SHERWOOD ANDERSON AND THE ART OF AMERICAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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M. H. Abrams suggests, in The Mirror and the Lamp, that critical theories are concerned with the relation of the universe, the artist, and the audience to the work of art.\(^1\) Criticism of autobiography is complicated because the author is also the main character, and the universe (or environment) actually exists as the real world. The author's self-conception is expressed in the character he becomes. The environment he perceives provides the development or structures the plot of the autobiography. The author's intentions, made conscious by the awareness of an audience, direct the theme (or themes) of the autobiography and determine its didactic purpose, if any. The interrelationship of character, plot, and theme constitute the design of the autobiography and furnish a basis for aesthetic criticism. The term "autobiography" refers more to the content than to the form of the genre. Barrett John Mandel provides an acceptable working definition of the genre: an autobiography is a retrospective account of the author's own life written in the spirit of the truth.\(^2\) Since the autobiography, unlike the novel, is not a closed work (the characters have existed and the events have occurred outside the work) the question of mimesis arises: what relationship does the content of the autobiography have with the historical truth of the autobiographer's life? The manner in which the subjective and objective truths are arranged, displayed, and analysed affect the form of the work. Both the mimetic and aesthetic merits of an autobiography must be considered in light of the author's intentions, which will
determine his selection and interpretation of his experiences. The author's intentions depend to a considerable degree on the world view established through the same events that he is describing. This paper will consider autobiography from these various perspectives in search of a means of evaluation of autobiography in terms of the restrictions and potentials of the genre. The intention, the truth, the theme, or the formal value—alone—are insufficient for a valid conception of the genre. Their interaction is what makes some autobiographies more than historical curiosities—that make them successful and enduring works of art.

Although autobiography originated in Europe, Americans adapted it to their needs and purposes. John Norris delineates two general types of autobiography: classical autobiography, in which meaning is found through responses to events and experiences, truth is a matter of social consensus, the development of the intellect is central, and the containment of emotion and pain is valued; and the more romantic autobiographies, in which meaning is found in the experience of writing the autobiography as well as in the experiences described, personal revelation is the means of knowing truth, spiritual growth and private feeling are essential, and a high value is placed on the responsive expression of emotion and pain. Although this construction is perhaps rigid in terms of European autobiography, it is even more so in terms of American autobiography, in which individual self-realization is often set in the framework of the broad current of American life. The romantic egoism and emotional
response of the most typical American autobiographers is often tied to their public lives and social awareness. If the act of writing autobiography is an important expressive experience for American autobiographers, it is so as one such experience, not necessarily central. Henry Adams in *The Education of Henry Adams* sets himself the task of writing the autobiography, but this temporal overturn, occurring near the end, does not negate the cumulative growth of past experience expressed in the body of the work so much as locate him in it. Moreover, American autobiographers, unlike such European counterparts as André Gide or John Stuart Mill, do not focus their response to or alienation from life on their immediate surroundings (family, upbringing, etc.) as much as their response to the broad scope of American life, usually somewhat hazily and emotionally conceived. Such autobiographers as Henry Adams, Sherwood Anderson, and Malcolm X search for intellectual analysis of what they initially only feel to be wrong: the dissipation of power, industrial impotence, racism. The tendency to wallow in the expression of pain is counteracted by the determination to understand and perhaps to correct its causes.

The early American autobiographers, Puritans and Quakers who felt called upon to give personal testimony of faith and grace, tempered their individualism with faith in and fear of God and the expressive purpose of their autobiographies with the didactic purpose of exhibiting the means and nature of salvation. Jonathan Edwards' *Personal Narrative* of joy and despair is intensely
personal, yet its purpose includes teaching the true nature of and response to election. Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, concerned largely with his secular rise, reflects personal response and irony untouched by his didactic plan to attain the social virtues. Henry James portrays a lively social milieu despite his alienation from America and his pursuit of the nature of consciousness. Twain, Adams, and Anderson define the interaction of self and the American environment in different ways, but all temper self-expression with social concern.

That the themes of the individual search for truth and the analysis of the American experience tend to interact in American autobiography can hardly be surprising, as these are the common themes of much American literature. America had a specific beginning as an environment, and Americans created their own social, cultural, and political environments in a few centuries of history. The American environment may be less established and less rigid than that of Europe, but this very theoretical fluidity implies personal responsibility for the present and the future. The focal point of the American experience that many American autobiographers recognize is not to be found in institutions—family, church, state—but in the broad mass of the American people. Thus, Henry Adams returns to an America that has no place for a young man with insufficient practical education. But the America that bars him from participation is embodied by democracy and industrialization, not individuals but vague forces that he tries to grasp through his theory of the Dynamo and the Virgin. He sits at the feet of the dynamo
as he did at the steps of Chartres, realizing that while he, the individual, feels the necessity for action, it is the masses who ultimately move. The individual expects to exert responsibility, but the very fluidity that calls for responsibility denies its effectiveness.

Sherwood Anderson felt the same necessity for personal understanding of the American experience as a means by which he could assume responsibility for himself. Adams, the Boston aristocrat, saw the depletion of abstract energy; Anderson, the middle American, saw the depletion of individual potence and integrity. Although he felt himself a victim of the ravages of America, he could not separate himself from his Americanness—the source of his creative power. To be able to understand, direct, and fulfill his potential, he could not deny this source of his nature. Anderson had read Adams, but disagreed that Americans had no virgins or Venuses as sources of power: although they had been forced into hiding by the platitudes imposed by the industrial process, they still lived, "under the bush." Anderson searched to uncover these sources of spiritual energy before the country was totally depleted by the advertising men and to followers of Ford.

This study of American autobiography will focus on Sherwood Anderson's autobiography and autobiographical novel, A StoryTeller's Story, and Tar. Anderson deals with the familiar themes of American literature and American autobiography: the individual self and the American experience, free-
dom and determinism, growth and success. *A StoryTeller's Story* is a quite successful autobiography, with interesting manipulations of both content and the formal problems of autobiography. Although it has been for the most part ignored by autobiographical criticism, it is definitely a work of literary value as well as historical interest. It is a good vehicle for the study of American autobiography because it has many possibilities for comparison and contrast with other American autobiographies. Although *Tar* is a less successful book, it has similar possibilities. Sherwood Anderson's vision of himself, of America, and of the nature of life interact to produce autobiographies with impact, although not without flaws.

Because mimetic, aesthetic, intentional, thematic, and expressivistic problems and potentials interact vigorously in autobiography, each must be considered to some extent, both alone and in interaction with the other elements. Anderson will be approached from these various aspects in terms of the internal structure of his autobiographies, and in terms of his success at manipulating the genre. While it is not my purpose to postulate rigid formal standards for autobiography, effective use of the possibilities of the genre can be determined. The very formal openness that autobiography offers can lead to impact or dissipation of force, to subtlety or fuzziness, to great ideas or over-dressed platitudes. In creating his persona, in manipulating his environment, in setting forth his themes, the autobiographermingles his intentions and basic
assumptions with the earth of his life.

The intention of the author as it is revealed in the work is important to autobiography because the values of the writer will determine the range and scope of his self-portrait, the aspects of himself that he thinks important, and the experiences and events that he thinks shaped his development. Although most critics separate by intention autobiography from related forms —memoir, confession, apology—Francis Hart considers all these autobiographical forms to be of one genre, distinguished only by the balance of the author's interacting intentions. Most autobiographies certainly are governed by disparate generic intentions. However, although perhaps there is no "pure" autobiography, those works that are known primarily as autobiographies cluster around similar objectives of form and content: to shape life into a coherent pattern as the individual takes shape in interaction with the environment, with interest centering on the individual. Within this general intention, specific individual intentions may interact to focus autobiographies in innumerable directions.

Autobiography is read to learn the organizing principles of the writer's mind as well as to discover the private details of his experience. The autobiographer reveals his image of himself and why he retains that image. This subjective analysis often becomes the prevailing public image of the author. Benjamin Franklin creates in his autobiography the image to which future minds adhere: the poor waif who makes good and becomes a successful manipulator of men for their own good. Henry Adams' twin images
of education and failure are his own constructions to represent his life in his time and place, but they endure as truth to the readers of his autobiography. Although these self-images are not completely untrue, they are not complete pictures of either man. Franklin had his passions and Adams had his successes, but these were not the main motifs these men recognized in their lives. The author's intentions, mediating between himself and society (to which and about which he writes) determine the nature of his subjective truth.

In autobiography, possibility and actuality, past and present, interact to produce a complex but unified picture of life. The author, in the present, both structures and responds to past experiences. The man, a product of experiences, selects through a dual process those experiences that he will use to reconstruct his life and self. The natural selectivity of memory makes the first determination of available materials. Then a more conscious selection takes place—deciding which events will be discussed, from what point of view, to what end. This intentional organization both determines content and creates form. The structure of ideas and events may be as important to understanding the man as the ideas and events themselves: Henry Adams may have ended his search for unity by accepting multiplicity, but the reader is as interested in the construction and search as in the conclusion. Distortion is nearly unavoidable in the structuring of experience because non-linear experience is presented in linear terms. There is as well an almost inevitable tension
between the author writing and the personna living his life—a tension between events in their immediate settings and events in retrospect, when their outcome is known, patterns can be established, and their place in the whole of life can be evaluated and interpreted. Formally, this becomes a struggle between static presentation and development. But it also can be seen as a question of truth.

A balance must be achieved in autobiography between subjective interpretation and objective history. Although the reader is looking for personal truth in autobiography, gross deviations from historical truth tend to cast doubt on the integrity of the autobiography and the autobiographer. The autobiographer's subjective evaluations and personal misconstructions can, however, provide valuable insight into his nature and purpose. Sherwood Anderson, in A Storyteller's Story, walks out of his business. Medically, he had a nervous breakdown. He depicts the scene as a decisive renunciation of the business ethic of success for an embrace of himself as an artist. Although this fits in well as a climax between what he sees as opposing aspirations, this construction is a piece of after-the-fact personal mythology. Nonetheless, his interpretation is significant for understanding his life, and probably had real effect on his later experiences and his interpretation of them. Both the fact of the nervous breakdown and Anderson's interpretation are important information about his life. Anderson presents only his personal interpretation, ignoring the historical (or psychological) reality, allowing personal truth to triumph over historical reality. Perhaps less
excusable is his insistence that his mother was an Italian and his father a Southerner (his mother was actually of German extraction, his father born in Ohio). Anderson does not just interpret his ancestry—he changes it to correspond to what he thinks it should have been. This undermines the historical aspect of his autobiography.

Early in Tar, Anderson excuses himself for irresponsibility to the truth: "My fancy is a wall between myself and the truth." (Tar, 9). Events and people are but staring places for the "scribbler"; it is he who gives them artistic meaning. Furthermore, there are truths that are too painful to mention or remember, except in guarded or circuitous ways:

> When men get older they grow sentimental about the old swimming hole. They remember only the pleasant things that happened. There is a trick of the mind that makes you forget the unpleasant things. It's just as well. If you could see life clear and straight maybe you couldn't live. (Tar, 148).

Anderson approaches such things only with evident pain: the proto-homosexuality of the boys at the swimming hole is approached but not defined. Whether or not "anything" really happened is of less importance than the impression of the forces in operation. Tar, as an autobiographical novel rather than pure autobiography, offers more mimetic flexibility. Anderson is more free to distort, eliminate, or invent events and experiences to provide linear thematic unity.

The autobiographer serves as the mediator between life and art. His persona is the agent of manipulation. There is inevitably tension between past and present, as the author tries
to define, expose, and develop his experiences as they occurred to him, knowing their long-range ramifications. To produce only a journal—recalling events just as they occurred—would ignore the value of retrospective evaluation that distinguishes autobiography as a genre. Yet to hold too tightly to thematic unity would encourage overlooking the often random and inexplicable movement of emerging life. Many autobiographers mention within their autobiographies this problem of exposition. There is also the problem of the distance which the autobiographer should retain between himself and his personna. Anderson remains close to his personna, occasionally merging with them. Henry Adams, establishing greater distance, refers to his personna in the third person, viewing him with a patronising attitude. Establishing and maintaining this relationship is essential to the autobiography.

Because Tar is an autobiography of childhood, the character is farther alienated from Anderson than his personna in A Story Teller's Story. To some extent, childhood is romanticized, but the concreteness of detail ensure a commitment to realistic treatment. The boy is poor, lonely, somewhat typical and somewhat strange. In Tar, as well as in A Story Teller's Story, while Anderson wants to be the typical American, he cannot help feeling that in some ways he is different, his experiences and feelings stronger than those of his contemporaries. For Tar, the process of growth is an agonizing metamorphosis: composed of elements of both his parents—the strong and resourceful mother and the profligate father—he shapes himself, growing in capability and
understanding, against an environment that often seems alien to his nature. By showing Tar only in childhood and by not committing himself to true autobiography, Anderson distances himself sufficiently from Tar to dull the pain and enhance the beauty of growth. Anderson's narrative voice intrudes on Tar's childish consciousness with statements of universal significance (about the swimming hole, about moral growth, etc), when Tar's childish concerns approach too near to the essentials of Anderson's adult life. Significant personal experiences are transformed into universal examples as Anderson concludes many chapters with generalizations.

In A Story Teller's Story, where he is more fully committed to autobiography, Anderson is closer to his persona, who is more a specific individual than Tar. Anderson, recognizing acutely his fears and inadequacies, tolerates them because they are admittedly his own. His persona is neither so much a failure as Adams' nor so much a success as Franklin's. As in Tar, he is both an "Average American" and a thinker, an artist. Although his story in the telling is somewhat random and unconscious, he can retrospectively see the growth of his imagination. His autobiography is the ultimate retelling of the stories of his life: he has always recreated his experiences to correspond with his sense of what should be right. These stories include invented parents, his lies to Nora concerning his fistfight with his fellow worker, his literary triumph of the cleanliness of the sailor. These stories map his imaginative growth. Norman Mailer's Advertisements for Myself is a logical completion of this tendency:
autobiographical comment connecting stories, essays, and poems to map the course of his imaginative and artistic development. Anderson's *A Story Teller's Story*, naturally, is more organically unified, but his story of a storyteller would not be complete without the growth of his imagination displayed in examples of that imagination at work.

Anderson the autobiographer recognizes elements of the gothic in the shifting tableaus of American life as the boy and young man sample various masks in quest of self-discovery. The workingman's life is an abyss of dirt and ignorance and impotence from which the young man escapes by imagining an aristocratic park in a vacant lot near his job. The war with Spain allows young American farmers and workingmen to leave this monotony to play hero: local town boys play soldier, military discipline imposed on small town camaraderie. Behind the windows of tenements and factories, the impotence acquired through the thwarting of craftsmanship and individual usefulness produces the grotesque sexuality of the dirty joke and sadistic spouse-baiting. Even the preindustrial village has its latent homosexual. Because Anderson sees—and rarely allows himself to forget—the illusions and ignorance and corruption and frustration that underly middle American innocence and energy, the dark side of existence is always lurking near his typical American experiences.

Anderson establishes his relation to his persona by characterizing him in terms of two common American motifs: social and financial success and individual moral and imaginative growth.
Although both success and individual growth span the entire book, roughly the first half deals predominately with Anderson in his movement toward financial and social success. Although he is pursuing a social goal, essential to this goal is rising above the herd; he is unwilling to be merely a poor boy, a working man, a victim of American impotence. His period of devotion to the library in lieu of work or social life emphasizes this quest for uncommonness—Benjamin Franklin too cultivated his intellect as the first step toward success. The drive to be set apart is more typical of Anderson's drive for success than of his later devotion to imaginative and artistic growth, which involves him intimately with the American experience.

The turning point, where the commitment to success is abandoned for dedication to the imagination, is when Anderson walks out of his office and out of town, telling his secretary, "My feet are cold and heavy from long wading in a river. Now I shall go walk on dry land." (STS, 226). This event is seen only in retrospect, as a recollection when Anderson returns to that town several years later. At this remove, it can be manipulated to evoke its symbolic importance rather than its medical significance without losing the appearance of truth. Framed by a brief return to the town, the recollection of his leaving can be successfully told in relation to his feelings at the time of his return rather than by a more objective standard.

The commitment to the imaginative and artistic life shifts the focus of Anderson's growth from the struggle for material success and separation to artistic growth as an American (from the paternal
businessman to the fraternal artist). Anderson's dedication to the ideal of craftsmanship centers on the blank pieces of paper that arouse his sensibilities and on the pencils that he hoards. Artistic integrity implies serving words rather than the people who will read them: he is an artist, not an advertiser. He comes to understand his personal and artistic possibilities and limitations: defensive about his midwesternness and afraid of the "great men in the East", he learns that this is the core of his imaginative understanding. The success ideal was shallow and alienating; the artistic ideal he tries to protect from the polished superficiality that could deaden his possibilities.

Anderson looks back rather indulgently at the persona who is living his life, proud of his abandonment of the office, and proud of his calling as a writer. In the beginning of A Story Teller's Story, as in Tar, Anderson can develop his persona with an eye to nuance and understanding through a series of tableaux and short tales at some distance. His childhood and his search for success are farther removed from his writing present than his experiences as a writer and his commitment to his imagination. In the later books of A Story Teller's Story, Anderson merges with his persona: he refers to himself as "one"; he examines himself in relation to American life and culture. The retrospection begins to give way to the immediate response of the essay, in a progression from retrospective autobiography to discussion of existence from Anderson's point of view. Because this movement is gradual and incomplete, it does not impair his commitment to autobiography.
The movement from recreation of the past to description of the present seems a logical product of the growing closeness of the writer to his personae.

Anderson both emerges and develops in *A Story Teller's Story* in interaction with the environments and situations he encounters. The early incidents delineate the germ of the man: his parents, his early imaginings of more appropriate parents and environment. This sets up the static potential of the character. Through skirmishes with the world he begins to develop, to consciously concern himself with the directions he takes. Autobiographies generally merge static and dynamic characterization, probably because autobiographers, using themselves as standards of stasis and change, can see elements of both in their lives. Henry Adams, for example, spends most of his life trying to adjust himself between the traditions of his origin and the new United States. The problem and his incapacity remain through life, but as he grows in maturity and understanding his ways of looking at them continually shift. He both changes and remains the same. Although Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* recreates a turning point in the author's transition from youth to maturity, and he changes somewhat in the course of the book, the change is the development of latent aspects of his personality, not the addition of new ones. Development in autobiography generally takes place through the dynamic actualization of static possibilities. If the life as it was lived seems dynamic, the retrospective vision of the autobiographer tends to see the culmination of original potential. Furthermore, the reader knows
the general outcome of the autobiographer's experiences through
the intentions and assumptions in the form and content of the
book. Although individual experiences can be viewed in terms of
the flow of the whole life, autobiographers such as Anderson may
organize their experiences around what seem to be significant
turning points. In A Story Teller's Story, the commitment to
crit implies a new perspective and concentration of values, but
the perspective and values were coexistent from youth with values
that previously hampered their fruition. Environmental changes
focus the necessity for self-conscious self-determination, and
Anderson grows in capability of coping with the environment as the
book progresses. Tar develops from youth to maturity, growing in
vision, in understanding, in pride, and in competence. But his
too is a logical growth, based on potential depicted early in the
story.

The environment which the autobiographer sees and describes
affects the development of the character in terms of freedom and
determinism. It is through interaction with the environment that
the persona is both exposed and developed. The autobiographer's
treatment of the environment—his decisions about the relative
importance of experiences shapes the development of "plot" of
the autobiography. Anderson's relationship with the environment
of his early years affected the literature he wrote and the shape
and direction of his thought. This interrelationship is apparent
in his autobiographies. The environment provides incidents and
experiences which cause and demonstrate growth and change. The
interrelationship between character and environment reveals both
static and dynamic elements of Anderson's life. Anderson reveals what he thinks important in his development by shifting, distorting, and ignoring aspects of his life. In _A Story Teller's Story_, he distorts his nervous breakdown, ignores the short time he spent at college, and speaks little of his life as an industrialist. He simplifies his life to produce a more coherent story, omitting and blending the various times he lived in New York and Chicago. Time sequences are blurred as he remembers in his autobiography experiences in his autobiographical past. Similarly in _Tar_, movements from house to house and city to city become unclear as one house becomes all houses. Although experiences are shifted and fictionalized, the environmental elements that Anderson considers essential to his development are portrayed with a posed realism that drives to their heart and relates them to his growth: his mother rubbing his hands, Judge Turner's discourses.

If Anderson as a character is undergoing processes of change, so is the environment in which the persona moves. In both _Tar_ and _A Story Teller's Story_, it is a changing and often fearful world. The series of loosely-hung incidents that comprise the "plots" exhibit the multiple tensions and possibilities of life. Anderson's universe implies potential for both freedom and determinism. The exhilarating new forces of growing industrialism inspire both the spreading of possibilities imagined by boys hiding behind bushes watching the drilling of a gas well, and the growing bleakness and failure of the urban workers whose lives are pared.
down to fit the needs of the industrial machine. Anderson's shifting experiences allow him to reflect both aspects of the age of standardization. Although he maintains his individuality to some extent, he is never entirely free from playing the part expected by the forces of uniformity. Anderson, like most autobiographers, sees himself as a product of his environment and in opposition to it. The environment is thus both an active shaping agent and a background against which the personality is displayed. This dual role of the environment is especially explicit in *The Education of Henry Adams*: Adams is not of the American masses, but by denying him his "rightful" role as statesman they profoundly affect the future course of his life and the movement of his consciousness toward the evaluation of power in terms of the new status quo. Anderson is not only affected by his environment, however. In some ways, he internalized it. In *A Story Teller's Story* the standardization of both production and consumption imposes a new, man-made determinism that Anderson recognizes acting on him even as he opposes it. He unconsciously indulges in the same self-advertisement as the New York literati he has come to mistrust:

I sat in the New York restaurant fully aware that what was true of the men and women about me was true also of myself. The people in the restaurant, the actors, painters, and writers, had made themselves what the public thought it wanted from its artists, and had been well paid for doing so. (STS, 268)

Yet this very recognition of the grave possibilities of determinism implies self-evaluation and self-motivation, renewing faith in individual freedom. Anderson's growth to maturity is paralleled by
growth in self-determination as he develops the ability to cope with his own life through more conscious decision making.

In *A Story Teller's Story*, Anderson's struggle for self-realization, thus, both rises out of the promise of the environment and is impeded by the industrial promise in action. In the first part of the book, Anderson explores places as he tries on roles: he sees the farm, the factory, the town, and the city, meeting and describing the people of these places and trying to avoid the scars these other men bear. In trying to distinguish and define himself, he berates the impotence and the decadence that America has produced, and tries to protect himself from its defects. The workers are fed on dreams that dim and fade into shabby and limited realities. The businessmen build and enjoy only the building, not the fruits, of their labour. When, later in the book, he has defined his identity and committed himself to the vocation of "scribbler", he turns back to the American environment as the source of his imaginative strength.

But his experience has taught him to search for the humane realities of men like Alonzo Berners rather than to accept the established realities of either commercial thought or the established Eastern literary perceptions:

The smart fellows of the American Intelligentsia sat about in restaurants in New York and wrote articles for the political and semi-literary weeklies. A smart saying they had heard at dinner or at lunch the day before was passed off as their own in the next article they wrote. The usual plan was to write of politics or politicians or to slaughter some second-rate artist, in short, to pick out easy game and kill it with their straw shafts, and they gained great reputations by pointing out the asininity of men everyone already knew for asses. (*TS*, 186).
Anderson learns and accepts his identity as a Middle American and finds this the source of his imagination: "I did not want to be merely a writer living in America, but wanted to be an American writer, wanted to make my tale-telling fit me more snugly into the life about me." (STS, 297). He becomes aware of the possibility of environmental determinism, and in embracing his environment and accepting its limitations, he tempers determinism through aware self-determination.

In Tar, the tension between freedom and determination is resolved on a completely different environmental scale. A small town in the midwest is a constrained and restricted sphere, providing only brief glimpses of the world beyond to the emerging consciousness of a growing child and adolescent. Tar's potentials are realized through contact with the world, but this contact is generally ambivalent, resulting in either blind pain—his mother giving birth, the sting of the bee—or is embodied in emotional responses typical of "A Midwest Childhood"—the swimming hole, adolescent love. Anderson is examining boyhood in general as well as Tar specifically. This results in a greater narrative detachment than in A Story Teller's Story. Although the environment is generally limited to boy's possible consciousness, the author more often holds it at a panoramic distance than examines the specific effects of the boy's interaction with his world. The necessity for and the process of growth dominate the book, and the environment nurtures the young Tar, rarely forcing him to consciously recognize or control his destiny. He maintains some autonomy by not understanding the world around him—birth and love and
work and the town—but this makes him typical and determines his life for him as well.

In Tar, possibilities are expanding. But in A Story Teller's Story, Anderson recognizes the shrinking possibilities of American life and their effect on his consciousness. Anderson responds to America with the urgency and understanding gained through living as an American, through believing American myths and seeing the flashes of reality permeate through them. The uncertain progress of a sometimes self-aware individual in the industrial state is expressed through the shifting scenes and rambling speculations. Tar, too, is an explorer. His story consists of successive explorations in an inconclusive search to understand the world and his relation to the world. As he grows, the environment expands and his place in it changes. He must recognize his place in nature (he cannot be a cow), in the home (he can no longer be an infant), and in the town (even the newsboy must make moral decisions—how to treat Hob Hawkins). In a somewhat random manner incidents reveal the growing consciousness of the boy through contact with his world. There are large and significant scenes: the trip to the farm, the birth of the baby, the death of the mother; and little vignettes: walking along the railroad tracks, discussing baseball or sex, the coming of spring. The impact of experiences large and small is hardly known at the time, and when examined in retrospect contribute only to a barely explicable whole. This process of encounter is in some ways reminiscent of Henry James' A Small Boy and Others, which also
documents the development of consciousness in a child. But where Henry James breaks down the integrity of specific incidents to show their interrelationship with other experiences in the mind, Anderson maintains a greater integrity of specific events. Anderson's essentially chronological development connects events through recurring motifs rather than through integral juxtaposition: the rain and wet clothes of Tar and his sister the night they see Hog Hawkins at his wife's grave echo the rain and wet clothes of the search for the doctor on the night their mother dies. James' circular and digressive approach focuses attention on the consciousness; Anderson's discrete experiences stress the importance of events. Even the smaller experiences stand alone while echoing and recalling larger events. Discrete experiences provide resonating echoes that accumulate into knowledge of the world and the self, and a perspective (or at least a series of alternative to order theme A Story Tellers Story, with its tales, its range of questions) with which and its reflective aspect, is more reminiscent of Mark Twain than of Henry James. But Anderson confines himself to some thematic unity, unlike Twain, who produced a jumble of experiences, impressions and character sketches. Like James, he frames events and impressions by viewing them retrospectively from a specific point in the autobiography—leaving his business office, meeting Alonzo Bemers. But, as in Tar, experiences remain discrete and for the most part chronological. For Anderson, historical
moments exist in their own rights as well as in the consciousness of the autobiographer and his persona.

The autobiographer expresses his experience in terms of the understanding of the nature of himself and the world that he has gained from living those experiences. The movement of the plot is of necessity based on the autobiographer's interpretation of and expression of its meaning. Evaluation therefore must include understanding of the expressionist nature of the author's portrayal of his life and times. Anderson learned through experience that the amount of control an individual can assert over the course of his life is minimal—yet essential to human dignity and emotional integrity. For him, intention is the result of shifting social forces as well as a source of personal motivation. Thus, Anderson is wary, in A Story Teller's Story, of abstractly characterizing people and events and his reactions to them. His father (the source of Windy McPherson and other negative masculine types) is portrayed both as victimizer and victim. Industrialization produces both potential and degradation. Judge Turner is both a sensitive humanist and a decadent vastral. The drive for success and the urge of the imagination both produce kinds of awareness and blindness. Directional vigilance and clear-sightedness are necessary, yet most of living occurs when the guards are down, as they are most of the time in Tar. Anderson the autobiographer expects a vigilance that he only occasionally applied when living the experiences he describes and evaluates. The form of the autobiography reflects this
personal experience and concept of life. Life is never quite as unified or as meaningful as the retrospective autobiographer may wish to see it. It fits only partially the categories and themes with which he wants to organize it. The relative disunity of A Story Teller's Story and the occasionally nebulousness of For express Anderson's dislike of judging too closely or organizing too tightly experiences that exist by themselves as well as in relation to those who experience them.

Nonetheless, in transposing experience from memory to art, the autobiographer develops an organizing theme or principle that shapes his presentation. The theme usually entails didactic purpose, which may or may not be strongly pronounced. However, the reader must beware of searching for thematic unity in a purely rhetorical sense. Because in autobiography both the narrator and the persona may develop in self-understanding, the autobiographer's formal principles interact with various intentions. Hart suggests that the reader "is in search of an evolving mixture of pattern and situation—patterns discerned in the life recovered, patterns discovered or articulated in the self or 'versions of the self,' that emerge in that recovery, pattern in the recovery process. The total emergent reciprocity of situation and activity and pattern is what is formative or distinctive, and this he seeks to identify." Critical tendencies to seek formal unity through either the development of the autobiographer in the process of writing the autobiography alone or in the process of the life revealed in a predetermined form along do not give ample scope to the
multiple nature of autobiography. However, because writing is a somewhat conscious activity, and because the writer is the product of the life he is describing, there should arise harmonies among the life recovered, the versions of the self, and the recovery process of retrospective writing. Because autobiographies are means of communication as well as works of art, consideration of theme and direction is of some importance.

Anderson's purpose in both autobiographies, like his means of presentation, is somewhat loose: it is expressive and expository. He is exploring the American as an indicator of the American experience. And he is exploring America: its possibilities, its debauches. And he is exploring the interaction between man and experience to understand its meaning for his life and art. He avoids Mark Twain's pitfall of random and complete inclusiveness. In Twain's sittings of experience, the inclusiveness tends toward the trivial and inconclusive. But Anderson's direction avoids as well the impetus of constantly evoked organizing images found in The Education of Henry Adams. Anderson presents his life as a series of realizations about the nature of life that lead to new beginnings that grope toward energy and understanding. His retrospective evaluations reflect this same groping movement of understanding.

Far is organized around revelations of growth and metamorphosis. "Growth was a thing of terror and pain. What a fearful world, this into which he had been born." (Far, 50).
The tendency to romanticize childhood is counteracted by Anderson's grasp of the painful and often grotesque realities of life. The frustrations, uncertainties, and bizarre fantasies of childhood are interspersed among the gentler elements: Tar eating grass to become a cow; Tar embracing the beech tree he identifies with Estor Farley; Tar's guilt at extracting extra money from the needy lawyer. There is a longing for potency and a moral urge to use it wisely. The needs for power and control conflict at times, and are hampered by expectations and obligations to the more prosaic realities of life. Tar recognizes the forces of life as he grows aware of their effects on him, but the book closes before he can gain real perspective on his experiences. Anderson, watching from some distance, reveals his understanding of the interrelationship of the beauty and horror of growth.

*A Story Teller's Story* deals with somewhat more complex issues: a man finding himself in a larger world, an artist coming to understand his art, an American learning about America. Broader issues emerge: fact and fancy, actuality and possibility, freedom and determinism. Like Henry Adams, Anderson the autobiographer wants to explore, document, and put into perspective an emerging America in terms of his own emerging consciousness. Because of the importance of his consciousness as a middle American to his art and to his life as an artist, Anderson and America are shifting centers of focus. At times, Anderson takes the part of audience in this
autobiography, questioning his perceptions and evaluations. The assumption that he is dealing with problems typical to all Americans adds an element of skepticism to his analysis: "Was I trying to put myself over to the literary world as formerly I had been employed to put over automobile tires to the public?" (SEJ, 287). No one is sure of escape into freedom. His almost ostentatious spurts of humility (he is just a scribbler, who may someday write a passable tale) and his obsession with craftsmanship reflect this uncertainty. It is essential to Anderson that his readers understand him and the culture they share, but this must be an organic process, resembling the growing awareness that accompanies maturation.

Anderson tries to manipulate his audience into close identification with his characters to convey the sense of this process. By fitting the progress of his story into familiar American motifs—success, the growth of the artist, the small town boy (poor but with dignity), craftsmanship—he is able to some extent to manipulate response through his adherence to and deviation from the traditional motifs. Both the young man out to make a place in the world and the budding artist are visible from the beginning of A Story Teller's Story, smoothing the transition from businessman to artist. Anderson admits that most Americans expect their artists to be somewhat strange, and he plays on this expectation of strangeness in the movements of his personality—walking out of his place of business, his attachment to pencils and paper, his
inattention at advertising reviews, his isolation in New York. Anderson's somewhat defensive midwesternness and his concern for craftsmanship attempt to incur respect for his honesty as an autobiographer and as an artist, although at times he is uncomfortably self-conscious and tries to use these claims to conceal his insufficiencies. Tar, the typical midwestern boy growing up, is a familiar American character. Anderson ensures identification with the young innocent so that the shadow side of growth, when revealed, will seem to be an authentic aspect of American life. With an occasionally antiintellectual tone, Anderson makes himself a kind of folk-hero despite intellectual and artistic commitment to his craft. When this becomes obvious (as it too often does) the opposite effect is reached. Occasionally, Anderson lets himself drift into a tale within the larger story. In Tar, the chapter about the woman who dies circled by her dogs is an example of this kind of deviation. Occasionally, these tales take on aspects of Mark Twain's tall tales. Tar's successful butting of the local champion butter is especially reminiscent of Twain. Tar, amid constant self-deprecation, is led deeper and deeper into proving the supremacy of brains over brawn, much like Tom Sawyer painting the fence. In A Story Teller's Story, Anderson's mother collecting Halloween cabbages is developed in much the same way, to exhibit her homespun resourcefulness with a touch of pathos in the security offered by the buried cabbages. By manipulating
real or imagined experiences into short but complete stories, these digressions add touches of "human interest" to the work as a whole.

The autobiographer uses aesthetic techniques similar to those of the novelist, although the autobiography treads a line between history and art. Organic unity resonates from the interrelationships of character, development, purpose, and narrative voice. Images, motifs, antithesis and tensions delineate these interrelationships, without, in good autobiography, oversimplifying truth. Both Tar and A Story Teller's Story are criticized as severely flawed literary productions in comparison with Anderson's tales and novels. Tar verges on the sentimental and shifts perspectives, often disconcertingly, from child to adult. A Story Teller's Story is often sloppily constructed: it lacks the biting edge of Anderson's other works, tending to be self-indulgent and accommodating. Despite the truth of this criticism, Anderson's autobiographies compare more favorably with other American autobiographies than with his novels. Although Anderson used material and impressions from his life in both his novels and his autobiographies, he could manipulate them more plastically in Minesburg, Ohio, and Windy McPherson's Son, than in his autobiographies. The commitment to objective reality in autobiography necessitates reevaluation of characters and situations and acceptance of the conflicting elements of their identities. Anderson's father was to some extent both a scoundrel and an
ineffectual bumbler, exciting both repulsion and tolerant understanding. The novel can isolate one aspect to provide thematic unity. The autobiography, presenting both aspects, gains in objective truth, but is forced to a rougher and less stringent development of thematic unity. To establish a valid perspective between the subjective and the objective is an inescapable problem for the autobiographer. Those who maintain stringent unity often do so with admitted artificiality. Henry Adams maintains a family consistent perspective—failure in reconciling the expectations of family tradition with the reader to accept his definition of terms and to be satisfied with the limited focus of the truth he reveals. Hemingway establishes himself as one of his own characters through his brittle realism in *A Movable Feast*—but the reader is kept at a distance and never allowed to look out at the world from inside his consciousness. Twain disallows the ideal of perspective and strives for inclusiveness and spontaneity, leading the reader from incident to reflection without direction, and ultimately, despite occasional flashes of his lucid wit, without impact. Anderson, using motifs and images to connect specific experiences and evaluations, provides unity and purpose with a minimum of constraint.

Houses and bodies are the main unifying motifs in *Tar*. Houses are images of environmental awareness. "For *Tar* Moorehead life began with a procession of houses." (*Tar*, 30). *Tar* imagines himself living in other people's houses. His isolation
in his own home is reflected on the farm; when the women go into the house, he is left to experience the fright of growth along. As Tar grows older, he begins to learn about the real lives of people in their houses: the aggression and sexuality of everyday nonentities become moving forces behind their own walls. Within the confines of his own house, poverty and shame produce the same secretiveness: friends cannot be invited to dinner to share the poor meals of cabbage soup. One presents a blank face to the world: realities are revealed and faced in the home. The older children learn to forage for themselves outside the house; the mother remains at home with the young ones. Anderson muses about never having had a home of his own, and romanticizes the idea of home as castle (ignoring the grotesqueness that experiences shows lurking behind the doors of even the most commonplace houses). A house protects a person from the world, while advertising his position to it. The image of houses serves as a recurring static concept to unite the developing perceptions of the boy's increasingly complex consciousness.

Images of bodies connect Tar's growing physical awareness of himself and others. His recognition of bodies provides a tangible manifestation of the theme of metamorphosis. His growth, like the swollen lip stung by a bee or the growth of the child in his mother's belly, is a painful process. He grows in awareness only to find dark gaps that experience cannot bridge: why did he butt Henry Fulton off the bridge; why was he motionless and speechless in the barn with Name
Thompson; why was the beach tree identified with Estor Farley so frightening? Men, horses, animals, and women force physical response from Tar in establishing the relationship between himself and others.

While this type of merging of author, character, scene, and theme of metamorphosis through recurring motifs is effective in bridging gaps of experience, Anderson lacks continuity of impact. While physical growth and environmental awareness underly many scenes, much more is implied, although not developed. Too often this "more" is vague: the mysterious urges, and fierce longings have too much potential and too little concrete meaning. The blanket explanation—that this is the growth of an emerging American writer's consciousness—is insufficient. Lionel Trilling's suggestion that Anderson's portrayal of childhood is more meaningful to adolescents than to adults may be to some extent true. It is easy to respond to Tar, but the gaps between potential and actual impede more sophisticated understanding. Anderson injects his adult vision into the book often and intensely enough to create a tension of perception: although Tar grows in perception as the book develops, Anderson's willingness to fill in the gaps between what Tar can see and what really exists leaves the reader in an hiatus between response and understanding that Anderson does not bridge. Henry James solves this problem in one possible way by imitating a child's pattern of consciousness with adult sophistication of language and understanding. Anderson, however,
wants the reader both to respond to Tar and to understand him, although at times these motives are incompatible. Horace Gregory suggests that Anderson creates in Tar a counterpart of both Huck Finn and Ishmael—a wanderer between the dark and bright elements of existence. But in trying to embody the typical and the grotesque from both present and retrospective points of view, he creates an unwieldy structure that he does not manipulate skillfully. The powerful moments in the book stand strongly and truly, but as a coherent whole, Tar is shaky. The successive impacts are dissipated in the whole, and the promise of "meaning" is never completely fulfilled.

A Story Teller's Story is a stronger autobiography because it is not committed to the novel. Anderson can concentrate more fully on self-expression and self-exposition because he does not have to create a fictionally coherent world and characters and plot to exist in it. In autobiography, the author uses preexisting material. The reader knows the outcome—the autobiographer is the conclusion of the autobiography, and he is known through the shape and texture of the experience and evaluations as they occur. In A Story Teller's Story, Anderson is fully committed to autobiographical retrospection. Although he is tolerant of his past, he judges it by his present understanding of life. He is able to manipulate objective and subjective responses to give a multidimensional approach to experiences and characters. For example, he expresses his ambivalence toward middle America, even as its spokesman: he loves
its power but is contemptuous of its foolishness; he loves its people, but abhors its gullibility and lack of self-respect. Anderson, exploring himself through the outer manifestations and the inner consciousness of the American experience, is attracted to and repelled by its diverse implications, as author and as persona, through the looser demands of autobiographical development.

Hands and words are two main motifs in *A Story Teller's Story*. Hands are the shapers of creation and words the medium. Although Anderson recognizes the need to communicate, as a craftsman it is not the people but the words to which he must be true. Like the woodcarver he describes caressing the tree, Anderson feels the pull of his craft as a physical and spiritual necessity. The essentials of the story, among which the focus shifts, are the author, the medium of writing, and the material—America. Anderson identifies his hands with the creative experience from the early vision of his mother rubbing his hands with melted fat to restlessly gazing at his hands in a room in New York wondering if they are leading him astray. The book ends focussed on the hands of the football story writer who tears books because he cannot or will not write them. Anderson's hands fail him in the fistfight with his fellow worker and reveal him as a story teller when he lies to Nora about his defeat. When his hands are true to their calling, words transform their experience to paper in the physical manifestation of his craft.
The motif of storytelling also dominates the book structurally. Anderson does not only tell stories reflecting his consciousness at various stages of his development. He also presents a chain of other storytellers in their relationships to him: his father, Uncas, Judge Turner, the American myth-makers like Ford and Edison, Jim Berners, the Eastern intellectuals. These stories affect Anderson even when he knows they are fictional because fact and fancy are interrelated and can be equally valuable indices of experience and character. As a story teller, he knows that the truth of words is not always the truth of actual experience.

A Story Teller's Story seems more successful than Tar because Anderson is more fully committed to autobiography. Tar suffers the restrictions of both the novel and the autobiography, without reaping the full benefits of either. Autobiography, a genre based on content rather than form, provides the opportunity for dynamic manipulations of historical experience. The novel, with more formal expectations, is able to create a totally fictional world. In Tar, Anderson succeeds in producing neither the historical verity of the true autobiography nor the formal integration of the novel. A Story Teller's Story uses the looseness of formal expectations to its advantage while remaining within the scope of historical truth. Although Anderson's approaches to the problem of ordering experience, establishing and relating to his persona, and communicating his evolving and ultimate ideas differed from those of other autobiographers, they did produce an esthetically valid and
historically satisfying autobiography in *A Story Teller's Story*. Although the book divides itself roughly into two parts---before and after Anderson became a writer---the themes of success and of developing imagination, cemented by the motifs of hands and words and story telling, provide unity for the book as a coherent whole. Despite his occasionally irritating tone of self-indulgence and the distortion of some experiences, Anderson's experiences as a writer and as an American retain emotional and intellectual truth. Anderson is not an intellectual social critic. But the quality of his thinking is emotionally deep, if intellectually shallow. It is popular to chastize Anderson for rarely going intellectually or artistically beyond his initial urgent rejection of American industrialism for art---and, considering his later work, this criticism is not without value or truth. Anderson does not think so much as respond, nor create so much as recreate. Yet Hart suggests that autobiography is fitted to Anderson's abilities as a vocalizer of the undercurrents of life, although his inability to control gradations of fact and fancy works against his impact as an autobiographer (perhaps his father should have been a southerner and his mother an Italian, but this does not make them so). However, despite such inconsistencies, Anderson shapes his experiences into a generally satisfying autobiography.

The autobiographer picks and chooses among the multiple possibilities of all aspects of autobiography to create a work with depth of meaning that is true to life and to his view of
life. The critic must judge the validity of these choices and of their interrelationships in the work as a whole. This evaluation involves various approaches and levels of analysis. Although truth is an important consideration in autobiography, there are levels of truth---narrative and dramatic. Since the intention of the autobiographer generally includes both, truth must be considered as both subjective and objective. When these cannot be reconciled, the autobiographer must maintain a precarious balance if he is to reconstruct experience in terms that will be meaningful to his audience. Since his dramatic and narrative intentions spring from the same source---the life lived---they should be in general harmony. But they may conflict: to what extent should events be described as they seemed at the time, to what extent from the retrospective viewpoint? The environment is both part of the autobiographer and apart from him. The aspects of environment that are stressed depend on the nature of the persona, and of the autobiographer who he represents. In reconstructing his experiences, the autobiographer can hardly avoid implying general themes and principles of his development. But these themes may distort and obscure equally vital truths. Structure may both organize experience and erect artificial truths. Yet, because structure evolves from the same experiences that are described, it serves also as an important indicator of the autobiographer's conception of life. The interrelationships go on and on. In the autobiography they are solved by the author's
basic assumptions, intentions, and purpose.

What, then, constitutes successful autobiography? The successful autobiographer establishes logical relationships among the conflicting demands and possibilities of the genre: between narrator and persona, between past and present, between static and dynamic characterization, between action and environment, between freedom and determinism, and among theme, intentions, and form. He maintains unity without constraint or artificiality and merges objective with subjective truth with honesty and sensitivity. As an expressive genre, autobiography exposes an author through subject, form, and manner of approach: Adams can be seen as a prig, Anderson as a whining incompetent, Hemmingway as an egoist, and Edwars as a fanatic. Autobiographers leave themselves open to criticism not only as writers, but as human beings as well. The successful autobiographer is honest with himself and his audience, using the art of autobiography as a means of potent communication.
FOOTNOTES


5 Sherwood Anderson, *Tar: A Midwest Childhood*, ed. Ray Lewis White (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve Univ. Press, 1969). Quotations will be followed by Tar and page number. In this critical edition, White restores passages deleted from galleys in brackets and indicates passages added to galleys with brackets and asterisks. I follow White in including these indications.


8 Pascal, pp. 69-73.

9 Pascal, pp. 77-78.

10 Anderson hated the idea of plot; to him it appeared to be a mechanistic device which obscured the multiple undercurrents of real and imagined situations. See STS, pp. 254-256.

11 Hart, p. 492.


15 Hart, pp. 490-491.
Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


