (qtd. Perry 234). As Grant's life ended, his memoirs proved to be the public burial of President Grant, the revival of General Grant, and the stunning success of author Grant. The representative Civil War memoir by the representative Civil War veteran would secure his family's financial well-being, the first Presidential memoir to find a broad public audience, and enhance his public reputation and memory. *Personal Memoirs* proves the power of the life narrative to restore and correct the public narrative.

First and foremost, *Personal Memoirs* is a military book. As Cox observes, the three preeminent figures of the Civil War were President Lincoln, Robert E. Lee, and Grant, and "Grant alone realized the full material benefits of victory" (101). With Lincoln dead and Lee defeated, Grant would become the beloved hero, the instant celebrity, who would serve as the face of the triumph of the Union. In 1868, he would receive the full benefit of his victory by winning election as President Lincoln's successor. But President Grant would never, perhaps could never, surpass the achievements of General Grant, the military celebrity, and his decision to focus his memoirs exclusively on his Civil War experience reflects this reality.

The style of Grant's writing might also be called military: precise, economical, and rigidly organized. *Memoirs* adheres to a strict chronology, segmented into short, tightly focused chapters. The action of the war provides the flow of the narrative, which

was enhanced by the inclusion of fold-out maps for the reader's convenience. Any reader—perhaps, say, a veteran who saw action under Grant and wishes to read the commander's account—can quickly find specific events in the text. The author offers only occasional commentary, generally foregoing his opinions and instead relating only what he saw, heard, and read. The result is an understated but compelling authorial ethos; every quality of the text posits Grant as a reliable and confident recorder of fact.

The quality of Grant's prose attracted lavish critical praise. Matthew Arnold expressed great admiration for Grant's command of language that underlay his command of men; though Grant's use of the English language was without "charm" or "high breeding" the author nevertheless found ways to use these characteristics as a strength rather than weakness (qtd. Perry 234). Twain himself declared, "Their style is at least flawless and no man can improve upon it" (qtd. Russell 4). Later, in his own autobiography, Twain compares Grant's memoirs favorably with Caesar's *Commentaries* in "clarity of statement, direct-ness, simplicity, unpretentious-ness, manifest truthfulness, fairness and justice toward friend and foe alike, soldierly candor and frankness and soldierly avoidance of flowery speech" (qtd. Russell 4). It captured the essence of the man without attempting to be "too literary" (qtd. Russell 4). And for Grant, whose unpretentious manner was legendary, such comments were high praise.

The story of *Personal Memoirs* is, in some respects, more dramatic than the narrative within the book. It was the high water mark of the Civil War memoir craze that kept nineteenth-century publishers on the lookout for compelling narratives. Grant's story was naturally considered eminently marketable, and his wartime memories were coveted by *Century Illustrated*, which was originally called *Scribner's Monthly* and was one of

the major publications of the later nineteenth century, a “bellwether of the entire Gilded Age” (*American Literary Magazines* 364). Among the distinguished list of American writers popularized by the magazine during its run as *Scribner’s* was Mark Twain, whose *Huckleberry Finn* would be serialized in the pages of *Century*, and whose role in bringing out the memoirist Grant would prove crucial (365). *Scribner’s/Century* would set a high bar for publishing fiction and poetry, but its range of nonfiction writers was equally impressive and included Civil War leaders such as General William Tecumseh Sherman, future President James Garfield, and Abraham Lincoln through the pens of his personal secretaries John Hay and John Nicolay (366). The magazine recognized that there was a strong public appetite for Civil War material and their active courting of Grant demonstrates how much public appeal his story had.

But Grant’s extraordinary military success did not translate into a successful presidency. The eight years of Grant’s administration proved the antidote for his hero capital earned in the war. Easily reelected in 1872, Grant reached his political peak, splintering and driving all political opposition from the field just as he had done to his military opposition (J. E. Smith 552). But Grant’s second term brought with it the Credit Mobilier scandal, the Indian Ring scandal, the collapse of Reconstruction Republican administrations in the South, and scores of questionable patronage hires that would taint Grant’s public image and erode his popularity. If General Grant was the beloved hero, President Grant seemed a stupefying failure—and by 1885, President Grant was the lasting image foremost in the minds of Americans.

Much like his predecessors Adams and Buchanan, then, Grant took up the autobiographical pen at a time when his cache was at its low point. Although redemption

or vindication was not Grant's only—or even primary—concern, it would prove to be a necessary part of the task, if for no other reason than to find an audience willing to give the old war hero a fair hearing. But Grant had a tremendous advantage that Adams and Buchanan did not: namely, that he could leave the political self aside and focus instead on constructing (or perhaps reconstructing) for the public the military self that had won their admiration not so long before. Instead of a “vindication,” Grant sought to remind readers of his now-lost glory, crafting a narrative of the education of a self-made war hero rather than a political memoir. Indeed, perhaps the most potent statement that Grant's *Personal Memoirs* makes about his political life is his avoidance of it.

Grant's first brush with memoir occurred when he was invited to write for the *Century's* Civil War Papers, an ongoing project devised by editor Robert Underwood Johnson and his assistant Clarence Buell to provide a series of articles about famous Civil War battles written by the men who were in charge of them (Mott 468). The series ran from November 1884 to November 1887, and the magazine's circulation would increase from 127,000 to 225,000 (468). By the time the series ended and a final companion compilation was published in book form, it was estimated that the Civil War Papers had generated over one million dollars for the Century Company (470). Thus Grant was offered immediate access to a substantial audience and a financially lucrative job. Grant's involvement would pave the way for his later *Memoirs* in two significant ways: first, by convincing him of the financial potential of his writings, and second, by bolstering his confidence that he could emerge once again upon the public stage, this time as Grant the author.

As with James Monroe, the pecuniary motive was foremost in the reluctant

general's mind. According to Johnson, Grant was the first person invited to contribute to the Civil War series; he declined, suggesting that his biography written by former aide Adam Badeau was sufficient (Johnson 209). Johnson's analysis of his other reasons is interesting:

[Grant] believed his fortune amounted to a million dollars. He seemed indifferent to his past career, and certainly was glad to be out of controversies of war and politics. He did not possess that historic sense of a man-of-letters which impels one to make up the record of an active life. (209)

Grant had been stung by the intense criticism—much of it legitimate—of his presidential administration, as well as by second-guessing of his military accomplishments (209). As Johnson notes, Grant had the ability to appear indifferent to outside criticism, while it nevertheless affected him strongly; believing that he had no pecuniary reason to produce a memoir he simply chose to “pass his honored days in peace” (209). Unlike Buchanan, Grant did not believe that producing an apologia was enough motivation to take up his pen. Perhaps he lacked Buchanan's self-confidence; perhaps he knew of Buchanan's unsuccessful example. Either way, it would take financial hardship to force Grant to join his fellow presidential memoirists.

That hardship arrived in 1884, when Grant's finances collapsed. He was heavily invested in the Grant & Ward investment firm started by his son Ulysses Jr. (“Buck”) and the dashing conman Ferdinand Ward. The firm produced enormous dividends from 1881 until 1884—when Ward's house of cards fell (J. E. Smith 619). On May 6, 1884, Grant learned from his son that “Grant & Ward has failed, and Ward has fled” (621). Like

Monroe, Grant was broke and desperate. Like Monroe, his life narrative was now the most valuable piece of property in his possession. Like Monroe, Grant saw little choice than to turn to autobiography.

Fortunately for Grant, Johnson was still interested. The publisher renewed his attempts to lure Grant into the *Century* stable with a written entreaty delivered through Badeau (Johnson 210). The general now had an “impelling motive” to reconsider: as Johnson frankly states, “to keep the wolf from the door” (210). Grant invited Johnson to New Jersey to discuss the arrangements, finding the general a “wounded lion” with his “heart upon his sleeve (210-11). Grant had suffered immense humiliation, confiding to Johnson that he had to pay his butcher’s bill with borrowed money (213). Though in desperate need of money, Grant expressed concern over his writing ability, asking how many articles he should provide “if it should prove he could write at all” (213). Johnson chose four significant events of the war: the Battles of Shiloh and the Wilderness, the Siege of Vicksburg, and Lee’s surrender at Appamattox (later changed to the Battle of Chattanooga) (213). Eventually, Grant’s agreement with *Century* called for him to provide these four articles, at a cost of \$500 each (Mott 16). However, as a result of the popularity of Grant’s contributions, *Century* paid him an additional \$500 per article, doubling their agreement (469).

But when Grant decided to produce a full-fledged memoir, Johnson would be left in the dust by a more aggressive competitor. Just as Grant’s Civil War experience was largely overshadowed by Abraham Lincoln and Robert E. Lee, so also the story of his memoirs is dominated by another larger-than-life figure, one Samuel L. Clemens, or Mark Twain. Twain knew of *Century*’s plans and, as Johnson was coaxing Grant’s

articles along, Twain was positioning his “nephew-in-law,” publisher Charles Webster, to make a bid for the rights (Perry 83). Twain offered Grant by far the most generous terms of any publisher, and eventually the general would, in the words of the disappointed Johnson, be “won over by a humorist” (qtd. Perry 119). The general began to compose the story of his life, recording his memoir while his health declined. Grant had developed throat cancer, and his race against death to complete the manuscript provided a poignant subtext to his work.

Grant was not alone in his efforts to make the book a success. In order to distribute the forthcoming work, Webster, like most booksellers, relied on book agents who traveled door-to-door, many of them veterans of the War eager to help out their former commander in his time of need (Madison 119). The publisher anticipated large commercial demand and prepared accordingly. Once Twain finally lured Grant under contract, sixteen book agents and 9000 canvassers were assigned to make sure that the book’s sales would live up to Twain’s lofty expectations and ensure General Grant “the largest royalty check ever given an author” (120). Facing his impending death, the general desperately needed the proceeds from the book to secure his family’s financial security. Neither Twain, Webster, nor Grant would be disappointed.

Demand was immediate and immense. The initial orders for some 60,000 copies required Webster to enlarge his business premises and to expand the first printing from 150,000 to 200,000 copies (120). The two-volume work started at \$9.00, with a sliding scale depending upon the binding chosen by the customer. Thanks in part to the publicity surrounding Grant’s death shortly before publication, the demand for copies remained strong for over two years, during which time some 312,000 copies were sold (120). Even

after Grant's memoirs faded from the best seller list, Webster continued to publish successful Civil war memoirs: the memoirs of General George McClellan, a biography of General Winfield Scott Hancock written by his wife, and General Philip Sheridan's two-volume autobiography (120-1). But there simply would not be another success on the scale of Grant's *Personal Memoirs*.

As fascinating as the story behind the book, Grant's construction of self within its pages immediately grips the reader. There is no boasting or self-centeredness; what introspection emerges does so reservedly. Clearly, Grant was a modest author, perhaps unable to explain even for himself why his generalship proved so successful. At the heart of Grant's style is what may appear to be a contradiction. In reconstructing his battle memories, Grant takes himself out of the action, presenting himself almost as an independent observer rather than a central participant in the events he describes. Thinking of autobiography as a personal narrative, or the history and development of a personality, this approach may seem somewhat unsatisfying; after all, if the main selling point of Grant's *Personal Memoirs* is that they are specifically personal, then he must deliver more than just a straightforward analysis of events that could have been written by anyone.

Fortunately for generations of readers, Grant's prior experience with Robert Johnson helped to develop the general's thinking about how to write battle narrative. Grant was used to writing military reports: dry, straightforward, factual, fond of passive constructions—too much like *Buchanan's Administration*, one might say. Grant's first draft of his *Century* article recounting the Battle of Shiloh was unpublishable for a broad popular audience—a “dry” rehash of his official report, which was already available

(Johnson 213). Johnson provided Grant with advice Buchanan could have used: an official report, despite its strong clarity, would not suit a “popular publication,” and so he urged the author to develop the “personal touch that makes a great battle a vital and interesting human event” (213-4). Upon speaking with Grant about the battle, a new narrative emerged, one in which Grant was willing to admit mistakes, having “no desire to make a perfect record or to live up to a later reputation” (214). Johnson introduced to Grant a new way of writing, one based on Grant’s “point of view,” “what he planned, thought, saw, said, and did” (215). In short, Johnson convinced Grant that, in order to find a broad popular audience, he would have to be the central character in his memoirs.

Making Grant a compelling character also underscores the fact that the marketing of the book would rely on Grant’s remaining personal popularity. Unlike the obscured authorship of Buchanan’s memoir, each edition of Grant’s contains a printed dedication in the president’s hand, dedicating his “volumes . . . to the American sailor and soldier” above Grant’s signature, dated May 23, 1885 in New York City. Over time, numerous bibliophiles have mistakenly bought and sold early editions of the *Memoirs* as signed copies; however, “signed books are an impossibility,” as Grant never lived to sign any (Gasbarro 4). The facsimile signature had become a common personal touch offered by publishers since the 1840’s, and collecting autographs would become an increasingly popular way for the public to connect with their favorite celebrities throughout the nineteenth century (Blake 42). Autographs were considered personal reflections of their authors, but the mass printing of books and magazines allowed printed facsimiles to be distributed through “mechanical reproduction”—far from personal (42). The inclusion of Grant’s handwriting and autograph lent his works an extra aura of intimacy between

author and reader, emphasizing the personal nature of Grant's *Personal Memoirs*.

The content of Grant's text is conventional, offering no deviation from expected autobiographical practice. His first words are understated, yet considering the arc of his life, profoundly appropriate: "My family is American, and has been for generations, in all its branches, direct and collateral" (3). The declarative statement, simply and directly phrased, with appendages for thoroughness, sets the structural tone for Grant's writing. The content also emphasizes Grant's status as an exemplary national hero, suggesting that this is the story of an American—some would say, a prime example of one. What follows is the predictable walk through Grant's family history, which he defines largely by connections to war: a great grandfather and grand uncle who died in action during the French and Indian War, grandfather (Captain) Noah the Revolutionary War veteran, and father Jesse the tanner who is linked to the Civil War because he once improbably worked for John Brown's father and knew the ill-fated abolitionist (3-4). Fittingly, Grant crafts his paternal family history as a history of American warfare; in contrast, he confesses to "have little information" about his mother's family, which privileges his warrior ancestry (5). Thus Grant establishes immediately that his family history is, like his own history and the history of his nation, defined by war. And he will, as the reader well knows, reach the pinnacle of his family's and his nation's military achievement.

Like his fellow presidential autobiographers, Grant moves quickly to his public life, in his case a martial rather than political one. By the second chapter he is a West Point cadet; by the third he sees action in Mexico. But at the end of the perfunctory chapter on his childhood and upbringing, Grant demonstrates a spark of unexpected humor. He relates a story about buying a colt when not "over eight years old"

(10). Jesse, evidently trying to teach Ulysses the art of negotiation, instructs him to offer twenty dollars for the horse, then raise the price incrementally if the owner refused until reaching the owner's original asking price of twenty-five. But the youngster immediately gives away the game, telling the horse dealer that his father "'says that I may offer you twenty dollars for the colt, but if you won't take that, I am to offer twenty two and a half, and if you won't take that, to give you twenty-five'" (10). The author Grant then assures his readers, "This story is nearly true" (10). The style Grant displays here is nicely described by Henry Russell as an amalgam of "the tradition of other military commanders like Caesar, the Napoleon of the Maxims, or the later dispatches of the Duke of Wellington" with the unique "gift of the American ironic humorist" (9).

This incident is one of the better known and most-examined slices of Grant's writing. William McFeely reads the episode as a moment of humiliation that painted Grant's entire life experience; Bruce Catton notes that it demonstrates Grant's straightforward determination to obtain his object on his own terms; and Russell reads it as a sly indictment of the period press and its construction of truth (Russell 14-16). I would add that it provides an early insight into Grant's education in negotiation, which will emerge later to shape his military experience. For my purpose, Grant's notable shift in tone draws attention to the anecdote and suggests that it is important to understanding Grant as memoirist, though not perhaps in the exact ways suggested above.

With respect to style, one can easily picture this anecdote coming from the pen of Mark Twain himself: the humor, the memorable punchline, the self-deprecation, and even the tantalizing challenge to the reader to guess whether the story is true, false, or somewhere in the middle. Grant clearly understood—perhaps from the master Twain—

the value of a humorous anecdote, especially coming from a distinguished American writing predominantly about serious matters. It also reveals a change from the *Century* articles, which contain no similar moments of self-deprecating levity, suggesting a Grant who is more comfortable experimenting with his writing. The anecdote stands out because it creates a contrast to the straightforward tone and structure that preceded it and will follow, and reflects Grant's awareness of the contemporary reader who would likely appreciate a bit of levity—a more tangible audience than the imagined posterity of earlier presidential memoirists.

Let me suggest that Grant's wit is a late addition to his memories, probably the result of editorial coaching. While the colt incident provides a chuckle, Grant's ability to fuse levity with his narrative is not always so successful. While describing preparations for the Battle of Cold Harbor (an episode which will be further considered below), Grant slips in an "anecdote of [Sherman's] campaign to Atlanta," a curious reference to William Tecumseh Sherman's memoirs (440). Frustrated by the speed with which Sherman's men could repair burned bridges and damaged railroads, a Confederate calvaryman suggests slowing Sherman's march by blowing up tunnels. A comrade replies that it would be no use; "Old Sherman carries duplicate tunnels with him, and will replace them as fast as you can blow them up" (441). In the context of a battle narrative, this insertion seems awkward and forced, a distinct contrast with the seriousness of the scene that Grant is describing. Considering the skill and restraint of most of Grant's battle narratives, this discordant note was perhaps the result of too much effort to insert a personal touch. Fortunately, Grant does not overuse such moments of (attempted) levity.

While humor is uncharacteristic of the text, reflective honesty is one of its

hallmarks. In his treatment of his Mexican War experience, Grant offers the education that he earned in battle as a means of explaining his martial success. “My experience in the Mexican War was of great advantage to me afterwards,” he asserts, but then notes that this advantage was not simply one gained by learning military strategy or tactics (96). Rather, the predominant advantage gained was “what [Grant] learned of the characters of those to whom I was afterwards opposed” (96). One such character was the South’s own hero, Robert E. Lee. Lee’s reputation, at least among a “large part of the National army and most of the press,” ascribed “superhuman abilities” to him (96). No doubt frustrated by the fact that his defeated rival was nonetheless seen as the superior general, Grant concludes, “I had known him personally, and knew that he was mortal” (96). And unlike his predecessor generals, Grant would be unafraid to pursue and engage Lee’s army until finally bringing it to heel at Appomattox Court House.

This dogged determination was an important element of Grant’s success, though it emerged in part from his stoicism in the face of death. Unlike other generals who acted too cautiously (McClellan, Meade) or too impulsively (Burnside, Fremont), Grant combined a willingness to endure loss with a determination to succeed. Indeed, consider Grant’s account of the death of his brother Simpson. Grant had worked as a clerk in a store run by his two younger brothers before enlisting as a volunteer in the Union army. One of them, Simpson, contracted “consumption” and “lived until September, 1861, when he succumbed” (109). Simpson’s was not the sudden death of battle, but the slow, protracted demise that Grant himself was facing as he produced his memoirs. He could be excused a bit of melancholy sentiment.

Yet there is none of it. Rather, his conclusion is spare and characteristically terse:

“In September, 1861, I was engaged in an employment which required all my attention elsewhere” (109). In some respect, then, Simpson was the first casualty of Grant’s war experience, for rather than sharing Simpson’s final days, Grant was called away to an even greater duty. But the account of Simpson’s death reveals no regret or reflection; it is a statement of fact, not of emotion. It is indicative of a public life based on sacrifice for one’s country. And the reader understands that this stoic, understated Grant would live to see far more bloodshed and death in his career, and his ability to remain calm in the face of it would be perhaps his biggest strength—and, to others, his greatest flaw.

How could Grant demonstrate this stoic acceptance of death without reinforcing his “butcher” reputation? Consider his handling of the most notable stain on his military record: the Battle of Cold Harbor, which played out in early June 1864. On June 3, Grant’s army was repulsed by Robert E. Lee’s forces, resulting in 7000 Union casualties as opposed to 1500 for the Confederates (J. E. Smith 364). However, unlike his predecessors, Grant did not retreat after taking such a thrashing; rather, he recognized that his overarching goal remained the same: to pursue Lee’s army and destroy it. As Smith notes, Grant was therefore well-equipped for the aftermath, seeing the battle as “a setback, not a defeat” (368). However, considering the size of the Union losses and the significant stain that the rout left on his reputation, Grant was obligated to address Cold Harbor in his memoirs.

Grant’s handling of the Cold Harbor disaster demonstrates considerable rhetorical skill. He describes the advance of the army to Cold Harbor in detail, and despite some relatively minor skirmishing between the two sides, “[p]reparations were made for an attack” on the morning of June 3, 1864 (440). What follows shifts the reader’s attention

away from action and toward (like the colt episode) negotiation. A significant portion of the Cold Harbor remembrance—some two pages, including four transcribed letters sent from Grant to Lee—concerns not the battle itself but a more mundane albeit gruesome task: collecting the bodies of the dead and wounded from the battlefield. Grant begins by accusing the Confederates of “abandoning some of their wounded” and failing to “[bury] their dead” (443). He then assures the reader that the Union army was not so cold-hearted, assisting all the enemy soldiers “we were able to care for” (443). Aside from this act of basic humanity, Grant recognized the need to call a “cessation of hostilities” to make the battlefield safe for the removal of casualties (443). And here Lee is given the black hat.

All four transcribed letters comprise one side of a negotiation of truce. Stating that “Humanity would dictate that some provision should be made to provide” for the “exposed and suffering” soldiers, Grant suggests that “unarmed men bearing litters” be allowed to enter the battlefield during the pause in fighting (443). Lee’s response is not included; rather, the reader must depend on Grant’s paraphrase, which essentially states that such a mission be carried out under “a flag of truce” to avoid “misunderstanding”—presumably mistaking the presence of unarmed men on the battlefield for a resumption of fighting (443). Grant “immediately” proposed to send out men under a white flag, with orders not to stray off the ground occupied by the dead and wounded, but was rebuffed by Lee, who according to Grant demanded a formal “flag of truce” (443-4).

Grant’s third letter again emphasizes the suffering of the wounded: “The knowledge that wounded men are now suffering from want of attention, between the two armies, compels me to ask a suspension in hostilities . . . without further application”

(444). Though Lee agreed to this, Grant notes that “delays in transmitting the correspondence” caused forty-eight hours to pass before the wounded were collected; “all but two of the wounded had died” during the protracted negotiation (444). Grant sends Lee one final letter noting the lag time and “regretting that all my efforts for alleviating the sufferings of wounded men left upon the battlefield have been rendered nugatory” (444). This exchange—and as importantly the emphasis that Grant places on it—is by itself a significant response to Grant’s critics.

Additionally, this segment of the memoirs demonstrates Grant’s ability to co-opt the life narrative of another notable figure. Just as James Buchanan had the liberty to place words in the mouth of the deceased Lincoln, so also Grant can take some liberties with his rival Lee. By 1885, Lee had been dead for fifteen years, and though he considered writing about the war, the defeated general finally opted for a life “of silence”; as Cox notes, “he lacked the life” to write, for the war had been his life (101). Cox also notes that Lee lacked the records as well (101)—an understated perception on the damage that the Union army had done to the Confederate bookkeeping system. Lee could have been the voice of the fallen Confederacy, and no doubt his views on the war would have been a hot commercial property. However, Grant had chased Lee not merely from the military battlefield but also the literary one.

Grant needed not fear that Lee would rebut his account of Cold Harbor, or indeed of any other event so described. He could offer his version with complete and unassailable authority, and indeed much of his narrative dealing with Lee is offered without external verification. Grant’s awareness of this fact colored his treatment of Lee throughout the *Memoirs*, beginning when Grant first encountered Lee while serving with

him during the Mexican War, which proved to be a breeding ground for the military leaders of the Civil War; Grant recalled meeting not only Lee but Philip Kearney, Albert Sidney Johnston, and Joseph Johnston during that conflict (96). Grant then makes a strong and instructive argument as to the importance of this personal acquaintance to his successful leadership during the Civil War.

Grant's treatment of Lee provides a reflection of his own character.

Unsurprisingly, the most significant treatment of Lee in the *Memoirs* is the account of the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia, Grant's finest hour. As if to emphasize the importance of telling the story of this momentous occasion in American history, Grant immediately acts to earn the reader's confidence. "Wars produce many works of fiction," he warns, "some of which are told until they are believed to be true" (555). One such story—that Grant and Lee met on horseback under an apple tree—is the specific fiction Grant demolishes, concluding, "Like many other stories, it would be good if it was only true" (555). He quickly assures the reader that this account will not fit that mold. Upon entering the Wilmer McLean house to meet General Lee, Grant notes, "I had my staff with me, a good portion of whom were in the room during the whole of the interview" (555). The value of such a statement is that it assures the reader that witnesses were present who could offer confirming or contradictory accounts, although of course none would do so in the memoirs itself. However, despite this attempt to emphasize his authorial credibility, as Grant's account develops, the reader is still left to rely on Grant's memory and veracity for much of the text's reliability.

Most notable is Grant's unwillingness to read Lee's state of mind. He plainly states, "What General Lee's feelings were, I do not know" and notes Lee's "impassable

face” as evidence that “it was impossible to say” whether Lee felt relief or dismay (555). Grant concludes that “his feelings . . . were entirely concealed from my observation” (555). Aside from the fact that the two shared a banter about old army days that proved “so pleasant that I almost forgot the object of our meeting,” Grant provides little insight into Lee’s personality (556). One may certainly read this as admirable restraint; after all, Lee was certainly unavailable to respond to any of Grant’s conclusions.

But again, in the same vein as the account of Cold Harbor, Grant also presents Lee in a rather unflattering light. After the surrender, Grant again chose to meet with Lee for a private conversation, the two former foes meeting on horseback. Lee suggests that even after his surrender, the South may yet continue to resist, requiring further efforts on the part of the Union Army. Though he wishes not to be called upon “to cause more loss and sacrifice of life” Lee nevertheless admits that he “cannot foretell the result” (559). Grant in response urges Lee to work for a quick peace:

I then suggested to General Lee that there was not a man in the Confederacy whose influence with the soldiery and the whole people was as great as his, and that if he would now advise the surrender of all the armies I had no doubt his advice would be followed with alacrity. (559)

Lee, however, declines to act on this suggestion without consulting with Jefferson Davis, at which point Grant concludes that “I knew there was no use to urge him to do anything against his ideas of what was right” (559).

Grant, as mentioned before, was sensitive to criticism, and in this exchange—much like the exchange of letters at Cold Harbor—he seems to challenge the perception

of himself as a man willing to take casualties and devoid of feeling. Grant casts his version of events as a corrective to the widely held public imagination; for example, he discounts the story that he refused to accept Lee's sword of surrender as "purest romance" (558) and claims—perhaps stretching credulity—that upon sitting down to write out his terms of surrender, he "did not know the first word that I should make use of" (557). But the cumulative effect of the Cold Harbor and horseback exchanges is to cast the romanticized Lee as the real "butcher" seemingly impervious to the casualties of war while Grant himself is cast as deeply concerned both with those who lay dying on the Virginia battlefield and those who become casualties if every effort is not taken to end hostilities expeditiously.

This is the most significant rewriting of the General Grant of popular imagination, the most significant line of apologia in the *Memoirs*. Arguably, the whole account of Appomattox is a bit of a disappointment, as Grant does not explore the most notable part of the story: namely, how "Unconditional Surrender" Grant came to offer Lee and his army such generous terms of surrender. It was his finest moment, not simply because of his victory but his magnanimity. Yet aside from some references to his sensitivity toward causing his enemy undue humiliation, Grant does not offer further explanation. Not entirely revealing and not entirely matter-of-fact, the episode serves more as an example of a general using his memoirs to correct the popular fictions of war than as a thorough account of the inner workings of his mind at that moment.

There is, however, another passage in which Grant is willing to read the thoughts of a fellow general. But, unlike the proud, defeated Lee, Grant's subject is a man with whom he feels commonality. Prior to himself, only one other man had parlayed military

success into the Presidency: Whig Zachary Taylor, a hero of the Mexican War and Grant's former commander. Though Grant does not address his own presidency directly, this passage may reveal his reflections on being president through the lens of his predecessor. While Lee remained opacity in epaulets to Grant, Taylor was a man the Civil War victor could understand. Like Grant, Taylor was not a man of pretense, placing personal comfort above appearance. Grant recalls that Taylor "never" wore his formal uniform and rode sidesaddle despite concerns that it looked feminine (66). As a writer, Taylor was noted for the transparency of his orders, "on paper" expressing "his meaning so plainly that there could be no mistaking it" and using "the fewest well-chosen words" to communicate (67). He was a modest leader who designed plans "to meet the emergency" at hand rather than with "reference to how they would read in history" (67). The similarities between Taylor and Grant were clear in retrospect and not lost on the junior officer.

Grant describes the rise of Taylor as a singular man fighting both military and political wars, ultimately triumphing but ending badly. In Grant's view, Taylor had been seen as a rival for the White House by President Polk's Democrats, leading them to formulate a war policy that would "destroy his chances" while not causing "the loss of conquest" (57). That Polk would let political considerations stand in the way of military strategy during the Mexican War was a serious accusation—and one that neither Polk nor his Secretary of War William Marcy lived to answer. But Grant had himself discovered the difficulties of mixing politics and war, most notably in his conflicts with junior General John McClelland, a former Democratic Member of Congress who had been a Springfield lawyer and knew President Lincoln (J. E. Smith 141). Grant eventually faced

a politically sensitive problem as it became “evident . . . that both the army and navy were so distrustful of [his] ability to command” created a weakness in the troops (229); as a result, Grant felt “great embarrassment” about how to rid himself of the troublesome Brigadier (229). In the end, after ample provocation, Grant sacked McClellan after the latter circulated a report of the Vicksburg campaign critical of Grant and laudatory of himself—a particularly political document (286).

Like his former commander Taylor, Grant survived McClellan and succeeded wildly in winning the Civil War. And like Taylor, Grant was rewarded with the presidency by a grateful public. But of this final laurel Grant writes,

I believe that he sincerely regretted this turn in his fortunes,  
preferring the peace afforded by a quiet life free from abuse  
to the honor of filling the highest office in the gift of any people,  
the Presidency of the United States. (58)

Whether Taylor did or did not feel this way is unknowable and irrelevant; after all, Taylor died after only sixteen months in office, hardly enough time for the type of backward-looking assessment that Grant indulges in with his memoir-writing. However, Grant can know that he himself gave up the peace of a quiet life to seek and win the Presidency, making him the target of critics who had a poor opinion of his administration. At the end of his life, Grant the president had overshadowed Grant the general, meaning also that Grant the failure had surpassed Grant the hero in the public mind.

James Buchanan never saw the errors of his ways, and his memoir proved a stubborn effort to bring an aggressive counteroffensive against his critics, to fight for his own reputation as he refused to fight to defend the Union. But Grant, who had learned

from his childhood experience buying horses how to learn and adapt, delivers a measured final lesson. Wasting away from the final stages of his throat cancer, struggling to complete his final revisions, Grant understood his final lesson in four simple words: “Let us have peace” (590). Perhaps there is no better explanation for the magnanimity of Appomattox: Grant believed that peace was worth foregoing some of the victors’ spoils because war’s ultimate lesson is the value of peace. And Grant proved a receptive student.

While Buchanan tried at all costs to avoid war, Grant fought it and sought peace in the aftermath, concluding simply, “I hope the good feeling inaugurated may continue to the end” (590). His legacy is not just the war but the peace that followed. Grant’s life was defined by war, and he recognizes that, for better or for worse, “I was . . . a representative of that side [the Union] of the controversy” (590). But serving as a representative of the victorious Union was a far better legacy than his two terms representing the electorate as their president. As a political figure, Grant was controversial and unpopular, but as (or although) a symbol of Union might, he has received kind wishes from both Unionists and Confederates who reunited as one nation after the war. This is a legacy with which, Grant implies, he is at peace. His memoirs are a landmark work. Let him have peace, indeed.

The memoirs of the Civil War era demonstrated that the public hungered to consume their presidents’ life stories. After Grant, publishers would pursue the chief executives with offers for magazine articles and book-length memoirs. The presidential autobiography had become a way of “cashing in” on the office, and as presidents had no official pension until 1958, an important one. Both James Buchanan and Ulysses Grant

knew that they had a broad, receptive audience at their fingertips; Grant gave them the war narrative they wanted, while Buchanan utterly misread their appetites. Still, the model of the modern presidential autobiography as a predictable and anticipated publication was firmly established. And the next presidents to take advantage of that model would expand the flashes of personal voice that intruded into their predecessors' works. The autobiographies of Theodore Roosevelt and Calvin Coolidge would fuse their written voices with their distinct political personae to inaugurate a new style of writing presidential memoirs.

### Chapter Three: The Modern Presidency and the Rise of Personality

The years between 1866 and 1913 were lean ones for presidential memoirs. One reason for this was the subsiding influence of the post-Lincoln presidency; even the desire for a savior president could not prevent the shift of power back to Congress once military matters receded from public attention. During the so-called “Gilded Age,” the president was seen as less effectual than Congressional power brokers; no less than future president Woodrow Wilson wrote in 1885 that “the predominant and controlling force” driving American government “is Congress” (qtd. McCann 13). For the forty years after Abraham Lincoln, Congress would indeed “[enter] into a period of extended dominance” as men of more limited vision—the overwhelmed Grant, the mediocre Benjamin Harrison, and the machine-driven Chester Arthur and William McKinley among them—rose to prominence (McCann 13). Lincoln’s powerful and assertive executive had been driven to a large extent by the exigencies of war and the prerogatives of a commander-in-chief in time of rebellion; when Lincoln and the rebellion were gone, so too was the desire for an activist president (McCann 12). Lincoln’s appealing life story, punctuated by his martyrdom, and his striking and memorable character, proved the exception rather than the rule.

Therefore, public interest in the presidents’ characters waned. The president reverted to his earlier form, the embodiment of a party platform rather than a unique personality. The mid- and late nineteenth century was littered with unsatisfactory presidents, undermined by their lack of vigorous action. Capturing the attitude of the times, British writer James Bryce, in the 1888 tome *American Commonwealth*, would ask, “Who now knows or cares to know anything about the personality of James K. Polk

or Franklin Pierce?” (qtd. McCann 14). Few presidents even sought to publish memoirs to market their personalities. Some died too soon to produce memoirs: James Garfield and McKinley died in office, Arthur only a year after leaving it. Others produced books that contained no narrative of their presidential terms: Grant, of course, but also Grover Cleveland (who published two collections, one of speeches and another of hunting and fishing anecdotes) and Harrison (a collection of his speeches). Andrew Johnson and Rutherford Hayes produced nothing at all.

But the turn of the twentieth century would bring with it a new approach to both presidential leadership and to the presidential memoir. Nineteenth-century presidential autobiographers relied mainly on fact and legalism to craft works that focused heavily on their public lives, befitting a reserved view of the wall between the personal and the public. However, the presidency was on the verge of returning to a central position in American political life. The president was destined to become a larger-than-life figure whose personal nature was as familiar to Americans as his policies. And as personality came to the fore in the new century, it also brought an approach to memoir-writing that placed voice and image on par if not above fact and persuasion.

This shift was driven largely by one larger-than-life figure: Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., whose term of office (1901-1909) was marked by not only a vast expansion in Executive activism but also the projection of American power abroad. Roosevelt was driven by “boundless desires for both world power and publicity,” and his administration ushered in “increased U.S. international investments” and an “expanded” presidential role “in the eyes of the public” (Nelson 91-2). Roosevelt’s “Big Stick presidency” was not unique; after all, Washington, Jackson, and Lincoln before him had risen to prominence

as prominent, powerful executives. But those men earned their status in times of national crisis (Washington by his leadership in the Revolutionary War, Jackson by his response to the Nullification Crisis, and Lincoln by his management of the Civil War). TR faced no such grave, looming threats to America's future. He simply had a powerful personality, a sweeping vision, and a rather lenient view of the Constitution's restraints on executive power . . . much like many of the presidents who followed him.

The presidency had changed dramatically after the Civil War, both in its relationship to the public and its uniting of the individual personality to public policy. This changing relationship is crucial in order to understand the process of self-formation in twentieth-century presidential autobiographies. Unlike previous presidents whose works tended more toward memoirs of public acts, these modern memoirists would create autobiographies to reaffirm their personalities in the public's mind, producing narratives filled with fewer detailed, externally verifiable facts and more opinions, colorful anecdotes, and witticisms. One major purpose of modern presidential life-writing was to make these men's carefully constructed public faces appear organic, even natural, thereby implying an intimacy with the reader that was itself constructed. They sought to recreate their successful, fully developed political selves in texts that could be consumed by the electorate. Therefore, Theodore Roosevelt's autobiography resounds with his public voice: powerful, moral, and occasionally self-deprecating.

The public's demands for stronger presidential personality changed alongside the American body politic itself. New cultural developments would bring far-reaching changes to the American state, the American people, and the American president. First, high levels of immigration from eastern and southern Europe between 1880 and 1924

brought to the fore the old question of what it means to be an American (Taubenfeld 1). The president plays a significant role in this definitional debate. As the only individual elected by a national electorate, he has a unique responsibility to “articulat[e] the collective culture,” which may include defining Americanism in a way that proves most palatable to the majority (Stuckey 7). Lincoln had taken up this responsibility in his public utterances and constructed a conceptual Americanism—decent, loyal, determined, just—but he had done so regionally, offering a contrast between true Americans and the rebels in the Cotton States. The influx of new immigrants required a more sophisticated formulation, as ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences now came into play. As Mary Stuckey notes, ethnic or racial “others” can be invisible in presidential speeches until their visibility becomes too great to ignore, as which point the president must decide how to address these new Americans (5-6). By the twentieth century, the new immigrants were too numerous to ignore, and the American public yearned to revisit the question of what makes an American.

In seeking to shape the American public’s conception of itself, the twentieth-century president enjoyed new modes of communication that brought him into close contact with the public. In 1914, Woodrow Wilson would deliver his State of the Union Address verbally, the first since Thomas Jefferson to do so (McCann 10). The president had previously been required to be seen and not heard. Just as a candidate was not expected to campaign for himself lest he appear too eager for office, so the president had to eschew “express[ing] his policy preferences or personal attitudes directly to a popular audience” lest he be labeled a power-grasping demagogue (10). Mistrust of a too-powerful executive, incubated during the Revolutionary period and passed down to future

generations, required that the president tread delicately in his public statements.

But Theodore Roosevelt would usher in a new view of the presidency, that of the powerful individual motivated by the public good and, therefore, trustworthy with power—a crusader president, so to speak. To that end, Roosevelt implemented modern media management techniques (the White House press corps, press conferences, background, planned leaks) that would be indispensable to his successors (McCann 17). Far from a model of silenced servants unable “to distinguish themselves as symbolic figures in the public mind” (10), Roosevelt crafted a vivid presidency in which personality and policy worked hand in hand to position the executive as the spokesman and representative of the American people.

These changes in the American body politic and its view of the presidency are crucial to the first two presidential autobiographies of the twentieth century. In some respects, they form a bridge between the past and the future. Famous for his designation of the politician as the “man in the arena,” Roosevelt truly saw himself as just that: a gladiator prepared to fight it out in the rough-and-tumble world of politics. As such, he created a body politic of a “powerful, straight-talking, independent, masculine reformer speaking for and promoting the good of the average American” (Taubenfeld 140). Roosevelt’s views were driven in part by his reminiscences on his adventures in the Wild West, and in constructing his body politic, he sought to bring Western ideas and concepts to bear on the political sphere.

The *Rough Rider* produced the first presidential autobiography of the twentieth century, serialized and ultimately published in book form in 1913. The next presidential memoir came from a man who could have been TR’s temperamental opposite: “Silent”

Cal Coolidge. In policy, Roosevelt was the model of government activism, which he labeled “practical politics,” and Coolidge the model of moral seriousness and caution. In personality, Roosevelt was the Rough Rider, the rancher, the outdoorsman, a model of self-improvement through the “vigorous life.” Coolidge was the prototypical Yankee, reserved in speech and action, frugal with his words and the taxpayer’s dollar. Yet both were popular embodiments of their times, and both would use their memoirs to underscore their public images in the minds of American readers.

Roosevelt captured a big, wide, growing nation with a big, wide, expansive personality. Roosevelt’s America contained forty-five states and added a forty-sixth during his term, stretching solidly from sea to shining sea. As Americans sought to define themselves, TR displayed a persona broad enough to contain the inherent contradictions and fissures that defined his nation: he could be both Easterner and Westerner, both powerful in deed and elegant in word, both a soldier and a scholar, both an activist at home and a crusader abroad. He responded to the challenge of the modern era with reassuring strength and bravado founded in moral certainty, a projection that required the construction of a self that downplayed—even obfuscated—any weakness.

While Coolidge’s projection of himself differed greatly from Roosevelt’s, the Vermonter was no less successful in conveying his personality to the American people. He simply responded to anxiety about the modern era in a different manner. He was the symbol of an older America, the New England Yankee who harkened back to a simpler time. His personality lacked Roosevelt’s forcefulness but compensated with conscientiousness, straightforwardness, and common sense. He made an increasingly complicated world (and nation) seem refreshingly simple. And while Coolidge lacked the

activism of Roosevelt, his vision of a limited executive and reliance on the decency of the American people struck a chord, one which would be revisited half a century later with the rise of a Eureka College graduate.

Roosevelt's *An Autobiography* and *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge* (1929) take up and project the personalities of their famous authors. These works differ from their generic predecessors in several major respects. First, they bear the distinctive voices of their authors, capturing the two presidents' cadences and characteristic phrasings. Second, the texts reinforce the authors' public personae, a trait required of the modern memoir. And finally, their organization is generally though not stringently chronological, comprised of long, self-contained chapters arranged around topical ideas rather than periods of time, a nod to the books' history of serialization. They place personality foremost, relying less on reconstructing historical fact than explaining who these men were (or at least purported to be) and how they rose to the highest office in the land. And these carefully constructed public selves also reflect the needs and desires of early twentieth-century America: for a larger-than-life homegrown hero and for a reserved, soft-spoken traditionalist.

## II

As Buchanan wrote about the death of his political body and Grant wrote against the ticking clock of his physical death, Theodore Roosevelt wrote his memoirs at a moment of reflection. He had declined to run for re-election in 1908, bolted the Republican Party in 1912, and seemed a political dead man in 1913. But 1913 was hardly the first time TR had taken up an act of self-construction for public consumption. In July 1885, G.P. Putnam's Sons published *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, the latest work by

Roosevelt, then a twenty-six year old amateur naturalist, historian, and New York state legislator. The work would be a high-end collector's item, limited to five hundred copies and sold for fifteen dollars, an "unheard-of price" (Morris, *Rise* 298). As part of his publicity duties, Roosevelt posed for a number of still photographs, one of which Putnam used as the book's frontispiece. Clad in traditional American buckskin, a fur hat, a neckerchief, and moccasins, the young Roosevelt stands before a painted "studio backdrop" of trees and ferns, amid "a mat of artificial grass" (298). His rifle is held at the ready, a belt of cartridges around his waist holding a dagger with a large, visible handle. Less visible, though observed by Morris, is perhaps Roosevelt's most important piece of hunting equipment: his famous spectacles, hanging limply around his neck, without which "one doubts if he could so much as hit the photographer" (298).

The textual self that TR created in his autobiography resembles that youthful outdoorsman: distinctly Western, thoroughly masculine, close to nature, and above all, wary of any flaw that might reveal the self-consciousness of his image-making. The Roosevelt of text emphasizes the rugged, manly elements of his image and downplays his weaknesses. At the time he took up the memoirist's pen, his political career was over, and he turned to the exemplary value of his life. In December 1912, just after TR's defeat as the Progressive Party candidate for president, Roosevelt explained this value to family friend Frances Parsons: "if there is any lesson to teach a boy from my life (aside from the avoidance of my blunders and shortcomings) it is that a man of commonplace and ordinary attributes can achieve a measure of success if he will only use to the utmost, and develop to their limit, these ordinary qualities" (570). This admission is remarkable for its willing self-deprecation, the assumption of a particularly gendered reader, and TR's

somewhat didactic tone, which would carry over into the autobiography itself. Roosevelt was not, in the estimation of most, a man of “ordinary” qualities, but his presentation of himself as such presages part of the logic of his memoirs: there are certain types of men who can achieve improvement through conflict with their environment—and without question, as a product of the Victorian era of gender spheres, TR’s is a man’s world.

As such, parts of his narrative that indicate masculine strength are fully displayed in the autobiography, while many of his “blunders and shortcomings are omitted. Indeed, “avoidance of my blunders and shortcomings” provides a major subplot to the written text. David McCullough notes that TR’s autobiography is “particularly interesting if read with a view to all that is left out” (*Mornings* 366). Serge Ricard adds: “The book is as conspicuous for its omissions as it is for its statements; what it conceals is perhaps more suggestive than what it reveals” (277). Of course, part of the general thesis of autobiography is that inevitably there will be omissions, and therefore they must be read in the same way that the inclusions are. And, much like his predecessors, Roosevelt exercises editorial discretion with respect to some aspects of his life. Therefore, a full reading of the text must carefully consider both what is said and what is not.

The story of the *Autobiography*’s creation is an apt place to start when considering this complex text. Roosevelt’s background insured that the text would be more than the standard “life and letters” tome of the nineteenth century. First, unlike many other presidential memoirists, TR was an accomplished author with several past literary successes. He had made a splash in scholarly circles with his well known and respected naval history of the War of 1812, which lacked in literary flair but was “thorough, accurate, fair, and would remain a definitive study” (McCullough, *Mornings*

248). After his term, Roosevelt turned to literary endeavors as his primary means of supplementing the income from his inherited wealth. In 1909 and 1910, Roosevelt had visited Africa and produced a series of articles for *Scribner's* magazine, netting him some \$50,000 (Benardo and Weiss 47). When the articles were collected and published in book form, the resulting sales earned him another \$40,000—such a startling amount that King Edward VII of England declared it inappropriate for a former president to cash in so impressively (47). Including *Ranchman* and the *Autobiography*, TR produced over twenty books on various topics, one of the most prodigious outputs of the literary Presidency (McCullough, *Mornings* 366). It was a logical step that he should become the first president since Ulysses Grant to pen a memoir, one that—unlike Grant's—would focus largely on his political career.

Second, Roosevelt was actively engaged in the construction of a literary Americanism. In the same year of the publication of *An Autobiography*, Roosevelt declined an invitation to deliver the keynote at the annual meeting of the National Institute/Academy of Arts and Letters because of a scheduling conflict (Oliver 178). But he accepted a similar invitation two years later. The thesis of his speech, titled "Nationalism in Literature and Art," may be succinctly stated: "[T]he greatest work must bear the stamp of originality. In exactly the same way, the greatest work must bear the stamp of nationalism. American work must smack of our own soil, mental and moral, no less than physical, or it will have little of permanent value" (qtd. Oliver 112). Roosevelt lauded those authors he considered most distinctly American, such as Walt Whitman and his fellow Harvardian-turned-Westerner Owen Wister, while criticizing those he deemed too "Europeanized"—Henry James was a favorite target (113, 178). Roosevelt looked at

books the same way he looked at people: dividing them up with the eye of the naturalist sorting out species, deeming some fit and others less so. His autobiography would reveal, like his life itself, an Americanism of the right type.

Another difference between TR's autobiography and others of the genre was serialization. Roosevelt chose the New York-based magazine *Outlook* as the vehicle for his work. Begun as a Baptist serial, the magazine had become widely popular thanks to the leadership of its editor, the famous preacher Henry Ward Beecher, and his sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe. They made the (then named) *Christian Union* a wildly diverse and thorough-ranging periodical, which came to include an editorial section called "The Outlook" (Mott 423-4). The magazine took its new name in 1893, after a series of reorganizations led it to focus less on theological or religious matters and increasingly on public affairs and politics (428). In 1897, editor Lyman Abbott described the *Outlook's* central credo as belief "in the immortality of the spirit and in change of forms, in the old religion and in a new theology, in the old patriotism and in new politics, in the old philanthropy and in new institutions, in the old brotherhood and in a new social order" (qtd. Mott 429). By the late 1890's, the *Outlook* became a staunch supporter of a new face on the national scene, a man who had outgrown a somewhat sheltered life in "silk stocking" Manhattan to lead a diverse and florid existence. Theodore Roosevelt would become one of the leading practitioners of progressive ideals which looked for assertive new policies in line with age-old values.

The vehicle and the author were a perfect fit. Indeed, Roosevelt became an active contributor to the *Outlook* beginning in 1899 (429). And the magazine did its best to support their powerful ally. In 1903, Roosevelt's friend, the journalist Jacob Riis, would

publish a de-facto campaign biography in *Outlook*, titled *Theodore Roosevelt the Citizen*, and in 1906 it published one of the now-elected president's own most famous public statements: a Gridiron Club speech in which he decried that "Man with a Muck-rake . . . who was offered a celestial crown for his muckrake but who would neither look up nor regard the crown he was offered but continued to rake to himself the filth of the floor" (Mott 430, Roosevelt qtd. in Morris, *Rise* 439). Even during one of his signature moments as president—the Portsmouth Peace Conference during which he negotiated an end to the Russo-Japanese War, for which he received the Nobel Peace Prize—Roosevelt made time to prepare a review for the *Outlook* of *The Children of the Night*, a collection by one of TR's favorite poets, Edwin Arlington Robinson (Morris, *Rise* 423-4).

By the end of Roosevelt's term of office in 1909, his relationship with *Outlook* was so strong that he declined other more lucrative offers to accept the contributing editorship of the magazine following a persuasive pitch by the publishers Abbott (Morris, *Rex* 541). His annual salary was \$12,000—far less than the six figure sum he was offered by at least one corporation (Mott 431, Morris, *Rex* 540). Morris notes that the periodical's "middle-class, mildly progressive profile" combined with its steady support during his Presidency made TR's decision, and the official announcement was made on November 7, 1908, just four days after War Secretary William Howard Taft was elected TR's successor (Morris, *Rex* 541). As Roosevelt himself wrote in his first editorial, "The *Outlook* has stood for righteousness . . . but it has never been self-righteous"—interesting words to keep in mind when reviewing the *Autobiography* (qtd. Mott 431).

In reading the text, one should keep in mind that the work was produced for serialization. The text seems disjointed, each chapter seemingly self-contained rather than

transitioning to the next, few themes and ideas coherently developed and revisited throughout. At times personal narrative, at times policy statement, at times self-defense and at times campaign homily, *An Autobiography* perhaps holds its greatest value as a reflection of the powerful voice of Theodore Roosevelt rather than as a contribution to the history of the period. It was popular enough that many newspapers chose to run the monthly installments that began in February 1913; the compilation was issued at the end of the year (Brands 730). Its wide-ranging, opinionated style and ample anecdotes would resemble modern presidential memoirs to a remarkable degree.

As for the self that the book defined, one must remember that Roosevelt embodied a number of contradictions. His most remarkable accomplishment was to create a political self that could contain seemingly irreconcilable positions yet still hold together. Beneath the carefully constructed façade, his body politic was, like that of America itself, composed of differing and sometimes contradictory parts: he was a naturalist who loved to hunt; a populist—later a Populist—who inherited wealth from his grandfather and father; a model upper class do-gooder whose political experience would lead him to deride upper-class do-gooders; a man of letters and a man of action; and the first president born in a major urban area—Manhattan—yet associated closely with the Wild West.

Roosevelt cherished his image as a rugged outdoorsman and, as the *Ranchman's* frontispiece photo demonstrates, was willing to play this role to the hilt. But just as important in understanding Theodore Roosevelt are his obscured eyeglasses: the tools that helped him become a Harvard-educated scholar and to rise even at such a young age to a prominent place in New York's Republican Party. He was a complex figure who

advocated traditional domesticity as well as outdoor adventure, who combined “feminine gentleness” with “rough-and-tumble masculinity,” both an “outdoorsman and book-lover,” a “warrior” but also Nobel Peace laureate (Hardy 178). Yet because Roosevelt’s eyeglasses did not fit his desired image in that particular photo, they hang barely visible on his chest. After all, how much credibility could a “four-eyed ranchman” turned author have before a reading public anxiously expecting a survivalist narrative complete with fisticuffs, encounters with wild beasts, and the physical exertions of ranch life?

Twenty-eight years after the publication of *Ranchman*, TR’s public image as the Rough Rider had grown as he rose to the heights of American politics. The self that Roosevelt would construct in his autobiography would necessarily reflect these contradictions as Roosevelt responds to the inescapable desire of the autobiographer to construct a coherent whole. As a result, *An Autobiography* necessarily reflects the contradictions that underlie its author’s carefully crafted public self, making it a contradictory text which reaffirms as a central fact the difficulties of pinning down Theodore Roosevelt’s character. The young New Yorker, so conscious of his un-rugged spectacles, always recognized the potential for seams to appear in his public image. As such, reading the elder Roosevelt’s memoir requires a reader who can match the author in his attention to the finer points of self-creation, and his eyeglasses provide, fittingly, one clear view of how his autobiography reveals the seams in his carefully knitted self.

One such seam lies between Roosevelt’s Manhattan upbringing and his identity as a Westerner. The West always loomed large in Roosevelt’s mind—and in his autobiography—as a driving force in his self-creation. In 1883, he had boarded a train and headed west, to the Dakota Territory, where “[i]t was still the Wild West . . . of

Owen Wister's stories and Federic Remington's drawings" (*Autobiography* 93). He would spend parts of the next several years in Dakota, where the wealthy New Yorker had invested in a number of ranches, and his experiences would eventually make up his 1885 tome. He idealized the time he spent in the West, romanticizing it in retrospect: "I do not believe there ever was any life more attractive to a vigorous young fellow than life on a cattle ranch," where "self-reliance, hardihood, and the value of instant decision" could quickly mature a youthful fellow into a grizzled, fully realized adult (95). This experience would inform Roosevelt's politics, which included a seemingly contradictory embrace of self-reliance (indeed, even self-creation) along with government activism to retain as much of the original Western landscape as possible.

*An Autobiography* presents this young man, trying to reinvent himself as a Westerner, consistently frustrated by one obstacle, a symbol of his Knickerbocker origins: his eyeglasses. As a newcomer and an Easterner, Roosevelt naturally faced a measure of skepticism from the toughened cowboys on the plains. He writes that, upon meeting new acquaintances, he "always had to spend twenty-four hours in living down the fact that I wore spectacles," consciously ignoring the muttered comments about "four eyes" (99). Thus as Roosevelt tried to learn the ways of the West, to become a ranchman, his glasses proved a stumbling block, as they connoted weakness and even effeteness. Although Roosevelt found that, once established, the Westerners would treat him with "friendly forgiveness even toward my spectacles," upon first sight those spectacles could mark him as a soft target (102). Reading these passages from the *Autobiography* illuminates why, when Roosevelt posed for that 1885 picture, in the full costume of the rugged Westerner, he allowed his glasses to hang obscurely from his neck: as was

repeatedly pointed out to him on the plains, they visually marred his re-invention of himself.

Roosevelt's spectacles might also have changed the course of history. In an incident that TR refers to as his only "serious trouble" while out west, a visit to a small hotel became violent (121). Inside the hotel bar, he was accosted by a "shabby individual in a broad hat with a cocked gun in each hand" who was bullying the guests (122). Upon seeing Roosevelt, "he hailed me as 'four eyes'" and suggested that "Four eyes is going to treat" (122). The man then stood over TR, "a gun in each hand, using very foul language" (122). Roosevelt, realizing that the man was unsteady, stunned him with a series of blows to the jaw, causing his guns to fire. Fortunately, no one was hurt, and the man struck his head and collapsed to the floor senseless. But, had one of those bullets found its mark, the twenty-sixth American president would have been someone else, and history would have been changed by a pair of eyeglasses. However, the incident also reinforced what the young man had learned in the West: that when threatened, he could use his self-reliance and quick decision to save himself. These lessons helped create the confident leader who projected American power across the globe.

Thus, when constructing his autobiographical self, TR would recall that he learned from "the men and women of the cow country" the inner workings of "the mind and soul of the average American of the right type" which would in turn help fuel his rise to power (120). But by 1913, twenty years after Frederick Jackson Turner's famous exposition of "frontier theory" which presupposed a closing of the West, Roosevelt could only look back on these "right types" with nostalgia, a "West" that "has gone now, 'gone, gone with lost Atlantis,' gone to the isle of ghosts and of strange dead memories" (93).

The West of Roosevelt's elegiac remembrance would arrive with him at the White House in 1901. Throughout the twentieth century, it would continue to exist vibrantly in American politics, in the cowboy imagery of Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush. And in Roosevelt, the four-eyed cowboy, that type would find a surprising and memorable champion.

Theodore Roosevelt's eyeglasses—his obscuring of them in the frontispiece photo and his treatment of them in his autobiography—suggest an important aspect of his self-creation. Having taken on the challenge of reinventing himself by leaving his comfortable Manhattan life for Dakota, Roosevelt had to become, in the minds of the cowboys and ranchers, the Westerner. To be an Easterner was to be the Other, a foreigner of sorts. And though Roosevelt could wear Western clothing and learn to ride and rope and shoot, his eyeglasses would always be the outward sign that marked him as that Other, a weak potential victim for wrongdoers and a potential headache for the experienced ranch hands who had no interest in babysitting a New Yorker. Thus his eyeglasses rested not only on his nose but on a contradiction of identity: how could this city slicker from a wealthy, elite family become a rough rider (and eventually a Rough Rider)? TR's eyeglasses were significant because they ruptured his carefully cultivated image as a hardened Western cow-puncher. The contradiction of identity between East and West, particularly of a West that many Easterners only experienced through the mediated reproductions of artists such as Wister and Remington, was but one of several contradictory identities that Theodore Roosevelt would juggle in his creation of a successful political image and, later, a unified autobiographical self.

One major characteristic of this unified self is its assertive, confident masculinity,

and TR's views on the subject were clearly influenced by his Western experiences. The qualities required to thrive on the prairie—ruggedness, resourcefulness, square dealing—also defined a type of the ideal American man. Perhaps because he chose to become a Westerner, he recalls the West with more favor, but he also finds in his Eastern heritage another important source of his masculinity: his father. Early in the autobiography, Theodore Roosevelt, Sr. is described as “the best man I ever knew” (7). A full four paragraphs follow, describing Theodore Senior in terms that the son would likely have enjoyed receiving himself: “combin[ing] great strength and courage with gentleness”; demanding “the same standard of clean living” for his male and female children; “insistence on discipline” tempered with “great love and patience”, “sympathy and consideration” (8). One remarkable description of the president's father merits a full citation: “a big, powerful man, with a leonine face, and his heart filled with gentleness for those who needed help or protection, and with the possibility of much wrath against a bully or an oppressor” (9). In reading the description of Theodore the elder, one wonders how much of this is descriptive of Theodore the younger, or at least the form that the younger (looking back from 1913) hoped that his political form had taken.

On its surface, Roosevelt's father-worship nicely connects with the strain of powerful masculinity that defined his political persona. As Roosevelt described his approach to governance in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: “We despise and abhor the bully, the brawler, the oppressor, whether in public or private life . . . No nation deserves to exist if it permits itself to lose the stern and virile virtues” (qtd. Hardy 186). By the early twentieth century, the threats to sternness and virility included immigration and the closing of the Western frontier that could imbue those newcomers with the right

(masculine) values, just as it had with Roosevelt himself. But in trying to locate the essence of a masculine American-ness in his father's body, Roosevelt reveals an underlying tension. When his autobiography turns to the family he himself raised, Roosevelt notes in passing that he "speak[s] from the somewhat detached point of view of the masculine parent" (341). If excessive intimacy is a threat to Roosevelt's concept of masculine authority, then Roosevelt's father becomes a much more complex figure.

The autobiographer Roosevelt does not describe his own masculine parent as detached but rather as central in the lives of his children, a towering figure in his son's life whom he, consciously or not, seems to emulate. In addition, the younger Roosevelt uses his authorial discretion to conceal his father's weaknesses. For example, Theodore, Sr. never served in the Civil War. Although he was of age, Roosevelt, Sr. took advantage of the Conscription Act that allowed wealthy individuals to avoid the draft by hiring a substitute (McCullough, *Mornings* 57). The son saw fit to omit this fact from his autobiography (366). Additionally, the elder Roosevelt was a structurally weak man who died at a premature age. Of his father's death, TR notes merely that his father "worked hard at his business, for he died . . . too early to have retired" (*Autobiography* 9). In some respects, there is much in common between the autobiography's depiction of his father and the self-portrait that will follow: the strong man always willing to fight, yet demanding a "square deal" for those too weak to fend for themselves. Yet in constructing both his father and himself, TR manipulates facts that can help explain some of the decisions that informed his political career.

Theodore Roosevelt's perception of his father matters to the American public for several reasons. First, it helps explain one of the contradictions of TR's political persona:

the blending of rugged individualism with paternal government activism. The image of Theodore, Sr. combines masculinity (“strength,” “courage,” “big,” “powerful,” “leonine”) with nurturing maternity (“gentleness,” “tenderness,” “love,” “patience”). He was also a do-gooder: “interested in every social reform movement,” dedicated to “an immense amount of practical charitable work,” “greatly interested in the societies to prevent cruelty to children and cruelty to animals” (9, 10). The use of the word “practical” to describe his father’s charitable endeavors is instructive; the son routinely labeled his own style of activist governance “practical politics.” Although the elder Theodore never went into government, his effect on his son seems clear: a good government should closely resemble Theodore Roosevelt, Sr.

Second, TR’s close identification with his father helps to explain his most controversial decision as president. On Election Night 1904, having just been swept to victory by the largest landslide to date, Roosevelt shocked the world by announcing that “[u]nder no circumstances will I be a candidate for or accept another nomination” (qtd. Morris, *Rise* 364). The *Autobiography* describes this decision in great detail but little depth; Roosevelt simply believed that the tradition of serving two presidential terms was “wholesome” and chose to endorse the wisdom of the custom (388). But, as Edmund Morris notes, the ghost of Theodore, Sr. likely played a key role in the decision. As president, TR would lament, “What would I not give if only he [his father] could have lived to see me here in the White House” (qtd. Morris, *Rise* 46). The absence of his father cast a cloud on the son’s Presidency, but so too did the possibility that the son would suffer a similar fate. Although at age forty-six Roosevelt was the youngest man yet to be elected president, “he was now the same age Theodore Senior had been when he died”

(Morris, *Rise* 377). President Roosevelt likely feared that by seeking another term of office he would die (like his father) before he could retire from public life.

In his father, then, lay both an example and a caution. Though the elder Roosevelt lived a life of good character, he ultimately proved too weak to enjoy a long and healthy life. And while the son viewed the father with reverence, he would nevertheless seek a different path in life. In stark contrast to his father's avoidance of military service, Roosevelt, Jr. volunteered for service in the Spanish-American War, explaining in the *Autobiography* that "I had publicly expressed" support for freeing Cuba from Spanish rule, and a man "ought to be willing to make his words good by his deeds . . . He should pay with his body" (218). This masculine bravado creates a sharp contrast with the father, and revealed a streak that continued even after *An Autobiography* was published: Roosevelt attempted to raise another band of Rough Riders to serve in World War I but was denied, although his son Quentin served and died in action (McCullough, *Mornings* 368). Throughout his public life, TR projected masculine strength, the strength of the West and of his father, but a strength that coexisted with gentleness and paternalism in Roosevelt's political persona.

What brings together these strains is the consistent tension in Roosevelt's persona between strength and weakness, and the former president's fear of displaying the latter. Roosevelt's long-standing concern about displaying weakness likely developed at an early age. As a child, Roosevelt experienced nearly continuous poor health; an asthmatic, TR was "embarrassingly undersized and underweight, a scrawny frame with stick arms and stick legs" (McCullough, *Mornings* 113). His memoirs recount some of the memories of his frail youth. He describes himself as "a sickly boy, with no natural bodily prowess"

who was sheltered from “having lived much at home” (27). Because of his fragility, he was the target of bullies as a child. He recounts one rather embarrassing episode when, on a stagecoach ride to camp, he was set upon by two bullies who “industriously proceeded to make life miserable for me” (28). The “worst feature” of his torment was finding that, in a fight, either boy could “not only handle me with easy contempt” but do so in a way “as not to hurt me” but also “prevent my doing any damage whatever” (28).

In his recollection, Roosevelt’s greater humiliation did not come from the boys’ teasing but rather his own impotence to fight back, an experience that may help explain the adult Roosevelt’s advocacy of a vigorous foreign policy, complete with saber-rattling. In describing his foreign policy as president, Roosevelt states that “the principle from which we never deviated was to have the Nation behave toward other nations precisely as a strong, honorable, and upright man” (384). He then notes that, despite international law, ultimately “each nation must depend upon itself for its own protection”—hence his advocacy of a strong army and navy (384). Unlike the father who avoided military duty and the child unable to defend himself against his tormentors, President Roosevelt constructed an American body politic based largely on manly strength.

As president, Roosevelt never wanted his country to experience the ineffectual weakness he suffered as a child. Consider his surprisingly mild remembrance of the young tormentors who had bullied him: “I have no doubt they were good-hearted boys, but they were boys!” (27). Roosevelt implies that the singling out of one who is weak and unable to fight back is natural, at least where boys are concerned and perhaps also where nations are concerned. This lesson shaped the adult TR, and by his own admission, the future president’s childhood reading habits—his encounters with literature—made him

long to change himself into one of those “men who were fearless and who could hold their own in the world”—men like his male ancestors, particularly on the maternal Bulloch side (27). The growth and maturation of young “Teedie” into President Teddy would therefore conform to a pre-determined standard of strength and manliness, a transformation from a weak child into a man of “the right type.” And when that Roosevelt entered politics, he would seek to construct his political body the same way.

This belief that building up the self was tied to building up the nation never left him. As mentioned in Chapter One, Noah Webster spoke to the sense that “the general character of a nation” was comprised of the characters of its individual citizens (qtd. in Forgie 14), and TR would likely have agreed. However, while Webster spoke at the founding, when the character of the new nation was much in doubt and American-ness first required definition, Roosevelt came along much later, after the United States was an established nation returning to this basic definition. Therefore, TR was challenged to redefine the American body politic in a way that reflected strength even as modern anxieties threatened to erode the public’s confidence.

As a politician, Roosevelt believed that he could shape government policy to strengthen the body politic and cure its ills just as he had done to his sickly young body long before. He notes that, “while the chief factor in any given man’s success must be that man’s own character,” it is also true that “individual advancement and development can be brought to naught, or indefinitely retarded, by the absence of law or by bad law” (160). These statements come as part of a particularly fascinating section of *An Autobiography*—one that has been removed from some abridged versions. I wish to turn to two major threads of thought in TR’s memoirs that again explore the seam between

strength and weakness: the *Autobiography*'s debt to naturalism and its unease with femininity.

As mentioned before, Roosevelt made his father a paradigm of a benign yet powerful masculinity. However, also worth noting is that Roosevelt's emphasis on masculinity is balanced by his relative lack of interest in members of the opposite sex. While McCullough may be a bit stingy when claiming that TR "devotes all of three sentences" of his autobiography to his mother Martha Bulloch (*Mornings* 366), there is a visible imbalance between the depth of Roosevelt's recollection of father Theodore and that of his mother. Although in general Roosevelt describes his domestic and family life to a degree not seen in a presidential autobiographer since Adams, women receive far less attention than men. The opening chapter is, appropriately enough, titled "Boyhood and Youth" and contains information in line with previous autobiographers: a fairly descriptive lineage of his Dutch family and his ancestors that establishes him as a true New York Knickerbocker. It is primarily, however, the story of male ancestors.

The men of his lineage are remembered fondly, their influence on the developing Roosevelt made apparent; his great-grandfather is remembered "in some of his books that have come down to me—the letters of Junius, a biography of John Paul Jones, Chief Justice Marshall's *Life of Washington*" (2). Considering that the great-grandson would become a man of letters himself, a respected naval historian, and one of Washington's successors, one can well imagine why these titles might be the first in his mind. His maternal grandfather also is remembered through a book. In Roosevelt's library is a book owned by his grandfather, a member of Georgia's prominent Bulloch family; it was once taken by the Union army during Sherman's march and later returned to the then-president

as a token of esteem (5). Roosevelt's memory of his paternal grandfather is an audacious one, in which the elder Roosevelt rode home from church through New York's streets on an escaped boar, scandalizing his fellow parishioners (4). Although certainly not the most thorough treatment, the scene is at least memorable in that it shows the same drive for public attention and willingness to thumb his nose at convention that his grandson would famously come to personify.

Compared with his forefathers, Roosevelt's female ancestors scarcely make an impact on the text. Of his grandmother he writes only blandly of her "singular sweetness and strength"—though the only specific memory he shares is learning from her a Dutch lullaby—and describes her as an immigrant "of the usual type . . . of that particular time and place," hardly a memorable figure (1-2). He credits his mother's sister, Aunt Anna, for introducing "Br'er Rabbit" to him years before Joel Chandler Harris did and notes that a Roosevelt uncle had the stories published in Harper's—where, alas, "they fell flat" (12). Roosevelt's mother Martha Bulloch receives relatively scant attention; he recalls her and her sister telling him stories of their plantation girlhood but little specific detail. By comparison, Roosevelt spends far more space naming and describing the slaves of the Bulloch family than his actual relatives.

While it may easily be considered commendable that TR owns up to the fact of slavery's contribution to his family's success, one wonders why slaves like "Mom' Grace" and "Mom' Charlotte" seem to rank so highly in Roosevelt's memory (5). After all, Roosevelt once wrote that "the mother has much more to do than the father with the children's future" a truism that, though in that case used to describe modestly his own children's success, could as easily apply to TR himself (qtd. Hardy 176). McCullough

even quotes a New Yorker who claimed in a 1900 newspaper article that, based on his previous life in the South and knowledge of the Georgia Bullochs, “it was from his mother that [then New York] Governor Roosevelt got his splendid dash and energy” (qtd. *Mornings* 365). And while Roosevelt’s comments about his mother are solidly favorable—he calls her “sweet, gracious, beautiful” and “a most devoted mother” (11)—they are notable for their relative paucity. And McCullough is correct when he observes that none of Roosevelt’s sisters—not even Anna (“Bamie”), who was practically a surrogate mother to him—is mentioned by name in the text (*Mornings* 366).

That the female characters in Roosevelt’s youth make less impact than the men need not be explained as a full-scale rejection of femininity. But in one of the most remarkable sections of Roosevelt’s autobiography, he makes clear his stand on the gender spheres. In some respects, Roosevelt was a “progressive” in his strong support for women’s suffrage and equal pay (162-163). Yet he is also a traditionalist from the cult of domesticity who claims that “in every healthy society” men should be the breadwinners and women the “housemother” and “homekeeper” (162). Roosevelt’s reasoning is tied in to both naturalism and his nationalism. From studying the “statistics of the birth-rate” of shrinking populations such as “native Americans of New England” and “the native French of France,” Roosevelt states “it is evident that the married woman able to have children must on an average have four or the race will not perpetuate itself. This is the mere statement of a self-evident truth” (162). America was, of course a nation founded on “self-evident truths,” one of which Roosevelt claims is that women must serve as the amanuenses to continue the “right types” of Americans.

Concern about the strength of the future American body politic lies at the heart of

Roosevelt's conceptions about gender. He implies that perpetuation of the "race" must take primacy over reproductive lifestyle choices—hence, the crucial need for men and women to form stable, lasting relationships. After all, as the "native Americans of new England" declined, who took their place? Immigrants from Old England filled the gap nicely. If a "healthy society" is one that is based on stable—and fertile—male-female relationships that perpetuate the "native" race at an adequate clip, then what is one to make of an America becoming increasingly urbanized (eliminating some of the need for large families) and industrialized (necessitating the need for a large base of healthy workers, native or foreign)? The family is constructed by Roosevelt as the site where the population of the new "native" race of Americans is maintained, befitting his nationalist impulses.

At the end of his dissertation on the sexes, Roosevelt shifts from his broad philosophical argument to a practical—and unorthodox—application. He includes the texts of a series of letters that he exchanged with a woman (unnamed) in January 1913. Almost as if writing to an advice columnist, the woman complained to the former president that, at forty-five years old and having raised nine children, she finds that her husband considers her boring because she lacks education (164-5). Roosevelt responds with a short summary of his views on the importance of motherhood and includes a copy of a book called *Mother* by Kathleen Norris, a prolific sentimental novelist (Obituary 1). The description posted by the book's most recent publisher describes it as a tale of a woman who rejects her family to seek fulfillment in a career, only to decide that her heart really is in the home. And, indeed, Roosevelt's anonymous writer responds that she has decided that he is right after all (*Autobiography* 167).

For the former president, playing the role of an advice columnist seems rather undistinguished. However, the fact that Roosevelt would receive such a personal letter and—even to the surprise of his correspondent—take the time to send a personalized response demonstrates both Roosevelt’s dedication to the gendered views that he has articulated and also his populism. The female writer clearly felt that in some way she knew Roosevelt despite having never met him, and her willingness to share details about her married life is as striking as Roosevelt’s later decision to publish her letter. Clearly, she saw the president not as a distant figure but as a fully human being, reminiscent of the personal correspondence that his predecessor Abraham Lincoln so conscientiously, almost tenderly, kept. And like the doting “masculine parent” or perhaps the representative of the nation reminding a citizen of her duty, Roosevelt intervenes and ultimately carries the day.

In addition to playing a key nationalist role, Roosevelt’s conception of the family also functions as the site where genes are passed on to the next generation, hence his concerns about fertility and propagating the races. Closely tied to Roosevelt’s views of gender is his dedication to naturalism, which he held as a child and never forsook. As a boy, TR began a collection of specimens, mimicking his father’s work with New York museums by forming the “Roosevelt Museum of Natural History” in his bedroom (14). As H.W. Brands notes, Roosevelt would use his travels and time outdoors to seek out new samples and test his knowledge of the various fauna and flora he encountered (30). In the chapter titled “Outdoors and Indoors,” TR shares his reflections on the wildlife that he met while living on Long Island, as well as those he observed in other habitats, particularly birds. He catalogues in detail the various species of his acquaintance, fully

ten pages of material in print. He even throws in the populist riff that enjoyment of the outdoors can be a source of entertainment and betterment for “men and women who do not possess large means” (*Autobiography* 318).

Roosevelt’s naturalism was based on the philosophy of Jean-Baptist Lamarck; he believed that an individual could adapt to changes in the environment, then pass these new characteristics along through genetic materials to their offspring (Taubenfeld 34). Even at the turn of the twentieth century, these views were already becoming outdated (34). But Roosevelt’s adherence to Lamarckian philosophy is present in his return to the notion of “types,” dividing up and classifying both the people he has encountered and large swaths of the public with remarkable ease. While out west, he referred to meeting people of “the right type,” hardened Westerners who would fulfill their reproductive duties and help ensure that Western-ness would survive even after the frontier is closed (*Autobiography* 120). Weakness therefore is to be weeded out, to be driven from both the body and the body politic.

One example of this application of naturalism to politics occurs when TR recalls his run-ins with Senator Thomas Platt, the boss of New York’s Republican machine. Roosevelt parenthetically comments that “he was an old and physically feeble man, able to move about only with extreme difficulty” (284). That Roosevelt ultimately will get the better of Platt when they butt heads—and he does—seems virtually assured. Roosevelt is a man of the right type; Platt, who personifies the “wrong type” with his physically weak body, can only bluff and threaten, and proves unable to outmaneuver his rival. The defeat of Senator Platt provides a neat contrast to the young Roosevelt literally grappling with his boyhood bullies, unable to accomplish anything with his resistance.

Roosevelt, of course, posits himself as the exemplar of the right type. One of his proudest moments in the *Autobiography* is hearing the comment of an officer on the battleship *Louisiana*, before a dinner at which the president and first lady were honored: “Now then, men, three cheers for Theodore Roosevelt, the typical American citizen!” (329). But becoming “typical”—the “right type”—was a process that included his father’s example, his Western experience, and, of course, politics. As a young man, TR learned that politics provided a test for his newfound toughness, as the keys to political power in his Manhattan district lay not with “men in the clubs of social pretension and the men of cultivated taste and easy life”—which is to say, not men like Roosevelt had once been—but with “saloon-keepers, horse-car conductors” and other men who would be “rough and unpleasant to deal with” (56). Indeed, this challenge only affirmed his resolve: “if they proved too hard-bit for me I supposed I would have to quit” but not “until I had . . . found out whether I really was too weak to hold my own in the rough and tumble” (56). His view of politics is that a few of the right type must stand up to the depredations of the many corrupt types, defeating them through intelligence, perseverance, and self-confidence, the lessons he learned in the West, which fits in nicely with a worldview of nature as competitive, placing the burden on the weak to adapt or collapse.

These lessons enabled TR to become a dynamo in New York politics. Of the New York Legislature he remarks, based simply on his experience and opinion, that one-third were “thoroughly corrupt” and given the martial nickname the “Black Horse Cavalry”—which at least left “honest men” in the majority (69-70). He also encountered “the loudmouthed upholder of popular rights who attacks wickedness only when it is allied

with wealth” while ignoring the depredations of labor; even thirty years later Roosevelt still condemns this “noxious” type by remarking, “Human nature does not change” (79). The well-heeled “silk stocking” reformers—with whom Roosevelt was closely identified during his early political career—are dismissed as “very nice, very refined . . . but who were wholly unable to grapple with real men in real life” (86). Roosevelt’s politics is one of grappling, based on competition instead of consensus, in which the strong can overcome the weak—all the more reason for the “honest men,” the reformers, to make themselves strong. The lessons that Roosevelt learned from nature—the virtues of strength, cunning, and steadfastness—informed his entire life and his politics.

But in reading his memoir, fear of appearing weak—even feminine—informs his act of self-construction. One of TR’s omissions undercuts his vision of a reformist body politic, as he excludes one of his most noble, albeit unsuccessful, attempts to reform the Republican Party. Although not entirely obliterated from his narrative, Roosevelt’s crucial role in the 1884 presidential election receives, to put it mildly, short shrift. Much of the chapter on so-called “Practical Politics” describes his efforts to combat corrupt machine politics while serving in the New York legislature: the afore-mentioned references to the “Black Horse Cavalry,” the strength of Tammany, the thwarted passage of a bill to remit elevated railway taxes—dubbed “the most openly crooked measure” he saw in his legislative career (71)—and success of the progressive Cigar Bill, and attempted impeachment of Supreme Court Justice T.R. Westbrook. Some of Roosevelt’s efforts were successful, while others—notably the Westbrook impeachment—were not.

Yet Roosevelt’s most notable effort on behalf of political reform is described in lukewarm terms thusly:

After the session closed four of us who looked at politics from the same standpoint and were known as Independent Republicans were sent by the State Convention as delegates-at-large to the Republican National Convention of 1884, where I advocated, as vigorously as I knew how, the nomination of Senator George F. Edmunds. Mr. Edmunds was defeated and Mr. [James Gillespie] Blaine nominated. Mr. Blaine was clearly the choice of the rank and file of the party; his nomination was won in fair and aboveboard fashion, because the rank and file of the party stood back of him; and I supported him to the best of my ability in the ensuing campaign. (86)

The truth is somewhat more complicated: the election of the so-called Independents as delegates; Roosevelt's prominent and tireless efforts at first to elect Edmunds and, once that goal became impossible, to thwart Blaine; and his acting as the disappointed but "loyal soldier" of the party deserve more attention than TR is willing to bestow.

In contrast to the understated paragraph from the *Autobiography*, the Chicago convention of 1884 was Roosevelt's "first appearance on the national stage" and established him as a force within the Republican Party (McCullough, *Mornings* 310). Roosevelt had crashed the Chicago party as a leader of the Independent Republicans, who demanded ethical reform. Although committed to Vermont Senator Edmunds as their presidential nominee, Roosevelt and the New York Independents had decided to join forces with supporters of incumbent president—and New Yorker—Chester Arthur in an effort to send delegates to Chicago who would work to stop Blaine's ascension. The ruse

worked, sending TR to Chicago for the 1884 convention (Summers 133). Roosevelt followed up this feat with another impressive performance. He engineered the election of an African-American Congressman, John Lynch, as chairman of the convention, defeating Blaine's hand-picked choice, Arkansas Senator Powell Clayton, who had defected from Arthur to Blaine after Arthur rejected Clayton's patronage demands—and, presumably, Blaine had agreed to them (137-8). Roosevelt's remarkable efforts would prove futile, of course; Blaine's ground-roots support was overwhelming, and the Plumed Knight carried the day with overwhelming force.

Yet Roosevelt's failure at the Chicago convention was a precipitating moment in his career and the creation of his own political image. It was the moment that the dude began to transform himself into the cowboy. The TR of the Chicago convention was hardly "the epitome of American manliness," as contemporary observers noted the Independents "'rolled their r's'" and applauded "'with the tips of their fingers, held immediately in front of their noses'" (qtd. Summers 23). Far from his celebrated vigorous life, Roosevelt and others of his class were associated with leading lives of such leisure that they were marked by "frailty, languor, and an obsession with perfect apparel" (202). After the convention, the Independents—of whom Roosevelt was now a nationally visible leader—would be derided in heavily gendered terms that challenged their masculinity. The dude set was called out by the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* as "perfumed and powdered specimens of effete masculinity" (qtd. 202). Independents were old maids, "wet nurses," or lisping pantywaists (202). As this set—the well-heeled but ultimately ineffectual reformer types whom TR himself would bash in *An Autobiography*—became closely associated with independent politics, the gendered

attacks came from partisans, as well.

To remain an Independent was to take on an image of ineffectual femininity. Needless to say, Roosevelt found such a political image unacceptable, both for the achievement of his political aims and also for his long-term political survival in rough-and-tumble politics. As Summers notes, these gendered political attacks were directed at TR as much as any political figure—until, that is, he placed pragmatism above idealism and declared his loyalty to the machine politician Blaine (202). He was, however, neither satisfied nor defeated. Upon the announcement of Blaine’s victory, Roosevelt told a reporter his future plans: “I am going cattle ranching in Dakota for the remainder of the summer and part of the fall. What I shall do after that I cannot tell” (McCullough, *Mornings* 306). Chicago was the pivotal point of his political career. TR left the convention an emasculated "dude" and came back a rough rider. This significant change would seem to require more attention than TR gives it.

However, by downplaying this significant moment, TR also distracts attention from the fact that his "cowboy" persona had a genesis in the first place, that there was a moment in his life when he made the conscious transition from the upper-class do-gooder into the roughneck spoiling for the fights of his beloved "practical politics." Chicago led directly to the West; as Jacob Riis observes, TR’s long period in so-called “Cowboy Land” came immediately after the convention, and Dakota was “where he had gone to wear off his disappointment” (67). When he returned, he was ready to return to the arena in a major way. He was to seek the highest office of his life to that point: the mayoralty of New York City. It was the first test of his cowboy politics, and one would think it would deserve thorough consideration. Instead, like other moments of TR’s failure, it would be

all but excluded from his re-remembering of his life.

Another failure that helped create TR's successful political self was his defeat in the 1886 New York mayoral race. Yet, apparently discounted in Roosevelt's mind as a hopeless failure, it is mentioned only in the opening paragraph of the chapter titled "Applied Idealism." In that paragraph, Roosevelt describes his return to public life after a five-year political hiatus that made up one of the more interesting periods of his life. The failed campaign is mentioned matter-of-factly, almost as an afterthought. "For nearly five years I had not been very active in political life," Roosevelt offers without explanation, "although I had done some routine work in the organization and made some campaign speeches, and in 1886 had run for Mayor of New York . . . and had been defeated" (129). The sparseness of the description and its placement at the bottom of a nondescript paragraph reflect a determination to leave this episode in obscurity. It is placed in conjunction with "routine" and unspecified party duties, as though added on unnecessarily. Even looking back on his spectacular career, the memory of this political defeat seems to weigh heavily on Roosevelt, as though it was an indictment of his personal will or ability to represent the body politic of New York City (it was, after all, an election for a unitary executive office).

But the facts demonstrate that the failed campaign was hardly deserving of TR's shame. He was an underdog candidate, drafted by his fellow Republicans who knew that he was their best candidate, albeit one with "little chance of winning" (McCullough, *Mornings* 359). With TR hamstrung by the presence of an Independent candidate to siphon Republican votes, Democrat Abram George would win handily, with Roosevelt a distant third (361). At the time, Roosevelt was gracious in defeat, telling a *Tribune*

reporter, "I have been fairly defeated. . . . But to tell the truth I am not disappointed in the result." (Morris, *Rise* 355). So convinced of his imminent defeat was TR that he had even gone so far as to book passage to England for his upcoming second wedding, scheduled for that election November (McCullough, *Mornings* 359). It would be easy—perhaps encouraged by Roosevelt's dispassionate passing mention—for the reader to conclude that, like the Chicago convention, the 1886 election was a mere footnote in this successful man's life.

Yet there is reason to think much the opposite. Roosevelt's depiction of five years of routine political duty punctuating his new career as a rancher is undercut by other sources. According to Riis, Roosevelt learned of the draft movement from the New York newspapers while in Dakota—and in dramatic fashion "hung up his rifle, packed his trunk, and, bidding his life on the plains good-by [sic], started for the East" (96). This seems hardly the reaction of a man who is out of the political arena. And this campaign had won him considerable attention as he was dubbed "the Cowboy Candidate" by the media, inaugurating the familiar Roosevelt persona that would forever displace the straw-hat wearing dandy of 1884 (McCullough, *Mornings* 359). Furthermore, there is evidence that, far from acquiescing in the inevitable, Roosevelt was stung by this defeat. Edmund Morris describes it as "one of those memories which he ever afterward found too painful to dwell on" and notes its tiny mention in the autobiography (*Rise* 355-6). According to Morris, of all Roosevelt's campaigns, the 1886 Mayoral was "rarely, if ever, mentioned" (*Rise* 356). He depicts an animated Roosevelt responding badly to mild heckling during one of his hunting stories: upon a listener remarking of TR's kill, "He must have been as badly used up as if he had just run for Mayor of New York," Roosevelt shouted, "What

do you mean?" and slammed his fists on the table (*Rise* 356). This is far from the nonchalant acceptance of defeat implied by the single phrase in "Applied Idealism."

Roosevelt's treatment of the 1884 convention and the 1886 mayoral race represent significant examples of his willingness to bury his perceived professional failures in the text. But the most famous omission in Roosevelt's book is not professional but personal: this devoted family man entirely omits the existence of his first wife, Alice. Unquestionably, her death affected the stoic Roosevelt deeply. On February 14, 1886, the day that both his wife and mother died, Roosevelt placed a simple entry in his diary: a large X with the words scrawled underneath, "The light has gone out of my life" (McCullough, *Mornings* 287). Of course, at this stage of his life, Roosevelt could have little known what lay ahead for him. Far from a life deprived of light, he would lead a life that would be seen as an example of vigor.

But at least for a time, Roosevelt balanced an inner life of gloom with an outer appearance of self-control. McCullough notes a letter that Roosevelt wrote to his sister Corinne, in which he suggests a course of action for a friend who had suffered a personal loss:

"[T]he only thing . . . to do now is to treat the past as past, the event as finished and out of her life; to dwell on it, and above all to keep talking of it with anyone, would be both weak and morbid. . . . She should show a brave and cheerful front to the world, whatever she feels; and henceforth she should never speak one word of the matter to anyone." (qtd. *Mornings* 365-6)

Roosevelt's handling of losing Alice followed these lines of advice. The choice of the

words “weak and morbid” are particularly telling; after all, no words could more aptly describe the character that Roosevelt had put forth to his public than “strong” or “vigorous.”

As is so often the case, omission can be as telling as inclusion. Notice Roosevelt’s heavy emphasis on outer appearances, notably the refusal to speak of the loss. To speak of loss is, in Roosevelt’s formulation, to demonstrate inner weakness, precisely what he had long trained himself to avoid. The refusal to write of Alice shows Roosevelt’s strong discomfort with presenting himself as a man in mourning—despite the famous page in his diary. Edmund Morris suggests that Alice’s exclusion may also be seen as a nod to the wishes of his second wife, Edith, who simply refused to be reminded of her husband’s first wife, “editing it out of her book of life. The name of Alice Hathaway Lee was not to be mentioned, even in the index; no illustrations of that sweet, blank face were necessary; a quick cut from 1880 to 1885 would speed the narrative nicely” (*Rex* 450). Morris’s aptly chosen metaphor fits far more literally with Edith’s husband’s “book of life”—the one from which Alice was thoroughly expurgated. And whether he acted out of fear of sharing his mourning or out of fear of displeasing his second wife, Roosevelt’s omission seems to stem from other than manly strength.

*An Autobiography* thus stands across the contradictory body of the representative of a conflicted and diverse nation. It is a text of strength and weakness, inclusion and omission, flavored with the forceful and distinctive personality of its author. H.W. Brands sees the text as a “case study” of just how “principled performance required the melding of often-opposite qualities,” a reflection of the strong degree with which Roosevelt conflated self-creation with nation-building (730). McCullough, as reflected in earlier

citations, sees the text as a compilation of interesting omissions, worth reading between the lines as much as in the lines themselves. Edmund Morris called it “a confused mix of sharp but selective personal recollection and long stretches of presentist political philosophy, unreadable by anybody of sound mind” (*Dutch* 335). To some degree, all are correct; however, understanding the construction of Roosevelt’s autobiography may help explain its polyglot form.

Jacob Riis writes of Roosevelt that “we sometimes forget the man of words in the man of deeds” (73). Roosevelt saw that strength could be communicated through both, not simply one or the other. One popular definition of autobiography is that it is the story of the development of a singular personality, and Roosevelt’s—more than his predecessors’—fits that bill. When he died in 1919, TR remained a vivid and popular figure, and decades after his death, he continues to inspire less by his accomplishments and his words than through the force of his personality. His autobiography is a worthy contribution to the creation of the first fully modern president, who effectively combined institutional power with a personal touch.

### III

In August 1923, the Vice President of the United States, Calvin Coolidge, was visiting his father John on the family farm in Plymouth Notch, Vermont. While a small band of newspaper photographers watched, Coolidge performed the duties associated with farm life: pitching hay, tending crops, and milking cows. For some of these tasks, Coolidge put on a “blue woolen frock” that was a family heirloom worn by his father and grandfather (Sobel 230). Calling it a “most convenient garment for that region,” Coolidge would later recall in his post-presidential memoir his enjoyment at performing chores

wearing the blue frock and a pair of his grandfather's calfskin boots (*Autobiography* 20). But as much as the photographers enjoyed taking these pictures and ushering them into print, the days of Coolidge's blue frock were about to end suddenly (Sobel 230). On August 2, 1923, President Warren Harding would die in a San Francisco hotel room. Calvin Coolidge would become the nation's thirtieth president. And the blue frock would be put away, never to be worn in public again.

In shifting from *An Autobiography* to *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge*, it is important to note that both memoirists approached their presidencies as an outgrowth of personality, even if their respective personalities had little in common. Much like Roosevelt's obscured eyeglasses, Coolidge's frock provides a locus of tension in his act of political self-creation that spreads to his autobiographical self-creation. By his own definition, Calvin Coolidge's grandfather's frock marks him as a typical New Englander, appropriate for the president most closely identified with Puritanism since John Adams. As his autobiography notes, a long woolen frock which "reach[es] to the knees" proves "a most convenient garment for that region" (20). Not only is it warm, with its woolen composition and full-body length, it is also frugal, a garment durable enough to serve three generations. Sensible, frugal, the antithesis of ostentation, the frock resembles nothing so much as the image that President Coolidge carved in the American consciousness.

The pictures that circulated from Plymouth Notch defined Coolidge in the public mind. In 1928, his last year in office, the *British New Statesman* would publish a critical editorial that mocked Coolidge as "a 100% New England backwoodsman" (qtd. "If They" 2). In reply, Coolidge the autobiographer hypothesized that "some glimpse" of the

Plymouth Notch pictures of him in the frock might have inspired “an English writer to refer to me as a Vermont backwoodsman” (20). But concerns that the public felt that Coolidge’s frock was a “makeup costume” worn only for photographers led him “to forego the comfort of wearing it” (20). Seemingly musing on the ridiculousness of the ado surrounding his posing at his father’s farm, Coolidge observes, “In public life it is sometimes necessary in order to appear really natural to be actually artificial” (20). And in writing for the public, Calvin Coolidge produced a memoir that sought to persuade the reader that “Silent Cal” was indeed the soft-spoken, homespun Yankee philosopher he seemed to be.

After TR, several presidents failed to produce memoirs, many for good reason. William Howard Taft chose not to produce a memoir after his term of office, perhaps because he was occupied with other pursuits (among them, becoming the only former president to serve as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court). Woodrow Wilson was incapacitated after suffering a stroke in 1919, leaving him an invalid during his post-presidency, and Warren Harding died while in office. Therefore, Coolidge’s 1929 memoir chronologically followed Roosevelt’s. On the surface, the lively Roosevelt with his belief in activist government may seem to have little in common with “Silent Cal” and his belief that government had best mind its own business. But like Roosevelt, Coolidge proved adept in crafting an image that resonated with the public. This was evident in their electoral success. Rising from the vice presidency on the death of their incumbent presidents, both men became immensely popular juggernauts, easily winning both the nomination and the presidency by overwhelming margins in the ensuing elections. Then and now, Coolidge’s popularity has come to befuddle historians and

critics. But Coolidge was every bit Roosevelt's equal in manipulating the press and connecting with the American public. And his autobiography is equally adept at reinforcing an existing image of its author.

The story of Coolidge's autobiography began soon after he left office in 1929. The media speculated relentlessly on the popular former president's future plan, to Coolidge's apparent dismay: "You cannot realize how much I long for peace and privacy," he would moan (qtd. Sobel 403). Yet this longing for privacy would not prevent the former president from following Roosevelt's example and cashing in. His popularity made him an appealing commodity for publishers. He would become a well-compensated professional writer thanks to a number of "lucrative magazine contracts" that he had, despite the unseemly appearance, inked while still president (Benardo and Weiss 50). *Ladies' Home Journal* and *American* magazines would pay Coolidge some \$15,000 each to provide them with three articles, one on "Promoting Peace" for the *Journal* and two "human interest" articles on the Presidency for *American* (Sobel 403). In addition, his syndicated newspaper column titled "Calvin Coolidge Says" would earn him some \$200,000 more, courtesy of William Randolph Hearst (Greenberg 152). His words would also become an authoritative reference; the *Encyclopedia Americana* paid him a \$25,000 annual salary plus a dollar-per-word bonus for his writings (Benardo and Weiss 50). Coolidge thus became arguably the first American ex-president to become a professional writer, earning \$110,000 for writing in 1929 alone (50). But the most lucrative piece of writing he had to offer was, naturally, his memoirs. And offer them he would.

*The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge* was released in November 1929, preceded by two autobiographical articles in *Cosmopolitan* magazine (Sobel 403). *Cosmopolitan's*

book publishing arm had secured the rights to the tome for an advance of \$65,000 (403). In its advertising, the anxious publisher would declare the book “The greatest American autobiography since Ben Franklin” (Greenberg 152). And they had a right to be somewhat anxious about their investment; with the book’s text containing a bit over 40,000 words, the arrangement made the encyclopedia’s contract look like a comparative bargain. And as the manuscript was complete by April, the month after he left office, Coolidge’s dedication to refining and perfecting his words could well be called into question (Sobel 403). But much like in his political career, the writer Coolidge seemed content to spare his words, creating a text that is sleek and understated, in stark contrast to later presidential memoirists whose published volumes resemble paper doorstops.

In addition to its brevity of length, Coolidge’s autobiography is notable for the spareness of its language. The words employed are straightforward, simple and plain, many of his paragraphs constituted of one sentence. Throughout his career, Coolidge’s public utterances made a habit of using “short, simple, declarative sentences” many of them aphorisms that drew conclusions or identified “apparently self-evident truths” (Cross 312-313). This approach to communication is continued in his memoir. Nowhere does Coolidge explain in great detail the policies of his administration or recall their accomplishment. Most of his reflections on the job of the president deal with making appointments, delivering speeches, and attending social functions. Even when he takes up a particular subject—the Mississippi Flood Control Bill, for instance—he explains that he used both the newspapers and private discussions to shape the bill to his liking; he does not explain what those specific changes were or how the private discussions were

conducted (223-4). For the reader looking for policy discussions more substantial than personal narrative and Yankee wisdom, the autobiography will doubtless prove disappointing. But this is the image that Coolidge had so painstakingly crafted through the media. And as such the autobiography becomes, like Roosevelt's, an outgrowth of his personality, whether natural or artificial.

So upon perusing his memoir, a reader may fairly ask: How much of Coolidge was natural and how much artificial? He certainly took full advantage of his origins. During Coolidge's presidency, nineteenth-century Vermont carried the "typically American" connotations of "patriotism, democracy, individualism, and universal prosperity" (Cross 309). Coolidge had made a practice of visiting his father's Vermont farm often throughout his public career, in part because of the favorable (and copious) press photos that such visits generated (310). Predictably, Coolidge's autobiography would focus heavily on his Vermont upbringing, connecting the president to what he called the "courageous pioneering spirit" of the Puritans who had first settled in the rough granite country (5). Coolidge saw New England much like Roosevelt saw the West, as a spawning pool for "hardy self-contained people" who would move "forth to conquer" until their "descendants scattered all over the country" (6). From his father John Coolidge, a farmer and store-owner, Coolidge learned thrift and hard work; from his neighbors he learned "exemplary habits", "clean" speech, Puritan piety, and how to live "above reproach" (17). He also began to develop some of his policy views as a youngster. When his father served as a Justice of the Peace, he went along with him to collect taxes, learning that "when taxes were laid some one had to work to earn the money to pay

them” (26). No president has ever been more tax-phobic than Coolidge, illustrating that he never forgot the lessons of his New England childhood.

As mentioned earlier, Coolidge’s decision to cling to that childhood was at least in part a response to the needs of the American body politic. Coolidge was always a clever manipulator when he dealt with the media in creating his body politic. Even “Silent Cal”’s trademark silence was a tactic to appear thoughtful, to avoid controversy, and to allow favorable media to do his talking for him (Cross 307). The fact that his silence was attributed to the natural reserve of a New Englander worked to his advantage (309). Coolidge recognized the power of not just his words—which, he states in the autobiography, he used sparingly while president because they “have an enormous weight and ought not to be used indiscriminately” (*Autobiography* 184). His understated nostalgia for the simplicity of the New England village—quiet, homogenous, pious, dutiful—reflected a yearning of many middle class Americans left confused by the urbanization, immigration, mechanization and expansion of the early twentieth century. Coolidge soothed a roiled populace with his stoicism and confidence that less government was good government. And as a result he remained popular throughout his life, a testament to the American public’s belief that his values were reflective of at least a portion of their values. They seemed little concerned over whether his New England Puritanism could be put on or taken off as easily as a woolen frock.

In reality, Coolidge was himself a mass-produced good marketed to the American body politic. Like Roosevelt, Coolidge revolutionized presidential relationships with the media. Kerry Buckley called Coolidge’s term “the photo-op presidency” for his willingness to “strike any pose, don any costume . . . to satisfy the press’s” (and

presumably the nation's) "insatiable demand for novelty" (619). This history is at odds with Coolidge's reserved description in the autobiography, where he claimed that "there is no need of theatricals" in the White House (216). In fact, Coolidge found the cloak of modern advertising as comfortable as his grandfather's woolen frock. In 1919, then-Governor Coolidge of Massachusetts found himself a national celebrity when he broke the Boston police strike. His former Amherst classmate and confidante Dwight Morrow suggested that the only thing standing between Coolidge and the Presidency was his public image: "cold, taciturn, and reclusive" even by New England standards (Buckley 596). Morrow brought in Bruce Barton, a founder of Barton, Durstine, and Osborn, one of the largest advertising firms in the country (598). As he had done for General Motors, Gillette, and General Electric, Barton would go to work promoting Calvin Coolidge (598). And when his man became president, Barton would guide lobbyists to the oval office and create the Coolidge-Hearst connection that would pay off so handsomely for the ex-president (618). Coolidge thus would become a commodity sold to the American public as no president before him.

For an illustration, consider the president's trip to Roosevelt country in South Dakota (which is omitted from his memoir) accompanied by "thirty-odd newspaper correspondents, . . . a dozen or more moving-picture men, several . . . press agents . . . camera men representing the photo syndicates" (qtd. Greenberg 136). During this visit west, Coolidge took to wearing a cowboy hat, sparking a national rush for them, and had his photo taken wearing an Indian headdress when speaking to local Sioux and a cowboy outfit (red shirt, blue bandana, chaps, spurs, and his now-famous hat) on the fourth of July (136). Even the new technology of motion pictures was part of Coolidge's press

offensive; when former Republican operative Will Hays took over the Motion Picture Association, he worked with the Coolidge White House to monitor and sanitize newsreel coverage (Buckley 619n). For as much as he claimed to have lived naturally, it becomes apparent that his entire public self is, like his autobiographical self, a construction beneath a veneer of authenticity.

But what also emerges from Coolidge's story is a truly modern body politic. By clothing himself in cowboy regalia or an Indian headdress, "he could make the nation smile, cheer, or even feel superior" and reap the rewards at the polls (Buckley 619). Over the decades, many observers wondered how a man seemingly so unremarkable could prove one of the early century's most effective vote getters. Part of the answer is the power of his image, recorded and disseminated throughout the nation through newspaper and newsreel. Indeed, Coolidge recognized the underlying truth of all presidential image making, that all candidates and presidents place themselves in contrived situations. Therefore, his constructed image challenges the reader to find the tension between public and private in the autobiography. As such, I wish to focus on the pattern of Coolidge's handling of a deeply personal subject in his memoir.

Coolidge discusses death, which visited him in a number of shattering ways, with a stoicism that can be either deeply affecting or startlingly callous. In contrast to Roosevelt's complete avoidance or Jefferson's casual dismissal, Coolidge stakes out a middle ground of acknowledgment devoid of true emotional sentiment. As a young man, Coolidge lost his mother, Victoria, and his sister Abbie. Neither woman is remembered in extraordinary detail (certainly compared to his father John). Of Victoria, Coolidge (rather ironically) writes that no man "could adequately describe his mother. I can not describe

mine” (12). And so he does not really try, offering only three paragraphs describing her appearance (“grand and beautiful”), her love of color and sunsets, and her invalidism. Victoria seems less a character than a trope.

Her death provides Coolidge some opportunity for theatricality. The autobiography describes her deathbed scene thusly: “In an hour she was gone. It was her thirty-ninth birthday. I was twelve years old . . . The greatest grief that can come to a boy came to me. Life was never to seem the same again” (13). She is “laid away” in the “blustering snow” of March (13). The language is simple, direct, and factual, his mother situated in time and space and then gone. The emphasis is not on emotional expression, though its understatement is rather elegant, hinting at the suppression rather than the absence of emotion. Of course, there is also a measure of theatricality to the deathbed scene of which Coolidge was doubtless aware. When he left his father’s home to become president in 1923, Coolidge knelt at his mother’s grave in the cemetery across the road, where “during [his] boyhood” he had visited when “troubled” (177). While this certainly may be true, one doubts that the younger Coolidge did so in full view of reporters as he did that August day. Though Coolidge claims that “she seemed very near to me” that day (177), one has to wonder how much the media-savvy president was once again playing up his humble origins.

Approaching death with factual understatement forms a pattern in the book. His sister Abbie dies (likely of appendicitis) in a paragraph stashed between his love of history and his graduation in 1890. Again, the victim is first oriented to Coolidge himself: “In March of my senior year my sister Abbie died. She was three years my junior . . . She was ill scarcely a week” (47). The content is largely the same as the description of

Victoria Coolidge's death: suddenness (mortal hour, a mortal week), a vital statistic (she was thirty-nine, she was three years my junior), and orientation toward Coolidge's own life (I was twelve, I was in my senior year). Coolidge even offers this rather stale closing: "The memory of the charm of her presence and her dignified devotion to the right will always abide with me" (47). It will have to; he seems disinclined to share it with the reader. In both cases, Coolidge seems to acknowledge the presence of emotional attachment but offers none of it to be shared with the reader, an assertion of his right to private memory in the midst of the most public of texts, an autobiography.

Perhaps Coolidge approached the deaths of Victoria and Abbie with restraint because of the deeply private nature of his loss. But death also played a major role in shaping the public Calvin Coolidge, including making him president. He came to office on the sudden death of Warren Harding, an event which the autobiography naturally addresses in detail. Upon being awakened by his father that night, Coolidge noticed immediately that "his voice trembled," which had only happened before "when death had visited our family"—a tragically familiar occurrence (174). But even at this moment of such import to the American public, Coolidge reveals nothing of what passed through his own mind. Instead, his retrospective focus lies entirely on his father—the mixed emotions that John must have felt because he had lost a president yet also seen his son rise to the highest office in the land, "the culmination of the lifelong desire of a father for the success of his son" (174). But certainly Calvin Coolidge had indeed fulfilled his father's dreams and vindicated his sacrifices, having already served as governor and vice-president, no small achievement before reaching the highest office in the land over

another man's body. So why does Coolidge try to read the mind of his (now deceased) father rather than explain his own?

One possible explanation is that Coolidge was closer to the "cold" figure described by his friend Morrow than he will admit. Senator George Pepper claimed that Coolidge's first words upon learning of Harding's death were far less moving: "I believe I can swing it" (Sobel 232). The same author who had related the deaths of his mother and sister with such restraint surely realized that his reading public would demand appropriate sentiment in response to Harding's death. Therefore, Coolidge may well have projected onto his father his own primary feeling at that moment: the realization of his own burning ambition. Expressing any emotion other than humility and sympathy at learning of Harding's death would have been unbecoming at best and ghoulish at worst—much like the remark recalled by Senator Pepper. However, by displacing them onto his father, Coolidge can pull some narrative sleight of hand and recall his final ascent to the top without the necessary layers of empathetic hedging.

Of his own reaction to the stunning news, Coolidge recalls only being struck by "sympathy for those who had been bereaved"—the Harding family and then the American people (175). He took to his knees in prayer, then prepared a short telegraph to Florence Harding, and at last was sworn in as president by his father in the family's parlor "by the light of the kerosene lamp" (176). In that room, his sister and stepmother had died, and upon leaving for Washington, the new president paid that afore-mentioned visit to his mother's grave. The media-savvy Coolidge knew that he would not have a second chance to make a first impression on the American people. And in many respects, the swearing-in defined Coolidge's image for a stricken nation. The American people met

their new president, sworn in by his own father using the family Bible, and the piety of the scene made a lasting impression. It is both touching and memorable, with an appeal that still resonates.

That was exactly Coolidge's intention. While Pepper perhaps overstates the lack of emotion in Coolidge's reaction to Harding's death, there is no question that Coolidge wisely exploited the moment. His father lived in a modest home, devoid of modern conveniences such as electricity or telephone service (Sobel 232). That Coolidge took the highest office in the land in such humble surroundings was played up by the media; had Harding survived another day, Coolidge would have, like Roosevelt, taken the oath while visiting a friend's sumptuous mansion (233). The photo-ops that ran in the newspaper courtesy of those traveling photographers was one of perfect New England simplicity, the scene "replicated and sold in the hundreds of thousands" of paintings and drawings of John Coolidge's humble drawing room where his son took the Presidential Oath on the family Bible by the light of a kerosene lamp (233). Coolidge reinforced the "naturalness" of these rather contrived images by assuring his readers that they are "painted with historical accuracy" and that "everything in relation to the painting is correct" (176). Even after his popular presidency ended, Coolidge used his autobiography to burnish that image.

The deaths of President Harding and Victoria Coolidge, handled in the autobiography with a blend of straightforwardness, understatement, and subdued theatricality, provide a template from which to assess perhaps the defining moment of the Coolidge presidency: the death of his son, Calvin, Jr. Coolidge begins his recollection with the bland temporal statement that his son's death "occurred on the seventh of July"

in 1924 (189). His initial remembrance is that Calvin, Jr. “was a boy of much promise, proficient in his studies, with a scholarly mind”—much like his earlier comments about his sister, not exactly deeply personal or moving (189). But Coolidge then breaks from his established pattern by including a personal anecdote. While his son was working on a tobacco farm, a co-worker commented that if his father were president he would not perform such a dirty job; the younger Coolidge replied, “If my father were your father, you would” (190). In this brief moment, the former president captures not only a memorable slice of his son’s personality but also reveals a bit of his own pride and sense of humor. Unlike other ghosts who cross the pages of the autobiography, Calvin, Jr. jumps off the page in this tiny passage.

And unlike the deaths of his mother, sister, and Harding, Coolidge presents his son’s death as a lasting, devastating ordeal in ways that ring sincere. The sixteen-year-old died of a blood infection developed through a blister after playing tennis on the White House court. As Coolidge ponders, “if I had not been President he would not have raised” the fatal blister (190). The president then makes the remarkable statement, “When he went the power and the glory of the Presidency went with him”—most remarkable, considering Coolidge would win a full term that November (190). Of course, this does not mean that Coolidge enjoyed his term of office; in fact, Robert Gilbert has argued at length that Coolidge’s term after his son’s death consisted of an extended period of severe depression. And the autobiography demonstrates that Coolidge saw his Presidency shadowed by his son’s death, even to the point of a causal relationship: “I do not know why such a price was exacted for occupying the White House” (190). His other son, John,

who lived into the twenty-first century, nowhere merits any similar weight of consideration.

The final death of the autobiography, placed immediately after Calvin, Jr.'s death, is the 1926 loss of father John Coolidge. Calvin Coolidge laments that, because of his duties as president, he could not visit his father, instead settling for "the poor substitute of the telephone" (192). In the final sentence of his chapter titled "The Presidency," Coolidge states simply and movingly, "It costs a great deal to be President" (192). As recounted by Gilbert, the truth is more complicated. The president had repeatedly invited his father to visit the White House and was rebuffed, part of a life-long pattern of his father eschewing any close relationship with him (and remarkably similar to the strained relationship between the president and his son John, whom he named for his father) (223). The elder John Coolidge had even declined to attend his son's inauguration in March 1925, even though he had been invited to "come down three or four weeks before . . . and so stay with us the rest of the winter" (Coolidge qtd. in Gilbert 223). The pain inflicted by his father is implied but never stated; emotion even in the most sincere, human, and extraordinary forms stays trapped between the lines.

One of the remarkable qualities of *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge* is that, in many respects, his reflections on the presidency have less to do with his accomplishments while in office than with the limits on his power. Being president could not save his son or repair his relationship with his father; indeed, death treated the chief executive no differently than it treated the boy at his mother's deathbed. As such, his pleasure in seeing his ambition finally realized seems appropriately muted, his lack of brimming pride in the achievements of his administration more understandable. His

persona seems as hard as New England granite, the words only written on the page with the most careful editorial discretion. His memoir seems less a celebration of his administration than an attempt to find, perhaps for the reader or perhaps for himself, how much of Calvin Coolidge truly was artificial and how much natural.

The month before the release of Coolidge's autobiography, the stock market crashed. The ensuing Great Depression largely wiped Calvin Coolidge's administration out of the public consciousness, autobiography or not, and the nuances of his character have long faded—except, perhaps, his “Silent” nickname. Indeed, Coolidge's most durable political legacy was to inspire a successor who would return his portrait to the Cabinet Room nearly fifty years after his death. His name was Ronald Wilson Reagan, and he would merge celebrity and political power in new and profound ways.

## Chapter Four: The Lives of Ronald Reagan

“Am glad I only have one life to write about because it’s really a chore”

--Ronald Reagan, 25 July 1963

The election of Ronald Wilson Reagan as the nation’s fortieth president in November 1980 marked the culmination of a sixteen-year reinvention project for the former actor. In 1964, he entered the national political stage in the medium he knew best: standing before a camera, extolling the virtues of Republican presidential candidate Senator Barry Goldwater. In 1980, he achieved what Goldwater had not: election to the highest office in the land. In doing so, Reagan merged star power and political power to an extent not before realized. And considering both Ronald Reagan’s real life and his reel life is instructive when considering the presidency as a role, in the full sense of the word.

The idea of constructing a public self to win approval is stock in trade for both actors and politicians. As a former actor, Reagan carefully developed the craft of submerging his identity into one created for him by screenwriters and directors, lived out on the screen. And as a politician, though he traded the screenwriters and directors for advisors, pollsters, and the media, the movie screen for the television screen and the front pages, how much difference was there between Reagan’s first and second professions? Because he had been an actor, Reagan invites an analysis of his presidency as a role that he played, and his image as perhaps—maybe necessarily—overtly distinct from his identity. As such, he becomes a perfect site to consider the creation of presidential character as celebrity, and to then bring this analysis to bear on presidential memoir.

Befitting a man who earned celebrity in two different fields, Reagan produced two autobiographies. His presidential memoir, *An American Life*, was published in late

1990. *An American Life* (hereafter *Life*) was published by Simon and Schuster as part of a reported two-book, \$8 million deal with the former president (Ackman and King 6). Some questions were raised about the appropriateness of Reagan “cashing in” on his public service, as though his time in office belonged to the people as well as himself. His successor, George Bush, defended his former boss, remarking, “I expect every President has written his memoirs . . . Grant got half a million bucks . . . when half a million really meant something” (qtd. Benardo and Weiss 68). For his part, Reagan offered a more civic-minded explanation for his memoir in *Life*’s introduction: “Presidential memoirs have become somewhat of a tradition recently—a way for a president to tell his own story in his own words” (7). Indeed, they had, although as I will describe later, the truth behind the book is a bit more complicated.

This consideration of Ronald Reagan’s memoirs will generally follow two not entirely distinct paths. First, there is the matter of Ronald Reagan’s multiple identities and the slippages and schisms among them. Like Theodore Roosevelt, Reagan embodied a number of apparent contradictions in his political self. Reagan was both a celebrity and a populist, product of both Hollywood and the heartland, beholden to General Electric and Dixon High School, the union leader and the union breaker, accepting of his own occasional dependence on others while contemptuous of others’ dependence on government. Reagan was the citizen politician, in the Franklinesque tradition of reluctant leadership, riding to power on the crest of public opinion. Yet he was also a preacher of self-determination and reliance, of the power and agency of the individual, and a shrewd politician when necessary. He could be seemingly all surface and all depth, transparent and opaque, and sometimes both simultaneously. The public felt they knew him; some of

his closest associates felt they never did.

Second, there is the physical doubling of Ronald Reagan's body. The centrality of Reagan's physical form to his success is indisputable: his youthful athletic prowess that earned him a place on the football team at Eureka College; the good looks that gave him a long career in movies and television; the physical structure whose integrity was challenged by a near-fatal bout of viral pneumonia, John Hinckley's bullet, and finally Alzheimer's disease. Reagan understood image and the role of his body in shaping it. The most vivid pictures of him place him in the foreground of a carefully calibrated vista, whether standing at the harbor with the Statue of Liberty behind him or before the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. Millions of Americans yet remember rosy-cheeked Reagan staring down the gray-suited and gray-faced Jimmy Carter in their only debate and the broadly grinning, wrinkled face beneath the cowboy hat that graced the cover of all three major weekly news magazines after his death. Ronald Reagan understood the importance of his body in selling himself to the American body politic, and his earliest memoirs provide strong evidence that he imagined his quest for political power in terms of the completeness of his physical form.

So, despite Nancy Regan's assertion that "There are not two Ronald Reagans" (qtd. Rogin 7), she is wrong. There are actually more than two. There is Ronald Reagan the individual human being who lived from 1911 until 2004, born in Tampico, Illinois, who enjoyed a career in both film and politics, who was a husband and father. But there is also a youthful Ronald Reagan, captured forever on film alongside Pat O'Connor and Bette Davis, and an older Ronald Reagan calling on Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall or deriding Walter Mondale's "youth and inexperience." By making Reagan

into an “observed outside” on the movie screen, the camera “obliterates the referent” and challenges the pat conception of interiority and exteriority as two sides of the same coin (Rogin 7). And as Reagan’s rise to political power coincided with “the ascension of radio, film, and television as political technologies” through which political power was mediated between government and governed, his skills in manipulating “mass-mediated performance” would prove increasingly important (Rafael 9). For millions of viewers in America and around the world, the reel Reagan would indeed be the real Reagan.

Reagan was the product of several rising tides: the expansion of media, the birth and growth of Hollywood, and the emergence of celebrities as political entities. Ronald Reagan provides the consummate example of the blend of celebrity and political power that marks the modern era. Some would no doubt offer up Bill Clinton—understandable given his deep ties to Hollywood, his tabloidesque life story, and his Secret Service code name (“Elvis”)—or Barack Obama with his pop culture resonance as more prime examples, but in Reagan’s case, celebrity provided the opening to his political career rather than vice versa. Few presidents could say that, and those few who could attained their celebrity either through military authority (Jackson, Harrison, Taylor, or Eisenhower) or another branch of government service. Their celebrity was attended by institutional power and political agency. But Reagan, by contrast, was a product of twentieth-century mass-produced celebrity culture long before he rose to political prominence.

As David Marshall notes, the term “celebrity” has been, while itself a catchall term, associated with a distinct variety of types of celebrity: film stars, military heroes, political figures, business leaders, sports stars, etc. (19). One might also posit that it has

been a helpful label to identify those who are famous either for their notoriety (say, Joey Buttafuoco or Lorena Bobbit) or in spite of the absence of any talent or accomplishment (Paris Hilton). Indeed, Senator John McCain's presidential campaign made media waves when it released a web ad labeling his opponent Barack Obama a "celebrity"—including Ms. Hilton in the ad to emphasize what connotation he hoped would stay in the minds of the audience. The implication of this ad was that there exists a strong discrimination in the public's mind between one who is fit to be called a "celebrity" and one who is fit to assume political power.

Is this implication correct, especially in the twenty-first century? In general, "celebrity" has seen a fair share of "slippages in identification and differentiation" as mass media and popular culture have overgrown prior attempts to classify different types or levels of celebrity (Marshall 19). Indeed, constructing a "public personality" in one sphere is "informed by the methods and manners used" to construct a "public personality" in another sphere because of a set of universal communication and discursive strategies that have emerged (209). Although Roosevelt and Coolidge were groundbreakers in adapting the presidency to twentieth-century media, the "entertainment sphere" has been the hatching site for modernizing political strategies as media expanded; for example, Dwight Eisenhower's 1952 presidential campaign brought the press agent to the political fore with its reliance on a full public relations department (209). And George Gallup's famous opinion polls were originally commissioned by Hollywood studios to test audience response to film marketing. This format of bringing the views of the public in a quantifiable form to elite leaders quickly spread to politics, as newspapers chose to hire Gallup to measure political popularity using the same method (211-1).

Therefore, it is not terribly surprising that entertainment celebrity and political power have become increasingly intermingled over the past century. Marshall notes a number of examples—an issue of *Vogue* focusing on Nelson Mandela (19)—but for the purposes of considering Ronald Reagan, it may be helpful to consider other names: George Murphy, Sonny Bono, Jack Kemp, Jim Bunning, Arnold Schwarzenegger (whose celebrity candidacy for Governor of California was announced on Jay Leno’s *Tonight Show*). All of these men, and Reagan as well, were celebrities outside of politics before becoming power brokers inside politics. When it was first suggested he run against California Governor Pat Brown in 1962, Reagan demurred on the grounds that “I don’t think I’m right for the part” (Reagan to Wagner 579). But it would be hard to argue, based on his and others’ electoral successes, that being a “celebrity” in one field cannot provide an advantage in the political arena. Because he ascended to the highest office in the land, Ronald Reagan must be considered a crucial figure in assessing how politics and celebrity commingle.

And separating Reagan the actor from Reagan the politician was a task that defied even his most ardent political enemies. Political commentator Chris Matthews, once on the staff of Reagan rival Speaker Tip O’Neill, explains Reagan’s appeal to his generation as well as anyone: “I had gotten to know and like Reagan during his eight years hosting the old General Electric Theater . . . Ronald Reagan was simply the guy I shared my Sunday evenings with. . . . [H]e was one of those TV people about whom one could say I forged a bond” (185). Reagan had entered Americans’ homes to entertain them long before he asked for their votes, and this appeal made him an odd political creature who could fend off the traditional political issue attacks and mud-slinging. As Matthews notes,

“the [political] professionals blew it” when they tried to dismiss Reagan’s appeal and belittle his background (185). Their task was to define a man in the public’s mind whom the public had already known for decades, and Reagan was masterful at tapping the reservoir of good will that his film and television celebrity provided. He used the tools of his acting career to cultivate the political trust of the electorate.

But with this blending of the mediated image and the corporeal self would come Reagan’s own confusion about his role on camera and off. Biographer Lou Cannon recounts a 1983 meeting between President Reagan and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir. According to a published account, Reagan referenced the fact that he had photographed the Nazi concentration camps after they were liberated by American forces in World War II. Reagan reported that he kept a personal copy of the films as lasting proof that the Holocaust had really occurred. The following year, Reagan expressed similar sentiments to Simon Wiesenthal, the famed Nazi hunter. There was only one problem with the president’s stories: during his World War II service, Reagan never left the United States (Cannon 487-8). Although the films that he referenced indeed existed, and Reagan certainly may have seen them, he never set foot in Nazi Germany.

Simply put, Reagan had confused the experience of viewing those movie reels with being in them. As Reagan recalled in his first memoir, he served his World War II hitch as part of a movie production division. But while he never saw physical combat, Reagan and his colleagues nevertheless came into close contact with the war. His Hollywood post received “millions of feet of raw film” recording the combat, and the staff watched hours of the footage while editing out the gory parts before release to the public (Reagan, *Rest* 117). In addition, Reagan narrated films produced for Pacific

bomber pilots in which their missions were dramatized using stock footage of Tokyo and an elaborate model of the city's physical landmarks (118-9). Although stationed stateside, Reagan had an experience of the war that was more intimate than that of many others who never saw combat, all mediated through the lens of the camera. But he never physically served in Europe, nor in either of his memoirs did he claim that he had.

It seems unthinkable that personal and filmed experience could become so closely intertwined that anyone, much less an American president, could fail to distinguish them, yet Lou Cannon—a redoubtable Reagan expert—can find no other explanation. The role of memory—its ability to shade meanings or confound events, to even mislead the autobiographer—is always a concern when evaluating autobiography, but Reagan offers a particularly rich example. Allegations that Reagan conflated memory and movies floated during his time in office, but after his Presidency came the diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease, which is most closely associated with a single symptom: dementia. Granted, it is impossible to be sure exactly when the disease began to attack Reagan's neurological system, specifically whether and to what extent it impeded his administration of the office. But Reagan's dementia brings to the forefront issues that are relevant to all presidential memoirists: how memory is constructed, how reliably the narrative comports with existing information, and what formation of self—both physical and imagined—emerges from the pages. And even if his disease did not affect his presidency, it still may have affected his post-presidential memoir writing.

Ronald Reagan therefore brings to the fore a number of tantalizing strains of analysis. In order to consider the full breadth of Reagan's self-creation, I will expand beyond his presidential memoir and consider two other works. The first, *Where's the Rest*

*of Me?* (1965), was Reagan's first memoir, a recounting of his acting career. The other is Edmund Morris's *Dutch* (1999), a pseudo-autobiography that blurs generic lines in pursuit of the "real" Ronald Reagan. By examining all three of these works, the seams in the complicated construction of Ronald Reagan become clear, and what emerges is a self that challenges the compartmentalization of celebrity and politician, on camera and off, and—as with all presidential autobiographers—public and private. Even in Reagan's own mind, the many identities that constructed his public self became at times hopelessly mixed, leaving him unable to transition from his celebrity role into his familial role. Thus began the challenge of constructing Reagan's identity until decades later his waxing dementia left him unable to recognize even his own image.

## II

One challenge that Reagan's presidential memoir poses must be acknowledged immediately. Despite Ronald Reagan's assertion in *Life* that his memoir constitutes "his own story in his own words"(7), the construction of the 1990 tome was due largely to two other individuals. The first was Nancy Reagan, who wanted her husband to produce an autobiography and urged the project to fruition (Morris, *Dutch* 92). The second was the man who most likely crafted Reagan's "own words" for him throughout the lengthy narrative: *Los Angeles Times* writer Robert Lindsey, who is acknowledged a couple of paragraphs later in *Life*'s introduction (in fact, after Nancy) (7). Reagan described the process of being interviewed by Lindsey, who recorded their conversations and had them transcribed (7). Lindsey was less a ghostwriter than an amanuensis, as Reagan was heavily involved in the text's creation. But Lindsey certainly played a major role in crafting the words that appeared on the page. This process of writing placed Reagan not

in the role of writer but a more familiar and comfortable role as storyteller. The narrative was his; certainly the life was his; and to an impressive extent, the voice is his. But the written words simply are not.

Its status as a ghostwritten text no doubt contributes greatly to its low standing among some political and historical experts. Despite a number of kind contemporary reviews, Evan Cornog calls it “the most unrevealing” example of its kind (223), while Morris labels it “the most boring” since Herbert Hoover (*Dutch* 92). But the production of such a tome, as implied by the introductory remark about “tradition,” was almost a post-presidential obligation. Reagan’s post-presidential memoir came at a time when the genre had become a familiar, even expected, addition to Americans’ reading lists. Consider Reagan’s immediate twentieth century predecessors. Some simply enjoyed no post-Presidency: Warren Harding, Franklin Roosevelt, and John Kennedy died in office, and Woodrow Wilson suffered a debilitating stroke that left him an invalid. Of course, none produced a memoir, though Kennedy and Wilson were published authors.

Yet aside from these understandable exceptions, each president between Calvin Coolidge and Reagan would dedicate a portion of his career to producing a memoir. Some settled for a single volume (Calvin Coolidge, Lyndon Johnson, and Gerald Ford), while others would eventually produce multiple volumes of their memoirs (Herbert Hoover, Harry Truman, and Dwight Eisenhower), and still others would make a single memoir only an entry in their much longer list of publications (Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter). But the twentieth century would see ten presidents publish an authentic presidential memoir, something only two pre-twentieth century executives accomplished. Therefore, they would, in the tradition of Grant, TR, and Coolidge, have the opportunity

to burnish their reputations and be paid handsomely for it.

Reagan's effort would follow a familiar pattern fitting the model of conventional presidential memoir: part "small town boy makes good" success story, and part an explication and defense of his policies. Even the title *An American Life* is generic enough to be appropriated by many authors, celebrity or otherwise. And the primary charge that can be made against it is that of blandness. Reagan's Hollywood past makes for a number of entertaining anecdotes about his acting career and efforts heading the Screen Actors Guild, but they are no more controversial than Teddy Roosevelt's hunting stories. The life presented in *Life* indeed makes the representative claim implied by the title, suggesting a fully realized and complete life recalled by a content memoirist. This construction of a fully contented self stands in contrast to Reagan's earlier work of memoir, in which the author emphasized the incompleteness of his public self.

This first memoir was titled *Where's the Rest of Me?* after his most memorable line in arguably his best film, *King's Row*, and presents the story of an actor emerging from the small town of Tampico, Illinois, and eventually finding his way to Hollywood. The book thoroughly recounts the story of Reagan's rise to prominence in the movies, his labor leadership as the head of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), and his transition to television and eventual partnership with General Electric. Reagan would mockingly describe the effort as "my literary epic," assuring that the book is "autobiographical" and directed, at the publisher's request, toward his activities in the SAG and "some of the Communist assault on Hollywood" (Reagan to Wagner 753). But as the memoir of a Hollywood celebrity rather than a president, *Rest* can offer the reader a different twist on the life of its subject. Movie stars have more latitude than presidents (after all, their

bodies do not represent the body politic), and the boundaries of appropriateness are much looser. The changes in Reagan's life story—driven by the demands of autobiographical norms—become immediately apparent when comparing the selves that Reagan constructs in the two books.

*Where's the Rest of Me?* (hereafter *Rest*) is, as its title implies, a memoir that emphasizes the incompleteness of its subject. While this provides a twist on the notion of memoir as the story of a life, i.e., as a recollection of settled history, it makes sense considering the state of Reagan's life at its publication in 1965. His first explosion on the national political stage came the previous year, when his speech in support of Senator Goldwater's doomed presidential candidacy was nationally broadcast on airtime purchased by Goldwater's supporters. His career as candidate was almost ready to take flight with his successful run for California's governorship in 1966. By the time that he set about authoring this first memoir, Reagan was in essence closing the book on his life as a film star and corporate spokesman and setting out on a new political life that would take him to the White House.

The opening of *Rest* intersperses the real and the reel, playing up the connection between Reagan's life and his film work. The scene of Reagan's birth in a small apartment above a bank in Tampico, Illinois, on a freezing February day is set and described in a manner befitting the birth of a movie star: "The story begins with the closeup of a bottom in a small town called Tampico" (3). This opening line not only hews to the most basic autobiographical organizational element of chronology—birth as the first scene—but the language encourages the reader to visualize the moment, as if Reagan is on a movie screen rather than words on a page. It is the opening scene of a filmed

documentary, not of a written text, and suggests that Reagan may have found constructing the narrative easier if imagined this way.

Here Reagan also sews the seeds of his political awakening. In unabashedly corny fashion, Reagan describes his newborn self as blue in the face from his screaming and red on the bottom from being spanked into life before his white-faced father, concluding that “I have been particularly fond of the colors that were exhibited—red, white, and blue” (3). Even in that state of absolute dependency, baby Ronald is presented as yearning already for his independence. He describes his breast feeding as “the home of the brave baby and the free bosom” and suggests that he “imbibe[d]” his “ideals from his mother’s milk”, then that he was “gnawing on the bars” of his crib or “worrying” while sucking his thumb (3). The implication is that, even as a baby, Ronald Reagan already believed in seeking his freedom, even to the point of trying to break free from his crib. This is a child unconsciously uncomfortable with his own dependence and ready to seek the autonomy that first the screen and eventually politics will bring.

As if to emphasize that this search will form the backbone of the narrative, Reagan shifts abruptly from a child in his crib to an adult in a different kind of bed: a trick bed being used as a prop on a movie set. The political Reagan who would also sound themes of freedom and independence in his policies does not yet exist. Thus one finds the actor Reagan having to pursue these ends through the medium of film. And so the birth scene gives way to another birth scene: the birth of what will become the thirty-year-old actor Reagan’s political self. By 1941, “thirty years later,” Reagan would begin a search for the “missing” piece of his “existence” through the making of the film *King’s Row* (3). And in just two paragraphs, Ronald Reagan is free of the crib, on the screen, and

ready to begin the path that will lead to the White House.

In acting, Reagan must come to terms with his own shortcomings. The crucial moment at which he confronts his desire for a political career comes when he faces a challenging scene while filming *King's Row*. Reagan's character, playboy Drake McHugh, awakens from surgery to find his legs amputated by the vengeful surgeon father of one of his female conquests. Despite thoroughly rehearsing and preparing for this climactic scene, Reagan is unable to decide how to play it. At last, lying in the rigged hospital bed that concealed his lower half, Reagan "felt that something horrible had happened to my body"—he came to identify with his character so thoroughly that his real self was subsumed (5). And although he delivered the crucial line—"Where's the rest of me?"—well enough that no retake was required, the idea of only being "half a man" continued to gnaw at Reagan (6). He felt an incompleteness made tangible by his identification with his legless character.

In his acting career, he became a "semi-automaton" constricted by the writers who created his character and the directors who gave him commands on the set (6). He then began to revisit the experience of being trapped, a "shut-in invalid, nursed by publicity" like the baby in the crib (6). Reagan's desire for freedom would be spawned by what he perceived as a loss of agency, of the possibility of self-reliance. His desire for "space, the feeling of freedom," would drive him toward his three loves: drama (which had freed him from small-town Illinois but was no longer satisfying him), sports (no longer feasible given his age), and, of course, politics (6). Having experienced the loss of the physical body, Reagan now would seek a new political body as its replacement, beginning a journey that would end forty years later in the White House. And in 1965,

Reagan considered this moment in his life pivotal enough that his memoir took its title from the line uttered by the mutilated Drake McHugh.

Timothy Rafael notes that *Rest* “answers the question posed in its title by narrating the transformation of the amputee actor into the wholeness of the political performer” (3). The broken body of Drake McHugh is an apt metaphor not merely for the nature of the actor’s life or Ronald Reagan’s personal search for meaning. Both Rafael and Michael Rogin consider the tradition of the king’s two bodies—the natural, physical body, and the body politic, which can neither be seen nor handled but instead represents the power and majesty of the state. Although this doctrine initially empowered the state by imbuing it with the mystical power associated with the church, eventually “American presidents” built on the tradition, and the American public “identified the president’s welfare with the health of the body politic” (Rogin 5). When Reagan makes Drake McHugh’s body the locus of his desire for meaning and chooses politics as its natural medium, he necessarily taps into this tradition, which will prove important in his later post-presidential memoir.

In contrast to the birth scene that opens *Rest*, *Life* chooses a different tack. *Life*’s first twist on the story is to push it behind a prologue and two other opening scenes, making Reagan’s birth no longer the absolute beginning of his narrative. Gone is the play on the flag’s colors, as well as the use of cinematic language to set the scene. The language is much simpler, a statement of fact to be entered into the record: “I was born February 6, 1911, in a flat above the local bank in Tampico, Illinois” (21). Added to the scene is his father Jack’s remark, prefaced by its status as “family legend,” which can only carry their full foreshadowing value in the post-presidential memoir: “But who

knows, he might grow up to be president some day” (21). Of course, in both memoirs, there is no chance that Reagan literally remembers the moment of his birth any more than anyone else remembers his own. Therefore, the scene inevitably must be reconstructed from the memory of others. But the addition of this line, far more meaningful in 1990 than in 1965, suggests that these memories may have been altered or twisted again and again with the passage of time and the corresponding rise of Reagan’s star, perhaps without conscious knowledge.

By delaying the birth scene, *Life* follows what had become something of a new trend in presidential memoirs. Traditionally, these narratives fit a pat chronological order: the opening lines were devoted to the heritage and birth of the subject. This was true even as late as Richard Nixon’s memoir, which begins with the famously laconic “I was born in a house my father built.” And, of course, even *Rest* begins with a birth scene rather than the pivotal *King’s Row* scene. But *Keeping Faith*, the memoir of Reagan’s predecessor Jimmy Carter, opens on the last day of his presidency, when the American hostages held in Iran were released. Gerald Ford’s *A Time to Heal* opens in August 1974, in the days when the then-vice president realized that President Nixon’s resignation was eminent. Lyndon Johnson’s *The Vantage Point* opens on November 22, 1963—the day he unexpectedly became president. In contrast to the bitter February day in Illinois described by actor Reagan, President Reagan begins his life story in Lake Geneva in 1985, preparing to meet Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev.

By bringing these pivotal moments—in some respect, all moments that defined each president’s time in office—to the forefront and casting aside the tradition of chronological order, these authors admit openly what was always tacitly clear: that life

narrative is shaped and crafted, no different from any other form of narrative writing, with chronology offering only one of many organizational choices. This demonstrates not only a somewhat elevated sense of aesthetics on the part of the authors, but it also could be emblematic of the progress of the genre. First, by opening with a dramatic moment, these presidents seek to hook their readers immediately, certainly appropriate for a genre that has become increasingly aimed at securing a popular audience. Second, and this may be the more important point, this narrative shift also hints at a stronger role for publishers, editors, and consultants (and, possibly, for ghostwriters) in crafting the narrative. Presidential memoirs have become a lucrative genre as evidenced by Reagan's multi-million dollar contract. With that amount of investment, it would hardly be surprising that even presidents are expected to leave at least some of the writing to the professionals. Thus while strict chronology may seem to be the most "natural" narrative structure for autobiography, this structure can be subverted to enhance the text's aesthetic, and perhaps commercial, appeal.

Aside from reconstructing his own birth, Reagan must also meet the challenge of elements of his past that do not entirely fit his representative American life. Consider Reagan's treatment of his father, Jack, too important a figure to ignore and too embarrassing to present unvarnished. Reagan is careful to use the character of his father to advance his larger story of his self-development in sophisticated ways. That Jack was an influential figure in Reagan's life is beyond dispute. Edmund Morris describes Jack and his son as twins, sharing "an almost complete physical identity" (*Dutch* 13). Jack was hard-working, putting in ten-hour days as a salesman to support his family (25). He was a Roosevelt Democrat, even in a solidly Republican area of Illinois, and staunchly anti-

racist (89-90). In some respects, he was a powerful example to his son, who would start out a Democrat and even after his conversion would refer to FDR in warm terms; who would preach hard work and self-reliance; and who mingled easily with people different from himself. In that sense, Jack Reagan fit the mold of presidential fathers like Deacon John Adams, Jesse Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., and John Coolidge, who are described in glowing terms in their sons' memoirs.

Unfortunately, Jack was also an abusive alcoholic, moving from dead-end job to dead-end job and never able to climb the ladder of success. One of the memorable set pieces in both memoirs is the eleven-year-old Ronald Reagan finding his father passed out on the porch. In *Rest*, Reagan responds to the scene of his unconscious father with both resignation and pity and suggests that it is a formative moment in his early life. Immediately recognizing that Jack was "dead to the world," Reagan admits that even at that young age he "wasn't ignorant" of his father's "weakness" (7). He experiences an inversion of the parent-child relationship, the child realizing that he must accept "that first moment" of "responsibility" and tucks his father into bed (7-8). Thus Reagan must face the concept of individual responsibility at that young age, which in turn foreshadows his emphasis on self-reliance during his political career.

Yet while Reagan presents an image of his father as the victim of "sickness"—indeed, describes him as lying spread-eagled as though "crucified"—his claim to feel "no resentment" toward Jack is not entirely compelling (8). If that scene was for young Ronald Reagan the moment of first "accepting responsibility," then it also marks an end to childhood (7). Thus, it makes sense that "I felt myself feel with grief for my father at the same time I was feeling sorry for myself" (7). His pity for his father is the response

trained by his mother, but his immediate natural response is one of self-pity, because he cannot simply go to bed and pretend his father is not lying drunk on the porch (7). The reader gets the sense that young Ronald Reagan was forced to grow up too fast by his father's weakness, and it is a darkly moving moment.

To his credit, Reagan allowed the scene to be replayed in *Life*. But gone are his ruminations on personal responsibility and the end of childhood. Reagan again admits that he considered "continuing on into the house and going to bed," but the context of a moral choice, between evasion and responsibility or between childhood and adulthood, is lost in the retelling (33). In fact, Reagan suggests that his major concern was an apt one for a future politician: that Jack's snoring would be "loud enough . . . for the whole neighborhood to hear him" (33). What the neighbors would think weighed more in this version of the eleven-year-old than what this moment meant for his self-perception, making the moment lighter, almost even comedic. The paragraphs that follow are heavily indebted to the idea of Jack as a victim of illness—tolerant, understanding, and loving. The entire effect is to downplay the importance of the scene in Reagan's life.

That such a scene would be included at all in *Life* is "remarkable enough . . . Political candidates' recollections of their parents more customarily resemble hagiography, or, when that is untenable, a discreet near-silence" (Henry 7). A movie star can have a dysfunctional family; an American president cannot. But the entire picture of Ronald Reagan's troubled relationship with his father is obscured, leaning if not toward hagiography, at least toward idealizing an upbringing that was far from ideal. Although the full record of Jack recorded by his son is decidedly mixed, as in the front porch story, it became less critical when the scenes were rewritten for the presidential memoir. Jack

Reagan played a major, problematic role throughout his son's life, a role emphasized in the analysis of both Michael Rogin and Robert Dallek, both of whom wrote during Reagan's presidency—before *Life* was published—and therefore relied heavily (and rather uncritically) on *Rest* as a primary source.

Dallek's partisan screed in particular makes Jack a site of Reagan's intense ambivalence between dependence and independence; the president, he writes, "finds great appeal in self-reliance, and he strongly dislikes dependency, partly, current psychological understanding suggests, out of unrecognized fears that he is like his father" (14). Like William Henry, Dallek finds in the unflattering portrait of Jack some indication of why his son would reject his father's political legacy. Rogin, writing after Dallek though in a somewhat less openly critical style, similarly argues that Reagan has come to terms with his childhood in part by suppressing his resentment toward his father. He uses Reagan's roles in *King's Row*—which also features dysfunctional familial relations—and *Knute Rockne, All American*—in which the coach becomes a glorified father figure—to suggest that Reagan the actor displaced his own past onto the characters in his films (21-2). And after Jack's death, he would be replaced by Dr. Loyal Davis, Reagan's father-in-law, a successful surgeon and staunch political conservative (32-3). Therefore, Jack presents a narrative obstacle to both autobiographies because he fits poorly into Reagan's desire to present an idyllic small-town upbringing underscored by traditional family values. But *Life* has more at stake in whitewashing Reagan's childhood than does *Rest*, and the handling of Jack's character reflects this.

As Morris notes, Reagan's memoirs emphasize his pride in his father's admirable traits, such as relatively progressive views, and in *Dutch* he singles out two incidents:

Jack refusing to allow his sons to see the wildly popular but equally racist film *Birth of a Nation*, and refusing to stay overnight in a hotel that refused service to Jews (90). Indeed, the son ties these values neatly into his own political life in *Rest*, describing his father as “believ[ing] literally that all men were created equal and that man’s own ambition determined what happened to him after that” (8). Indeed, he immediately mentions the movie incident—adding, “my brother and I were the only kids not to see it” (8)—and the hotel incident, which is more dramatic than Morris reveals. A Catholic, Jack was sensitive to religious prejudices, and his principled refusal to stay at the only hotel in town led him to sleep in his car, developing pneumonia and later suffering a heart attack in consequence (9). Therefore we find one basis of Reagan’s belief system of self-reliance and reduced government: the life of his father, a man stubborn enough to risk death for principle.

In *Life*, the specific story of the D.W. Griffith movie is replaced with a generalized one about brother Neil sitting in the balcony of the segregated movie house to be with his best friend, a black child (30). Ronald’s approval is implied, although *Life* does not make clear whether he took similar action. However, it repeats the story of the hotel incident, adding the key point that “[m]y parents constantly drummed into me the importance of judging people as *individuals*” (30, italics original). This is for Reagan not merely an important emphasis to describe his upbringing but a tenet of his larger view of conservative politics: that the success or failure of individuals creates success or failure of societies, not vice versa. In context, Reagan uses the emphasis on conservatism to advocate a benign and non-controversial position on race, namely that judging individuals must necessarily preclude racial, religious, or ethnic prejudices. Whether one

believes that this view of individualism produced governmental policies during Reagan's administration which were equally as benign and non-controversial, the rhetorical point is clearly established to lend Reagan's conservatism the virtue of being color-blind.

But this still is not enough to erase completely Reagan's perception of his father's shortcomings. And along with seizing on opportunities to glorify Jack's strengths, Reagan seeks to downplay his failings. Thus, some of the worst scenes from *Rest* are excluded from *Life*. Right before admiring Jack's principles about equality and the value of working men, Reagan recounts getting into a fight at the schoolyard. Jack broke up the fight, then kicked his son in the pants "because you weren't winning" (8). This somewhat disturbing scene did not make it into Reagan's presidential memoir, and another story was heavily edited. Later, Reagan gave his father a job answering his fan mail and took him to South Bend, Indiana, for the release of *Knute Rockne*. The trip was tinged, however, by "a chilling fear" that his father would succumb to "the black curse" and embarrass his famous son in front of his co-star, Pat O'Brien (97-8). In fact, the stressful trip ended successfully, with Jack and O'Brien becoming "inseparable buddies," but this becomes the final incident in Jack's story; shortly after returning to Los Angeles, he died (99). In *Life*, Reagan's nervousness about his father's behavior is gone, replaced with observations that Jack had pledged to give up drinking and started attending church regularly. Even the trip to Notre Dame passes by in two short sentences that cut directly to the happy ending (94).

Considering the painful view Reagan held of his father, it is understandable that he would have reservations about paternalistic government. *Rest* could have been a story about an actor finding meaning in the left-leaning politics of Jack Reagan, but it comes as

no surprise that Ronald Reagan would dispossess himself of this paternal legacy, instead becoming a figure of the right. As he bemusedly noted as president in a letter to fellow film star-turned-politico George Murphy, the media treated his Democratic past as a major revelation when, in fact, “I wrote about it myself in my autobiography” (115). But he also wrote about his Roosevelt New Dealer father as an embarrassment and a lout, as contrasted to the Jack who appears as a well-intentioned victim of addiction with some laudable qualities in the later work.

Perhaps an even more embarrassing figure in Reagan’s life was Jane Wyman, the actress who was his wife from 1940 until 1948, making Reagan the only divorced man ever to serve as president. Perhaps the public does not consider divorce as significant a detail today; 2004 Democrat presidential nominee John Kerry had his first marriage annulled, and 2008 Republican presidential nominee John McCain was also divorced. But as recently as the 1960’s, divorce could prove to be the undoing of any politician’s presidential hopes—Nelson Rockefeller provided the operative example (Cornog 47). In *Rest*, Reagan rather forthrightly deals with his divorce, admitting that “small-town boys [like himself] grow up thinking only other people get divorced” (201). He paints a picture of himself as a gloomy divorcee, noting the unfortunate impact on their daughter Maureen and adopted son Michael (202). But aside from generally noting that “there had been warning signs” (201), Reagan abruptly cuts off the line of memory: “I have never discussed what happened, and I have no intention of doing it now” (202). Thus ends Jane Wyman’s presence in the text.

But while candor with respect to marital strife may indeed be off-putting, Reagan’s entire treatment of his marriage in *Rest* is puzzling. For example, he does not

mention getting married to Ms. Wyman in the first place! Jane Wyman makes her first appearance as Mrs. Reagan almost off-handedly in a crucial scene. Reagan suffered a sudden and near-fatal attack of viral pneumonia in 1947. In his lengthy description of the ordeal comes this nugget: “[I]n another hospital, my then-wife, Jane Wyman, had lost our child by miscarriage” (194). A miscarriage can prove a crucial factor in the break-up of a marriage, and it may well have contributed to the Reagans’ divorce; however, Wyman, her pregnancy, and their lost child quickly disappear in the tide of words. Reagan’s child is dead, but he will survive to tell the rest of *Rest*.

Remarkably, even the sparse mention Wyman receives in *Rest* overshadows the treatment she gets in *Life*. The text of *Life* runs over seven hundred pages, and Wyman gets two sentences containing the following facts: she was, like Reagan, a contract player at Warners, they were married the same year as *Knute Rockne, All American* was filmed, they had two children, “but it didn’t work out, and in 1948 we were divorced” (92). Even George Gipp got more screen time than Ms. Wyman, and the miscarriage is entirely omitted. Yet Dallek suggests that the collapse of the Reagan marriage was linked to Reagan’s increasing involvement with the Screen Actors Guild and accompanying anti-Communist activities—activities that helped launch his political reinvention (24). Wyman’s successful career was also a factor; in 1948, she lost Ronnie but won Oscar—for Best Actress in *Johnny Belinda* (Rogin 26). While Wyman’s star rose, Reagan was still obsessively watching reruns of his memorable performance in the then-six-year-old *King’s Row* (Wyman claimed she “couldn’t stand to watch that damn *King’s Row* one more time”) (qtd. Rogin 26). Professional changes and possible jealousy may well have contributed to the marriage’s demise; nonetheless, neither autobiography even begins to

address this angle.

Unlike Jack, who must be included even though he is an embarrassment, Jane Wyman is easily excluded from Reagan's life. Part of this may simply be because it is easier to replace a wife than a father, as Reagan did when he married Nancy Davis. Part of it may also be that Reagan did not wish to upset or dishonor Nancy by elaborating on his relationship with Wyman in his memoirs. But whatever Reagan's thinking, his construction of an idealized American life may have room for his father's weakness, but it clearly does not have room for his first wife. Like many divorcees, he may have simply wanted to rewrite his life story so that his ex-wife is not part of it. But at least actor Reagan could acknowledge Wyman and, more importantly, their lost child. President Reagan evidently felt that it was improper for a man of his station to do so. It is the most disturbing sacrifice to propriety found in *Life*.

It is also noteworthy that the entire episode of viral pneumonia is excluded from *Life*. In addition to mentioning Wyman's miscarriage, Reagan makes clear that this illness could easily have been fatal: "my next of kin were being notified that the hospital might be my last address" (*Rest* 194). Reagan presents himself reduced to helpless delirium, playing a scene with Humphrey Bogart in his mind until finally deciding that "I was too tired to breathe anymore" (195). Fortunately, a helpful nurse ("God bless her") encouraged him to pull through, "but the memory is vivid to me . . . The ambulance ride home made quite an impression" (195). Thus Reagan replays a scene of dependence that is familiar both from his life—the anxious baby in the crib, Jack's drunken form in the snow—and his movie life—Drake McHugh and George Gipp lying in their hospital beds. Even in *Life* he notes that "[a]s an actor, I guess I spent some of my finest moments in

bed” and cites those particular roles (95). Yet he does not revisit the “vivid” memory of his near-fatal bout of pneumonia. This omission suggests a shift in Reagan’s conception of his body, from his weak corporeal form to the embodiment of the values of all Americans.

By the end of *Rest*, Reagan’s reinvention of his body is well underway with the major event of his rise to power: his famous speech on behalf of Barry Goldwater, called to this day simply The Speech. Fittingly, the full text of The Speech appears as an appendix to *Rest*, as it represents the end of Reagan’s quest. Using his celebrity to attract listeners, Reagan had developed and perfected the text of The Speech over several years until shaping it into a Goldwater campaign speech in time for an address at the Coconut Grove Nightclub (Reagan, *Life* 139). It proved such a success that Reagan returned to the medium of television to deliver it again on a taped broadcast aired on NBC (140). In *Rest*, Reagan’s speech represented the culmination of his quest; like St. Paul going to Rome, Ronald Reagan would now be on his way to Sacramento and Washington.

But in *Life*, The Speech was the beginning. A political star had been born; now would come its development and empowerment. And, despite the political instincts that Reagan honed over decades, his life would be recast into the mold of the citizen politician drafted to action. The Speech represented one step in this process; Reagan’s political skill and media savvy allowed him to create a memorable televised masterpiece of political oratory. But Reagan also emphasizes that the idea of delivering the televised version was concocted by power brokers within the Republican Party; he acceded to their request only “if you think it would do any good” (140). It did little good for Goldwater—indeed, the Goldwater campaign was lukewarm toward the idea—but would work wonders for

Reagan. He concludes, “[T]hat speech was one of the most important milestones in my life—another one of those unexpected turns in the road that led me onto a path I never expected to take” (143). This is modest but disingenuous; the years spent honing *The Speech* and its role in *Rest* belie his claim.

Reagan’s efforts to position himself as the citizen politician make sense on several levels. First, they excuse the presumption of a movie star seeking political power. Second, they explain why an anti-government activist would seek to become the head of government. And finally, they suggest that individuals from outside government can play a productive role in government. But they are still dishonest. Consider some of Reagan’s claims when describing the decision to run for Governor of California in 1966. Republican groups and powerful individuals had come to Reagan urging him to run; he consistently demurred: “I’d never given a thought to running for office and I had no interest in it whatsoever” (145). “I’m an actor, not a politician,” Reagan would claim, although he certainly was aware of similarities between the two professions (145). “I was happy in show business,” he asserts, and at age fifty-four, “the last thing I wanted to do was start a new career” (145). But this is not the Ronald Reagan who realized he was missing part of himself, who identified so closely with Drake McHugh. It is not, that is, the Reagan of *Rest*.

The Ronald Reagan of *Life* offers a new credo: “A candidate doesn’t make the decision whether to run for president; the people make it for him” (199). He re-imagines his political self as a hesitant and unwilling draftee laden with the desires and expectations of his supporters. Although “I’d been dragged kicking and screaming into politics,” by 1976, he would succumb to the presidential bug (196). No longer a man

looking to politics for a graft to replace the missing part of himself, this Reagan is a satisfied, whole person who makes a sacrifice to enter public office. Rather than making him complete, politics requires him to give up part of himself. This is a deeply different Ronald Reagan, one whose memories are no doubt clouded by twenty years of being made whole by his successful pursuit of public office. This is not the same broken body at the center of *Rest*.

But while Reagan downplays his personal need to heal his own body by grafting it with the political body, the fact that he was urged to seek office and his winning candidacies point to a key of his success: Reagan fit the times in which he rose to power. Even if the Reagan of *Life* is uncomfortable with his own broken body, he surely must recognize that, in 1980, the United States itself suffered from “an ailing political body reeling from the specters of Vietnam, Watergate, the Iranian hostage crisis, and a crippled economy” (Rafael 3). Reagan rose to prominence on the crest of a growing conservative movement, empowered by the perceived excesses of the 1960’s counterculture, and anxious for the opportunity to push back.

But their vehicle, the Republican Party, was split down the middle between the conservative activists and the traditional East Coast moderate establishment. Thus, the movement had failed to take control of the Republican body politic in the past; Robert Taft could not defeat the more moderate Dwight Eisenhower in 1952, and when grass-roots conservatives succeeded in nominating Barry Goldwater in 1964, they lost the biggest landslide in presidential history, seemingly breaking and burying their movement forever. Ronald Reagan needed a platform, and the conservative movement needed a messenger. The first major attempt to graft Reagan’s embodiment of movement

conservatism on to the Republican Party was in the 1976 Republican presidential primary; the transplant was rejected in favor of the moderate, seemingly safe Gerald Ford. But in 1980, Reagan would storm to victory in both the primary and general elections, promising to purge the body politic of its Jimmy Carter malaise.

Reagan evinces some discomfort with the weakness of his body in *Life*, a weakness most significantly represented in the title scene from *King's Row*. As such, this scene ties into a theme in the book of seeking the purpose of life, which as presented in this case is to survive one breath at a time to please a helpful nurse. The Reagan of *Life* has taken on a new body, and his landslide election as president ensures that there is no weakness in this body. While in the later book Reagan references the difficulty of preparing for that crucial scene, he does not give it the same depth of interpretation as in the earlier work. It was a challenging scene, "one of the biggest milestones of his career," his finest performance in his finest film (96). But it does not raise the deeper questions of meaning that it does in *Rest*, nor does it start a search for meaning that leads to politics.

However, as with Jack Reagan's line at his birth, Reagan now interjects a remembered remark by costar Bob Cummings on the set: "Someday . . . I'm going to vote for this fellow for president" (qtd. 96). While the validity of this new recollection may be clouded by hindsight, there is no doubt that Reagan had re-shaped the scene as still important in his career but not his life. The exclusion of his bout with viral pneumonia also fits the idea of his unwillingness to accept weakness in his body. Yet, like the drafted candidate Reagan, he finds himself faced with physical weakness and attending loss of agency. If "the people" gave Reagan his political success, outside forces could also take it away. And so the helpless Reagan of *Rest*, "cocooned in blankets" and

waiting passively for his fever to break (195), now is replaced by the Reagan of *Life*, whose most notable brush with the death of his corporeal and political bodies was the assassination attempt of John Hinckley.

The scene of Reagan struggling to recover from the shooting bears some similarities to his earlier survival story. His description of being shot understandably focuses on the pain—“the most excruciating pain I had ever felt,” becoming “almost paralyzed by pain,” the “pain near my ribs was still excruciating” (*Life* 259-60). Of course, Reagan did not know immediately what had happened to him, and as the pieces came together, he again became the event’s central figure, yet without agency. His life had been initially saved by a Secret Service agent named Jerry Parr, who had not only tackled the president into his waiting limousine but, when seeing “frothy” blood coming from Reagan’s mouth—indicating a lung injury—had the presence of mind to order the driver to George Washington University Hospital (260).

This would provide a touchstone to Reagan’s past; once the lifeguard who noted that he saved seventy-seven people—“one of the proudest statistics of my life” (40)—Reagan now found himself being saved. But *Life* contains only a brief paragraph about his seven summers at Lowell Park. In *Rest*, he worked it into a collage of idyllic small-town life, though with a slightly bitter taste: “Not many thanked me . . . They felt insulted” (21). Even years later, in the grip of dementia, Reagan would recall those summers in Lowell Park, and note, “[N]one of ‘em ever thanked me” (qtd. in Morris, *Dutch* 667). Part of the lesson that Reagan took from lifeguarding was that “people hate to be saved” and thus resent their saviors (*Rest* 21). And indeed he unwittingly proves the point, at first ordering Parr off of him and accusing him of breaking his rib (*Life* 259).

Reagan expresses regret that his initial reaction had been to “chew” Parr out when in fact he “gallantly” shielded the president at risk to himself but does so with no apparent recognition of his lifeguard past, a past which clearly was not weighed in *Life* as heavily as in *Rest* (261-2). But even Reagan apparently did not know the full story of Jerry Parr, which will shortly be considered.

The attempted assassination of President Reagan provides a compelling example of the blurring of identities that that marked his career and his memoirs. Hinckley’s assault hearkens back to the first presidential assassination, itself a theatrical affair. When actor John Wilkes Booth shot President Abraham Lincoln in the presidential box at Ford’s Theatre, according to eyewitness accounts, he leapt to the stage declaring Virginia’s state motto, “Sic Semper Tyrannis”—thus always to tyrants (Rafael 9). Motivated by his commitment to white supremacy, Booth’s crime was both a political act and a dramatic one; numerous accounts observe the confusion that allowed Booth to escape, as both audience and crew did not immediately know whether he was part of the performance. He struck at Lincoln’s body as the embodiment of a government he despised; he shot Lincoln in the head in order to remove the head of state.

Remarkably, Reagan would indirectly benefit from Booth’s crime; during his first political race against California Governor Pat Brown, the incumbent made the mistake of telling schoolchildren that his opponent was an actor—and “you know who shot Abraham Lincoln, don’t you?” (qtd. Rafael 8). Reagan recounts this episode, noting that “I knew he knew he was in trouble” by allowing the remark to be included in a television commercial (*Life* 149). The “overwhelmingly negative response” to Brown’s remark helped seal his fate and begin Reagan’s rise to power (Rafael 8). And so the medium of

television and the invocation of a fellow actor would start Ronald Reagan down the road that would end in Abraham Lincoln's office as the leader of the Party of Lincoln.

The account of his ordeal in the hospital after his initial fear also hearkens to the bout of viral pneumonia in *Rest*. Just as the Reagan of 1947 lay helpless in bed, coaxed into survival through the agency of a nameless nurse, the Reagan of 1981 also finds himself delivered by an outside power. After having "passed out" while "praying" the "half-conscious Reagan finds that "someone was holding my hand" (260). That someone was another helpful nurse, and Reagan notes that "it gave me a wonderful feeling" (260). Like the other nurse, however, "I was never able to find her" and thank her (260). The nurse's anonymity suggests that, in his own mind, Reagan's prayer had been answered. When he concludes, "I owe my life to God," it ties in, as both nurse stories do, to Reagan's willingness to allow outside agency to pull him through (263). The bullet that nearly killed him becomes an opportunity for God to save him, and in turn allows Reagan to suggest that his accomplishments as president were in line with God's will.

Reagan's account is notable for his reliance on humor. He asks the nameless nurse holding his hand, "Does Nancy know about us" (260)? He tells the surgeon, "I hope you're a Republican" (261). Upon seeing his wife standing over him—unlike Jane Wyman, who was absent in his viral pneumonia memories—he recalls the boxer Jack Dempsey's line: "Honey, I forgot to duck" (260). When responding to a nurse's question, Reagan references not only movie star W.C. Fields but also that year's basketball Final Four: "All in all, I'd rather be in Philadelphia" (261). The picture of Reagan as a sunny patient delivering canned lines underscores his desire to downplay the attempted assassination, in which he came close enough to death that Vice President George Bush

was summoned to the hospital to take the presidential oath if necessary (Cannon 198). Indeed, it reminds one of the smiling George Gipp lying on his deathbed, requesting Coach Rockne to urge the Fighting Irish on to victory. Perhaps this selective remembering is simply a psychological defense mechanism, but it ignores the potential ramifications for the federal government if the head of state dies.

In Reagan's mind, his shooting was not a political act—and, as it happens, he is correct. Compared with God, the nurse, or even Jerry Parr, John Hinckley's role in *An American Life* proves small. Like Reagan himself, Hinckley had a tendency to confuse movies and reality. "In the hospital," the president recalls, "I learned [Hinckley] had gone to a movie, *Taxi Driver*, and fallen in love with an actress in the picture" (263). The actress was Jodie Foster, but as Reagan himself had met Jane Wyman and Nancy Davis through the film industry, perhaps he could understand the allure. Reagan concludes that, inspired by a shooting in the film, Hinckley "decided to get a gun and kill somebody to demonstrate his love for the actress" (263). Yet Reagan demonstrates no malice toward Hinckley, "a mixed-up young man from a fine family," instead praying for Hinckley's recovery from mental illness (263). In his diary entry for June 22, 1982, Reagan again returns to this theme, noting that Hinckley "was found innocent by reason of insanity . . . Quite an uproar has been created" (320). But Reagan shows no interest in being part of this uproar; Hinckley instead is treated as the unfortunate instrument who delivered to Reagan the challenge of recovering from near death. The president seems uninterested even on contemplating the irony that a movie may well have ended his life.

Again, the complete story behind the attempted assassination is more complex than Reagan's account suggests. Travis Bickle, the psychopathic title character of *Taxi*

*Driver*, was based on Arthur Bremer, who was also an attempted political assassin; he shot Alabama Governor and presidential candidate George Wallace in 1972 (Rafael 10). Bremer published his diary, which focuses on becoming a “media celebrity” through political assassination, planning the act in such a way as to maximize the media’s attention (10). Unlike John Wilkes Booth, Hinckley did not shoot Reagan to make a political statement; rather, he did so to force his way into the media-driven landscape in which Reagan—and Jodie Foster—lived and breathed. Just as the young actress and the former actor were creations of mass media, so also John Hinckley longed to be. He shot at Ronald Reagan, a celebrity who happened to be president. And he succeeded: the footage of a waving, smiling Reagan suddenly being thrust into the presidential limousine as shots ring out has been replayed countless times (9).

Yet in this moment of weakness, the doctrine of the king’s two bodies would work to Reagan’s advantage. After this severe challenge to his corporeal body, Reagan was determined to show strength to his public audience: “[W]hen I left the hospital, I was going to walk out, and I did” (*Life* 264). But his political image had grown much stronger even as his corporeal body struggled to survive. David Gergen, then a Reagan staffer, noted that after the shooting, “We had new capital”; it “gave us a second life” (qtd. Rafael 10-11). Because Reagan nearly lost his life, his administration enjoyed renewed vigor. The media showed deference to Reagan in light of his near-death experience, and he enjoyed “vast reserves of political capital” from the public (10-11). The end result was that Ronald Reagan’s appeal to the body politic was never more powerful, and the image of himself forgiving John Hinckley and confidently making jokes with nurses and doctors underscores this strength.

And now the final twist in the story of Jerry Parr. Reagan does not mention, and perhaps did not know, that his physical body had been saved by his cinematic body. In 1939 and 1940, Reagan portrayed Secret Service Agent Lieutenant “Brass” Bancroft in a series of four films (Letter to Foy 127). The films were so unmemorable that neither of his autobiographies mentions them. But they attracted the youthful attention of a boy named Jerry Parr, who grew up to become a Secret Service agent himself, eventually becoming “chief of the presidential protection detail during Reagan’s administration” (Matthews 192). Of course, Parr would throw his own body across that of Reagan/Bancroft and save the day (192). Somewhere between Brass Bancroft and Travis Bickle, politics and film had collided and became, on that fateful day outside the Washington Hilton, inseparable.

Critical response to *An American Life* was as benign as the book itself, lukewarm but generally positive. Former White House correspondent Barrett Seaman observed in *Time Magazine*—which published two exclusive early excerpts—that the book contained “no juicy revelations” and left the “mystery” of “the inner Ronald Reagan . . . unsolved” (qtd. Concini B03). Bert Rockman of The Brookings Institution reviewed the book for *Political Science Quarterly* rather kindly, suggesting that perhaps Reagan seems like an ordinary fellow because he already is “an open book” (716). Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, writing in the *New York Times*, lauds the sense of “authenticity” about the book in contrast to the concept of Reagan as “a manufactured presence” and suggests that “as Presidential memoirs go, this one is not bad” (8, 13). Both hawkish liberal journalist Paul Berman and columnist Joe Dirck focus on the treatment of Jane Wyman as the key to a reading of Reagan as a sunny man unwilling to relive the unpleasant past, editing out

tough decisions and personal anguish (Berman B6; Dirck C3). As for public consumption, the *New York Times* archives list the book as a best seller for eight weeks. However, the reported sale of 380,000 books was considered a “huge disappointment” (Ackman and King 6). Apparently the American public already felt that they knew the man well enough that the book was superfluous, that he had indeed been “an open book.”

As Reagan challenges the boundaries between celebrity and politics, between role and self (such as it exists outside of role), perhaps the publication of a book like Edmund Morris’s *Dutch* was inevitable. While not an autobiography—exactly—somehow any consideration of Reagan and memoir seems incomplete without considering this volume’s unique challenge to generic convention. Widely anticipated during a fourteen-year period in which its release was pushed back several times, *Dutch* earned Morris a \$3 million advance—well within the range of what Reagan earned for producing *An American Life*—and a 300,000 copy first printing (Carvajal 8-9). However, much like its namesake, the book would become associated more with a reappraisal of the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction than strong sales.

### III

Reagan learned that Edmund Morris had agreed to serve as his official biographer in 1985. He reported being “pleased” with the selection, noting that “his book on Teddy Roosevelt”—the Pulitzer Prize winner *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*—“was wonderful” (*Diaries* 366). But Reagan also worried about the quality of material he would provide Morris, noting, “I can’t ride up San Juan Hill” (366). Reagan was interviewed by Morris frequently throughout the remainder of his term, culminating in the biographer being permitted to shadow the outgoing president for a full day of

meetings on November 17, 1988 (668). Though not the author, Reagan was a full and willing participant in the process that would culminate in the 1999 release of *Dutch*. Little did he—or even Morris himself—know that the traditional biographical form of *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, with its elegant narration and copious documentation, would be subverted in *Dutch*.

Morris made a stunning, and still controversial, decision that challenged the genre of scholarly biography. In order to provide his seemingly unknowable subject with an audience, Morris wrote *Dutch* in first person narration. Rather than narrate from outside the text, he inserts himself into it—not precisely himself, but an imagined recreation of himself. Instead of the biographer Edmund Morris, a native of Kenya born in 1940 and thus at work on *Dutch* between the ages of forty-five and fifty-nine, the character Edmund Morris arrives on the page as a Reagan contemporary. The textual Morris is born on August 9, 1912—making him about eighteen months Reagan’s junior—and a native of a place much closer to Reagan: Chicago (6, 9). Instead of meeting Reagan after his rise to the presidency, Morris creates a new vista for himself, one from which the growth and maturation of both Reagan and his career happen contemporaneously rather than retrospectively.

Morris first encounters Dutch Reagan while watching a high school football game between Reagan’s Dixon High and Amboy thanks to his friend Paul Rae (56), and Reagan becomes a curious fixture in the correspondence between the two teenagers. Eventually, Rae invites Morris to swim at Lowell Park under the watchful eye of lifeguard Dutch, during which Morris forms a strong attachment to the older, stronger boy: “Watching him—indeed trying to imitate him—helped me understand at least partly

the massive privacy of his personality (61). By 1928, Morris is already clipping a newspaper article about Reagan's lifeguard heroics (62-3). Thus begins a sometimes-direct, sometimes tangential relationship that will last for the next sixty-plus years—a relationship that exists only within the imagination of Edmund Morris and the pages of *Dutch*. But the question arises: does imagination have a place in biography?

For Morris, the book made an enormous splash nearly twenty years after his Pulitzer triumph. He received unlimited access to and full cooperation from the White House, from the project's beginning in 1985 until its release in 1999 (Skelton A3). Morris would make the media rounds defending his work, claiming that he had first conceived of the idea of inserting himself as a character in 1992, noting that "I think the art of biography needs shaking up" (Morris Interview). In a notable similarity to Reagan's own *Rest*, Morris posits *Dutch* as a sort of filmed documentary, with a human rather than a mechanical projector. He also labels the work "a biography in the form of a memoir," a study of Reagan as a performer who can only be understood through the lens of an audience (Morris Interview). Most interestingly, given Reagan's affliction with Alzheimer's disease, Morris posits *Dutch* as "a study in the phenomenon of memory," a mélange of Morris's personal experiences with Reagan, Reagan's own memories as time and disease slowly eradicate them, and of the American public's memories of their fortieth president as the Reagan years slip into the past (Morris Interview). Indeed, much was made of the form of the text, its divergence from normal generic forms and audience expectations.

The most universally negative response came from a number of conservative voices, notably Reagan's daughter Maureen, who believed that Morris "wasted an

incredible and irreplaceable opportunity” and labeled the book “fiction” (Capital Briefs 2). Reagan’s vice president and successor George H. W. Bush also expressed disagreement with Morris’s portrayal of his relationship with Reagan (Capital Briefs). While Reagan’s son Ron, Jr.—no conservative despite his name—spoke favorably of the book, former First Lady Nancy Reagan remained silent (Siemaszko). Those who saw themselves as the keepers of Reagan’s legacy and protectors of his image—his ideological heirs—were also most likely to see in *Dutch* a threat to their perception of the great man.

Morris confronts head-on the great challenge of Reagan as biographical subject: his Alzheimer’s Disease, officially diagnosed in 1994, but which likely began to tell long before. Ronald Reagan’s life narrative thus slowly began to be lost even in his own mind. Morris accomplishes the important task that Reagan as autobiographer never could have: to present Reagan the Alzheimer’s victim as a character on the page. Indeed, Reagan’s final truly public act was to produce his famous “farewell letter,” forced by an impending news release, written in his own hand at the urging of those closest to him (Morris, *Dutch* 665). The letter makes for an appropriate ending to *An American Life*—indeed, some previous owner clipped it from the newspaper and taped it into the back of my own copy—as it famously states that Reagan “now begin[s] the journey that will lead me into the sunset of my life” (qtd. 666). This journey, which he can neither comprehend nor document, is therefore left to others, and Morris sensitively includes Reagan’s entire letter in the text of *Dutch*, a facsimile in the president’s own scrawl.

Like a mystery novelist, Morris reveals his purposes to the reader only in the end. Perhaps the most poignant moment of *Dutch* occurs when the former president brings

home a ceramic miniature of the White House, still wet from the bottom of the aquarium at his Los Angeles office. Puzzled and fascinated but unable to make the connection, Reagan is left wondering, “This is . . . something to do with me . . . I’m not sure what” (670). When faced with such utter opacity in his subject, Morris finds that he must seek a new approach to an old medium. As Morris, both the biographer and the character, notes to Reagan’s son Ron, the president resembles the moon, brilliantly reflective yet devoid of its own inner light source: “The closer he got to us, the more he glowed, but since he turned away and drifted off, he’s slowly lost his luster” (664). To understand Ronald Reagan is like studying the dark side of the moon and to be left wondering what—if indeed anything—is truly there.

Hence Morris’s insistence on the necessity of an audience to any understanding of Ronald Reagan. In 1992, Morris traveled with the Reagans to Tampico, Illinois, to visit the former president’s birthplace. Asked to address the congregation at the local Christian Church, Reagan quickly became confused and made his escape with the words, “I can’t describe the feeling of being back here in my birthplace. Really, there are no words” (xviii). Morris recognized this as boilerplate language that the president used to extricate himself from such situations; there were no words because his mind held no clear memories. Yet “many eyes fill[ed] with tears,” and the former actor took this emotional response as proof that he had provided his audience with the appropriate emotion (xviii). By faking his performance in order to meet the audience’s expectation, Reagan provided, to his own satisfaction, the equivalent to a heartfelt recounting of his childhood memories. The memories were gone, but Reagan had long since learned to replace them with generic words intended to provide his audience their desired response. They could

not tell the difference, and by that stage of his life, perhaps neither could he.

So it comes to this: what effect does the insertion of Edmund Morris the character have on the genres of autobiography and biography? Consider that every biographer or autobiographer serves a dual role as narrator; their narratives must be organized and specific incidents chosen to include or exclude, and in which order they are to be presented. In addition, most biographies and autobiographies contain opinionated comments on the decisions and actions described, passing moral judgments as well as more generalized assessments. Historical narrative is not *sui generis*, whether autobiographical, biographical, or neither, although it is sometimes treated as such. To suggest that the historian is also a narrator, and therefore a powerful presence in the narrative, is to remind ourselves that life narratives, like selves, are cultural constructs bound by context.

For Morris, part of that context is the unknowability of his subject. “Loss, the biographer’s torment,” he writes, “longing for treasures unrecoverable . . . Private loss, too” (5). *Dutch* is, to a large extent, an effort to deal with loss, specifically the life that has been lost to Reagan’s memory and can only be imperfectly pieced together through interviews, old photographs, yellowed newspaper clippings, and the convergence of the imperfect memories of others. Like Drake McHugh awakening to find his legs lost, or Ronald Reagan the rising actor discovering that some essential part of himself is lost, or Ronald Reagan the ex-president gazing at the ceramic White House in the aquarium and seeking a past that has been lost, Morris also faces the task of constructing the man and the memories in spite of pieces having been lost.

In some sense, Edmund Morris the character fills this need. The body politic

completed the unsatisfied actor and gave him a calling beyond the depthless screen. Reagan's physical body would be challenged—by viral pneumonia, by John Hinckley's bullets, and by cancer—but would survive, just as his political life would survive its own challenges—Pat Brown, Gerald Ford, Walter Mondale, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Iran-Contra. But eventually Ronald Reagan would again face the question, perhaps while staring at that aquarium, "Where's the rest of me?" Perhaps, then, it is fitting that Morris would offer a fictionalized version of his own body to accompany Reagan on his journey from Tampico to Washington, providing the audience that brought him to life or the light that he could, moonlike, reflect. And, most importantly to his success as a biographer and autobiographer, allowing him to fill in the blanks that Reagan no longer could.

Critics would suggest that the presence of the fictional Morris alone destroys the generic integrity of the text. History professor Peter Novick, echoing Phillippe Lejeune's "pact theory" of autobiography, suggests that Morris has violated a valuable trust between historian and reader: ""There is a tacit agreement between the academic historian and the reader. It's not spelled out and it's not written down anywhere, but it's well understood: I didn't invent anything here" (qtd. Carvajal 27). But, again positing the difficulties of separating the real life from the reel life, consider one of the conventions of drama: the fourth wall. There is an understanding between actors and audience that what occurs on stage is not "real"—that the actors and characters are two separate entities, that the performers will behave as if unaware of the audience, and that the actions carried out are not done so literally (no audience member calls an ambulance after Brutus stabs Caesar). The confusion in Ford's Theatre the night of Lincoln's assassination was a result of this convention, as no one quite knew whether the president had indeed been shot.

Morris's injection of himself certainly has its annoyances—the fictional Morris arguing with his fictional son Gavin over Reagan's politics (311-2) or being saved from drowning in Lowell Park by lifeguard Dutch (672)—but it also serves the useful purpose of exposing the conventions of historiography. In order to have useful debates about how history is constructed, there first must be universal acknowledgement that history is indeed a construction. Just as presidential memoir asserts the authority to create and organize narrative, all biography does as well, although perhaps drawing less attention to the seams across its surface. The popular idea that autobiography is simply one's personal story told by oneself remains, as though "story" and "self" are not carefully deliberated constructs, and even experienced historians uncritically use autobiography as primary source material (Dallek is certainly guilty of this in the *Politics of Symbolism*). In order to enrich understanding of history and biography—and its subjects, from the office of the Presidency to its individual occupants—readers must approach historiography with a critical eye. Although his technique may not be the most effective, Morris opens up a useful public dialogue by challenging the boundaries of genre.

Although his use of a fictionalized version of himself received most of the attention, Morris experiments with an even more dramatic appeal to film than did Reagan's first autobiography. Interspersed throughout the text, Morris reverts to inserting "scenarios" that describe a particular scene involving Reagan, the First Lady, or himself, with suggestions on how they might be filmed. In visiting Tampico and Dixon, he suggests making a documentary titled *The Ronald Reagan Story* and suggests camera angles, set pieces, and music (33). Morris begins, fittingly, with a Ronald Reagan voiceover, reading from his autobiography (33). Lacking a camcorder when visiting

Reagan's birthplace, Morris simply suggests what a filmed visit might look like on screen, complete with guest voiceovers from Reagan's family (15). Reagan's near-death bout with pneumonia is presented as the first of a four-scene distillation of the years 1947-8, preferably in "black-and-white photography" with alternating fields of focus (250). The memories are Reagan's, Morris takes credit for the "camera angles" and "sound effects" (250). The 1985 summit with Gorbachev gets the scenario treatment as Morris is unable to capture the "nuances" adequately in writing (573), later followed by a cacophony of imagined voices of the principals echoing in the walls of the Hofdi House hotel (600). For good measure, Morris tosses in several additional dramatized scenes of himself at work interviewing subjects.

In all of these cases, Morris chooses to describe events through the medium of film over the medium of the written word, even though the scenes are written in script form to be read. Like Reagan himself in *Rest*, Morris cannot entirely distinguish the real Reagan from the reel Reagan, and he is not embarrassed to cast himself in a supporting role. But these sequences—clearly marked from the surrounding text by their adherence to a script format with lines of dialogue and stage directions—suggest that, in tackling Ronald Reagan, two dimensions are in some sense inadequate. Morris's writings about Teddy Roosevelt betray no similar ambivalence of form. Unable to capture Reagan on paper, Morris reverts to trying to create glimpses that the reader can project on the screen of his imagination. These scenes are therefore reflective of Morris's sense that Ronald Reagan somehow defies the traditional narrative form of assembling evidence into a coherent, written narrative form—the form that defines biography. These scenes are sites of the same conflict that led Morris to create the fictional Edmund Morris of the text, the

conflict between discovering the essence of Ronald Reagan and finding an appropriate form to communicate it to the public.

Regardless of one's opinion of Morris's devices, reading his account as an appendage of sorts to the life staked out in both *Rest* and *Life* proves a rewarding experience. It opens up new possibilities for the biographical genre and re-opens the question of first causes in autobiography: what is the purpose of autobiography, and do generic conventions assist or constrain it in meeting its objectives. More specifically, Morris corrects the most egregious oversight of both of Reagan's memoirs. Recalling the horrors of Bergen-Belsen's concentration camp, the president said of the prisoners, "Here they lie. Never to hope. Never to pray. Never to love. Never to heal. Never to laugh. Never to cry" (qtd. 530). As Morris questions, "Did the ghost of Christine Reagan"—the president's miscarried daughter by Jane Wyman who also would never enjoy any of the verbs he listed—"hang in that damp air" (530)?

Nowhere in Reagan's own memoirs is Christine Reagan's loss felt or acknowledged. Although Morris folds Christine's death into one of his "scenarios", complete with an insert of the child's death certificate and "no music when you fade" (251-2), the fact that she is included at all provides a nice corrective to the other two texts. Her exclusion raises the obvious question of whether Reagan was too aggrieved to explore this most personal of losses, or whether he simply considered his first daughter—who had she lived would have been First Daughter—unnecessary to include in his life story. Although a deeply personal matter, it would also be fair to ask whether Christine's loss, like the death of Calvin Coolidge, Jr., affected Reagan's policies. For example, might Reagan's opposition to legalized abortion as president have stemmed, even

indirectly, from a lesson that Christine's loss taught him about the value of prenatal life? Unfortunately, that much is left unclear by both Reagan and Morris, despite the hint that Morris believes that her death weighed more on him than the memoirs reveal. At the very least, she weighed on Morris's mind. While Reagan dedicated both his memoirs to Nancy, Morris dedicated Reagan's life to a different woman in his family:

In Memoriam

CHRISTINE REAGAN

June 26, 1947

### Epilog: A Publishing Event and an American Tradition

Although this survey ends with Ronald Reagan, the literary genre of presidential memoir shows no signs of ending. Though George H.W. Bush never produced a memoir, he has hardly been absent from bookshelves. A book containing his letters (*All the Best, George Bush: My Life in Letters and Other Writings*) and a collection of his public statements (*Heartbeat: George Bush in His Own Words*) have been published with the former president's blessing, joining two memoirs by former First Lady Barbara and another by daughter Doro. Even if the elder Bush decides to take up his pen, one wonders how much of his story would be left to tell.

Bush's successors, however, have managed to cash in, producing memoirs with enormous publisher advances. Bill Clinton brought the genre to new levels of lucrateness and media coverage when he signed with Alfred A. Knopf, collected an advance in excess of \$10 million, and produced *My Life* in 2004. Clinton's advance, however, was less than half of the estimated \$25 million that the publisher spent on producing and promoting the book (Ackman and King 2). The book received lukewarm reviews, in large part because of its prodigious length (approximately 950 pages) and meandering style. Even Clinton acknowledged in the paperback edition that "[m]ost people thought it was too long -- a fair criticism" (qtd. Readersread.com 3).

However, despite the size of the tome and a \$35 cover price, public response was strong. The highly anticipated—and hyped—memoir sold 400,000 copies on its first day (Alfred A. Knopf Publishing). That one-day sales figure immediately placed Clinton well ahead of the entire sales marks of the memoirs of predecessors Reagan and Richard Nixon (Ackman and King 6). The hardcover eventually sold a remarkable 2.25 million

copies (Readersread.com 7). However, the profits from an estimated two million of those copies merely covered Clinton's advance (Ackman and King 5). So while *My Life* may not have been a bonanza for its publisher, the book's success proved the strength of the public's hunger for Presidential memoir.

As a memoirist, George W. Bush decided to follow in the footsteps of his predecessor rather than his father. Despite the downturn of the global economy in 2008, Bush reportedly agreed to a \$7 million advance with Crown Publishing for a book that, unlike conventional memoirs, will be organized around important decisions Bush has made during his life. Tentatively titled *Decision Points*, it is scheduled for a 2010 release, as is former First Lady Laura Bush's memoir (Sherr). According to former Bush speechwriter Matt Latimer, the President already had his memoirs on his mind while still in office. During an Oval Office meeting on the proposed \$700 billion bailout of the financial industry, Bush reportedly mused, "This might go in as a big decision" (257). Bush's desire to burnish his coveted public image as "the decider" will no doubt shape his forthcoming work.

But the most intriguing recent development in the development of Presidential memoirs was the 2008 election of Barack Obama to the White House. Upon leaving office, Obama will undoubtedly receive the richest book advance ever paid a former President, perhaps the richest ever paid for a non-fiction work. Unlike his predecessors, Obama has a proven track record as a best-selling author thanks to his two titles: *Dreams From My Father* (1995) and *The Audacity of Hope* (2006). Initially, *Dreams* was not a mainstream success; as Obama recalls, "Sales were underwhelming," and he was "certain that my career as an author would be short-lived" (qtd. A. Ferguson 6). But after Obama

burst upon the national scene with his 2004 address to the Democratic National Convention, demand for his first book skyrocketed. A reissued paperback edition stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 61 weeks (7). The new senator soon produced a second book, and *Audacity* quickly enjoyed a sustained run atop the bestseller list (7). Obama became a *de facto* professional author; according to his 2005 and 2006 income tax returns, he collected over \$2 million in income from his literary efforts, far eclipsing his \$157,000 annual United States Senate salary.

In addition to a strong public reception, Obama's works have also earned praise for their literary qualities. Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison said of *Dreams*, "I was very impressed. This was not a normal literary biography" (qtd. Cashill, *Hope 2*). British novelist Jonathan Raban called Obama "the best writer to occupy the White House since Lincoln" (qtd. Cashill, *Hope 2*). Author Christopher Buckley (son of conservative icon William) endorsed Obama in 2008 based largely on his admiration for Obama's "first rate" books (12). Obama's appointed National Endowment for the Arts Chairman, Rocco Landesman, called the forty-fourth President "a writer, a President who writes his own books" (qtd. Haithman 5). Unfortunately, Landesman erroneously added, "That probably hasn't been done since Teddy Roosevelt, and maybe not brilliantly since Lincoln"—in fact, several presidents after Roosevelt wrote their own books, including Hoover, Nixon and Carter, while Lincoln never produced one (qtd. Haithman 5). Still, Landesman's enthusiasm is a fair reflection of the broad perception of President Obama as a highly gifted writer.

But while Obama's talent sets him apart from many of his predecessors, in some respects the traditions of the genre still persist. For example, thanks to the Internet,

rumors continue to persist that Obama did not actually write his books. Author Jack Cashill suggested in 2008 that he did not write *Dreams*, citing the lack of examples of Obama's previous writings and the poor quality of those that exist. More strikingly, Cashill suggested that Obama's ghostwriter is Bill Ayers, the former leftist radical whose close ties to Obama became a major issue during the 2008 Presidential campaign (Cashill, *Dreams* 17). Cashill also made a similar case regarding *Audacity*. Obviously, Cashill's entire argument is based on circumstantial evidence (and the lack of it) and textual comparisons between *Dreams* and Ayers's acknowledged writings, making the strength of the argument subject to the eye of the beholder.

Cashill's analyses unleashed a minor furor on the subject, fueled largely by web writers and bloggers opposed to and distrustful of Obama. But the rumors must have reached none other than Ayers, who was quoted in a widely distributed Internet article as stating, "I wrote *Dreams From My Father*" and inviting the story's source to help him "prove it" and "split the royalties" (qtd. Leary 4). Of course, the fact that this story comes from an unnamed source called "Backyard Conservative" and alleges that Ayers spontaneously confessed to a stranger in an airport terminal should give significant pause to anyone who would accept its veracity. But regardless of how accurate these, or any other, allegations about Obama and Ayers may be, keep in mind that Cashill and others like him are the logical heirs of those who alleged that Adam Badeau or Mark Twain produced Grant's *Personal Memoirs*. The difference between the generations is that the heirs are empowered by the internet as a way to publish and circulate their theories.

And this leads to my own speculation about an Obama memoir. Despite his dazzling authorial skill, Obama will, I believe, produce a memoir that is completely

conventional in its form and content. The publishers who make a huge investment on his advance will not want to take any chances with the text's appeal that might diminish the work's inherent salability. In many respects, an Obama memoir will probably look a lot like *The Autobiography of John Adams*, with stories about his childhood, references to public documents, some entertaining anecdotes and opinions, and underlying arguments defending himself and his actions. Its literary merit will rest more on Obama's felicity of expression than any groundbreaking new approach to form. And it will still sell a few million copies.

From Adams to Obama, the American presidency has expanded and evolved, driven by the needs and demands of a growing nation. The media, public attitudes, and individual personalities have all contributed to making the Constitution's chief executive the symbolic, cultural, and democratic embodiment of the nation. The presidential memoir has changed in similar ways, from private affairs published posthumously to best sellers whose releases constitute grand national events and dominate the media. And that may be the most important role of the modern presidential memoir: to give all Americans the opportunity to celebrate their presidents and debate the merits of the office and its occupants.

Any study of the presidential memoir can never truly be finished, as new developments and new texts are always forthcoming. But my study provides a long-overdue start, and literary scholars will hopefully take up the memoirs of these powerful and remarkable individuals and contribute to the public's understanding of their presidents and the presidency.

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