Carolyn Steedman
from "History and Autobiography: Different Pasts"

The following is an excerpt of a chapter in Steedman's 1992 book, Past Tenses. Steedman investigates the differences between historical writing and autobiographical writing using a book she wrote, Landscape for a Good Woman, which is a series of life sketches. This excerpt is significant because she expresses a definite preference for how her work should be perceived: as historical, not autobiographical. Her reasoning is equally important to her conclusion, since the reasoning contains much of the delineation between these two similar types of writing.

All of that was prolegomenon: a way of talking about the real problem, which I believe to be history itself, and here and now and particularly, the relationship of history to autobiography. The standard histories of autobiography that we possess describe a development over the last five hundred years, of a specifically historical consciousness. It is this consciousness that has provided the framework for the emergence of the autobiographical form. In many literary and critical accounts of the genre, it is Goethe in particular, in Dichtung und Wahrheit who first formalised the notion of self-formation as the result of an interplay of the self and the world around the self. This recognition, of the historical dimension of all human reality, which was made about 1800 and which followed on a century or two of various autobiographical endeavours, meant that autobiography itself assumed a significant cultural function, within the lineaments of which we still operate. In accounts like these, which I am summarising in a somewhat breathtaking fashion, autobiography is to be distinguished from such genre as memoir and reminiscence by the status and function of experience within it. In the form of memoir for instance, it is a series of external factors that is presented as dictating the narrative course. These factors or events may be translated into inner experience, but that inner experience - lived and felt experience - is not its focus, as it is in autobiography.

And yet that history - that historical dimension of all human reality, that historical consciousness, historicity - is a problem for the daily telling of life stories. History is an irrelevance in common understanding, though historical explanation is my mode of thinking and public presentation, and perhaps of being. I say to students, to friends: 'a hundred years ago, it wasn't like that'; and I watch the shadow of polite boredom pass over their face. Or licensed for egotism, by this Conference, by this week-end, I could ask: Why do I care? Why do I want to tell my story in this particular way? And especially, why do I insist on telling a story within a historical framework, when many people, whom I respect and admire, think that I could manage just as well without? What am I hiding through my use of history? Or (to cut the self-abnegation) what am I finding?

[There are several reasons for saying that a] book does not constitute history. One is to do with its central device, which is to claim that the life of many people in this society is not explained by the dominant forms that give expression to lived experience: novels, other literature, film, history (though we should remember the eight-year-old, telling her story with the device of the princess's farthingale, to remind ourselves of what people manage, in the cracks in between, using someone else's story). In this way then, the book refuses the path of romance. I think that people's history and oral history are romantic devices (which is not to say that they shouldn't be undertaken), and I refuse to say that my mother's story, or my father's, or mine are perfectly valid stories, existing in their own right, merely hidden from history, now revealed. I won't do this. I think that the central stories are maintained by the marginality of others, but that these marginal stories will not do to construct a future by. They will have to be abandoned, for they were made out of multiple poverties and real deprivations. So I have to refuse the label history to what I say about Burnley in the 1920s, about the possible way my mother was brought up, about the more certain descriptions of my own childhood - not because I don't present perfectly true and useful historical information here, but rather because my rhetorical framework would collapse if I said that this was history: the central story.

I don't ever promise that this is really how it was. It is at this point that I remember most clearly an eight-year-old in a crowded post-War South London classroom, writing a life of Queen Victoria in three volumes (three LCC exercise books): the holly pinned to the little princess's collar to make her sit up straight at meal times, the moment of destiny on the stairs when the men in frock coats fell at her feet. This story I write (dip pen, a good round hand: it's 1955) is me, but also, exactly at the same time, not-me. It will go on operating like that, the historical past will, as acceptance and denial.

I know that there is no 'really how it was' at all. But knowing about all the pretensions of the historical enterprise that seeks to conjure the past before our eyes, as it really was, does not stop me from wanting what all of history's readers want: the thing we cannot have - which is past time: 'the past as it really was'. The child in the 1950s South London classroom knew (she might be able to articulate this, if you asked her the right question) that
the point isn't what happened, nor how the young Victoria sat at the table, nor the hurried drive through the dark to announce ascension to the throne; the point is what the child does with that history.

Later, the child will learn the delicate constraints of this particular literary enterprise - the writing of history. She will learn the pleasures of the plot shaped according to what the documents forbid, or authorise, but which they never contain in themselves. She will learn what massive authority this appeal to the evidence will give her as a story-teller. So when, thirty years on, she denies that what she is doing is writing history, then she is actually relinquishing the arena of her own authority; she does want you to know that. It is also of course, the rhetoric of denial. The way to show this is to proceed by making a contrast, between the telling of life-stories and the telling of history.

Stories come to an end when there is no more to be said, that is to say, when the listener as much as the teller knows that there is no going back on what has already been delivered up, when it's too late to change what has been said, when you can see that this point you have reached, this end, was implicit in the beginning, was there all along. Then, the story ends. In the autobiography, or in the telling of a life story in a pub, there is in operation a simple variant of this narrative rule. The person there, leaning up against the bar, or in another place, writing a book, is the embodiment of the something completed. That end, that finished place, is the human being, a body in time and space, telling a story that brings you (wherever the teller actually ends the story) to this place, here and now; this end. And written autobiography has to end in the figure of the writer (which is why you have to see that the good woman is me). I am talking about the simple physicality of writing, nothing more than that: that the story is told by someone here, now, in time. And of course, I do know that life goes on after the writing, that other tales will be told, and that there is a more permanent ending.

I wonder perhaps, if the historians who proffer a total history, and who dream of delivering up the past as it really was, do not in fact, aspire to the autobiographer's position: the all-seeing eye, the certainty of memory, of having been there, of telling a story that is completed in the figure of he or she who does the telling. But in fact, history writing represents a distinct cognitive process precisely because it is constructed around the understanding that things are not over, that the story isn't finished: that there is no end. In fact, in their day-to-day practice, historians do know and acknowledge that the story they tell isn't over, doesn't have an end. Closures have to be made, in order to finish arguments and books; but the story can't be finished because there is always the possibility that some new piece of evidence will alter the argument and the account. Historians have as their stated objective exhaustiveness (finding out again and again, more and more about some thing, event or person), and they proceed upon the path of refutation by pointing to exceptions and to the possibility of exception. The practice of historical inquiry and historical writing is a recognition of temporariness and impermanence, and in this way is a quite different literary form from that of autobiography, which presents momentarily a completeness, a completeness which lies in the figure of the writer or the teller, in the here and now, saying: that's how it was; or, that's how I believe it to have been.

By drawing these distinctions between the telling or writing of autobiography and the practice of history, I do not want to deny important similarities. History and autobiography work in the same way as narrative: they use the same linguistic structure, and they are both fictions, in that they present variations and manipulations of current time to the reader. These similarities are the matter of a different paper, and the topic of a different Conference. Rather, what I want to do instead, by looking at the distinctions between the two, is point to the psychological functions that autobiography and history serve - for the writer and the teller, for the listener and the reader. What I have dwelt on so far, is the end, the sense of completeness that a life story allows, whenever it is told, which I have suggested that history does not really allow; and the way in which the historical past, in my example, used by children, might allow them to explore possibility and denial, both at the same time. The telling of a life story is a confirmation of that self that stands there telling the story. History, on the other hand, might offer the chance of denying it.

I see now, that in writing Landscape for a Good Woman, I was most profoundly pulled between these two understandings, of autobiography and history, though I do not think I could have been clear about this at the time. The autobiographical part of the book happened - or at least - I believe that it happened, which might come to the same thing in the end. And I do not want it to have been that way. I think I hoped that history might rescue me from that bleak knowledge that it would have been better if it hadn't happened that way; hadn't happened at all. I need to pursue the bleakness just a bit further. I used a contrast in the book, between history and case-history. History, I argued, was to do with time. In doing and writing history, I said, the historian goes back through time, finds something, considers it, looks at it this way, and then that; gives it meaning. Then, with these bundles of
autobiography must employ biographical—which is to say historical rather than fictional—materials. On the other thought concerning it's permissible methods. On the one side are those critics who continue to insist that autobiography must employ biographical—which is to say historical rather than fictional—materials. On the other

William Spengemann from his “Introduction” to The Forms of Autobiography

In the introductory essay to his book, Spengemann attempts to define autobiography for his readers. He divides autobiographies into three main types, taking a historical approach to the subject. His comments are interesting because he attempts to imagine how some might object to his classifications, and he addresses those objections in advance.

The years that have slipped by since I began work on this little book have seen autobiography move from the borderlands of literary study to a place much nearer the privileged center traditionally occupied by fiction, poetry, and the drama. Had I written this introduction even five years ago, I could have begun, as was then the custom among critics of autobiography, by lamenting the scholarly neglect of this worthy literature. Now that the genre has become critically respectable, not to say fashionable, however, prefaces like this one are obliged to open on a softer note, with some acknowledgment of the great deal that has already been said on the subject, as well as some justification for adding yet another handful of pages to the steadily mounting pile.

While the recent flurry of books and articles on autobiography has abundantly answered the old plea for more work in the field, the volume of that response has raised a new problem: the more the genre gets written about, the less agreement there seems to be on what it properly includes. Back in the days when very few people even thought about this question, those who did might quarrel over the admissibility of letters, journals, memoirs, and verse-narratives, but they generally agreed that an autobiography bad to offer an at least ostensibly factual account of the writer's own life—that it had to be, in short, a self-written biography. As the number of people writing about autobiography has swollen, however, the boundaries of the genre have expanded proportionately until there is now virtually no written form that has not either been included in some study of autobiography or else been subjected to autobiographical interpretation. What was once a rather clearly demarcated territory, populated almost exclusively by such self-identifying texts as John Stuart Mill's Autobiography and Jonathan Edwards's Personal Narrative, has become an unbounded sprawl, in which the poetry of T. S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams, the novels of Stendhal and Proust, the plays of Tennessee Williams, and even Henry James's prefaces have found a place.

These efforts to expand the boundaries of autobiography have split critical opinion into two schools of thought concerning its permissible methods. On the one side are those critics who continue to insist that autobiography must employ biographical—which is to say historical rather than fictional—materials. On the other
side, there are those who assert the right of autobiographers to present themselves in whatever form they may find appropriate and necessary. Whether a particular study takes up the subject of autobiography itself, or uses autobiographies as a source of information about some other subject (the idea of individualism, for example), or simply treats some literary work as an autobiography, it will adopt, either implicitly or explicitly, one of these two theoretical positions, which will in turn condition everything else the writer has to say.

Both of these approaches to autobiography seem to me to have a good deal to recommend them. The idea of autobiography obviously cannot be separated completely from self-biography. However one chooses to define the genre, its universally recognized classics were all written in this mode, and anyone who wishes to redefine autobiography must begin by redefining the essential character of these acknowledged models. But neither can the idea of autobiography be identified with self-biography. The various poems, novels, and plays that have recently been inserted into the genre—all of which, significantly, are either modern or else particularly susceptible to modernist interpretation—do seem, despite their fictiveness, to address the same problems of self-definition that have taxed autobiographers ever since Augustine discovered that the self is a hard ground to plough. Indeed, the modernist movement away from representational discourse toward self-enacting, self-reflexive verbal structures and the critical theories that have been devised to explain this movement conspire to make the very idea of literary modernism seem synonymous with that of autobiography.

Insofar as both of these views of autobiography conform to our experience with actual texts both are right. What we need, therefore, is a theory, or rather a description, of autobiography that will recognize both its perduring relation to the self-biographical mode and its apparently increasing tendency to assume fictive forms in the modern era. Instead of identifying autobiography with self-written biography because it has usually been written in that form or denying the generic importance of that convention because autobiography has often been written in other forms, we need to understand the conditions that have led different autobiographers at different times to write about themselves in different ways. In other words, we must view autobiography historically, not as one thing that writers have done again and again, but as the pattern described by the various things they have done in response to changing ideas about the nature of the self, the ways in which the self may be apprehended, and the proper methods of reporting those apprehensions.

The evolution of autobiographical forms outlined in the following chapters begins with The Confessions of St. Augustine, a work that retains no vestige of the self-biographical mode. My aim is to demonstrate the generic kinship between these formally diverse works by locating them both within a single evolving tradition that arose in the early Middle Ages and arrived at the conclusions of its own internal logic in the nineteenth century. Chapter one analyzes the form of Augustine's Confessions in some detail, partly because this work is generally acknowledged to be both a true autobiography and the first of its kind, but mainly because this seminal document employs in succession all three of the forms-historical, philosophical, and poetic—that autobiography would assume in the course of its development over the next fifteen hundred years. Following the essay on The Confessions are three chapters: one on the development of historical autobiography in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, one on the transition to philosophical autobiography in the later eighteenth century, and one on the emergence of poetic autobiography in the nineteenth century. By applying the formal paradigm provided in Augustine's Confessions to a number of ostensibly representative, but at any rate familiar, works, these three chapters attempt to chart the formal permutations that, all together, constitute what autobiography is.

A word or two needs to be said at this point regarding my selection of texts for discussion. Although this book treats its subject historically, it does not pretend to survey the vast library of autobiographical writing. On the contrary, I have chosen for extended analysis only as many works as I needed to describe the movement of autobiography from the biographical to the fictive mode. This is not to contend that the works I have chosen are necessarily the first to do what I describe them as doing. Few of my readers will be unable to name for each formal category an autobiography written earlier than those I discuss, and fewer still will excuse my failure to acknowledge their favorites. Since I do not maintain that the formal evolution of autobiography was unilinear, proceeding directly through any particular sequence of texts, I have felt free to single out works that illustrate most clearly what seem to me the crucial episodes in the larger movement that is my subject.

Some of my readers may also feel that the evolution I am proposing does not really evolve, since the "earlier" forms, historical and philosophical autobiography, are still being written, while poetic autobiography, the "latest" stage of development, is present in Augustine's Confessions, at the very beginning of the movement. My response to the first part of this objection would be that no theory of evolution requires mutant forms to supplant the
strains from which they arise; they simply add to the existing stock of forms available for use. Although not
everything done today has always been done, it is probably fair to say that everything that has ever been done is still
being done, somewhere. In any event, I take each of the three autobiographical forms to be characteristic of the
period to which I have assigned it, even though it may not be the form most often used in that period. What I call
historical autobiography seems to me to accord perfectly with the climate of opinion regarding the self that prevailed
from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment, philosophic autobiography to reflect the changes in that climate which
occurred around the turn of the nineteenth century, and poetic autobiography to express the radically altered
conditions that resulted from the ideological upheavals of the nineteenth century. Only St. Augustine remains a true
anomaly in this pattern, accomplishing the entire course of autobiographical change in a single work written at its
very beginning. Concerning this recusant fact, I will simply observe that it is the subsequent evolution of
autobiography that gives Augustine his preeminence, in retrospect. If later autobiographers like Dante, Rousseau,
and Carlyle had not employed the very different forms they did, we would doubtless be unable to recognize the
formal movement that makes The Confessions so proleptic.

And that brings me to my final word concerning the selection of texts analyzed in the chapters ahead. Although a good deal has been asserted already about the proliferation of autobiographical forms in the twentieth
century, this study concludes with an analysis of The Scarlet Letter, my prime example of poetic autobiography.
Where, the reader may well ask, do we account for the autobiographical experiments of Yeats and Proust, of T. S.
Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath? Although the reader's satisfaction on this point
will depend on the persuasiveness of the chapters ahead, I will say here that, however various critics have defined
autobiography, their ability to recognize one has always depended on some evidence that the writer's self is either the
primary subject or the principal object of the verbal action. In the former case, the self is seen to exist independent
of whatever the writer says on its behalf, and the verbal action seeks either to describe that self historically, or
analyze it philosophically, or express it poetically. In the latter case, the self is seen to depend for its existence upon
the verbal action, which therefore describes its own poetic creation. Historical self-explanation, philosophical self-
scrutiny, poetic self-expression, and poetic self-invention—these are, so far as I know, the only procedures available to
autobiography, and the list was exhausted by the time Hawthorne finished The Scarlet Letter. Unless I am greatly
mistaken in this formulation (a possibility of which I am perfectly aware), then, all subsequent autobiographies may
be described in terms of one or more of these formal strategies. Although historical, philosophic, and poetic
autobiographies are still being written today, the generic evolution that produced these divergent forms and so relates
them to each other—the movement outlined in this book—was complete a century ago.

From The Forms of Autobiography
William Spengemann
Chapter 1: Augustine's Confessions

The structure of Augustine's Confessions is tripartite. In Books I through IX, the Augustine who has
already received the gift of faith stands upon the fixed point of an immutable truth and looks back, or rather down,
upon the sinful life he led between his birth and his conversion. To dramatize the importance of conversion,
Augustine draws a sharp distinction between his old, unregenerate self, who could see his life only from an ever-
shifting perspective within it, and his new converted self, who sees that life as an eternally complete moral design
with all its parts existing simultaneously in timeless space. The religious significance of the conversion, the accuracy
of the meanings he assigns to his past life, the whole lesson of the narrative in fact, depend upon the narrator's ability
to persuade himself and the reader that he has attained this timeless wisdom, and can now see the true, eternal pattern
of his false, temporal life.***

The narrative mode of Books I through IX has been employed by so many autobiographers of so many
different ideological persuasions over the centuries that we are apt to forget that its origins lie in a very special set of
beliefs and assumptions. The mode is grounded ultimately in the conviction that the retrospective narrator can see
his life from a point outside it, that his view is not subject to the limiting conditions of the life he is recounting.
While the past self, the protagonist, can see each event in his life only in its ever-changing relation to a past which is
being continually reshaped by the addition of new experience in the present, and to future expectations which
experience is continually revising, the narrator can see each past event in its fixed relation to a past which has
presumably achieved its final form. Because the narrator does not stand within the temporal span of the action he is
reporting, because he does not stand in time at all, his perspective is not altered by new experience. He contemplates
each past event from the same, unmoving point, the point of immutable truth. In these first nine books, it is faith and faith alone that gives the narrator this timeless vision of his temporal life, enabling him to survey his past wanderings from a stationary, exterior point, and preventing his memory from wandering along those old paths that once led him away from the truth. What the narrator sees from this ecstatic ground is nothing less than the eternal form of the life he once lived moment by moment, the true meaning of his false life.

Since the narrative is above all the story of Augustine's conversion, of his awakening to the faith that taught him the truth, the converted narrator and the unconverted protagonist are distinguished primarily on the basis of their faith and their consequent knowledge of the divine purpose behind the life. The narrator draws this distinction sharply at the moment of the protagonist's birth. Upon asserting his present conviction that good things come from God, he immediately explains, "This I came to know later.... [T]hen all I knew was how to suck, to be contented with bodily pain; that was all." From this point in the narrative until the moment of conversion, when the protagonist suddenly awakens to the true meaning of his life and thus becomes the narrator, Augustine maintains this clear division between past ignorance and present knowledge, elucidating the true significance of acts which he failed to understand previously. "At that time," he says, "I was ignorant of these things and unaware of them. On all sides they were striking me in the eye, but still I did not see them" (62); and again, "At that time I did not know this and I loved these lower beauties and I was sinking down to the depths" (82). So penetrating is the narrator's redeemed perception, compared to the protagonist's blindness, in fact, that he can now discern not only the ultimate significance of past acts but their true causes as well. While the protagonist believes that he is going to the Manichees to find the truth, the narrator knows that he really went in order to become disillusioned with them (107-08).

The extent and completeness of the narrator's knowledge give him a command of his past life that is truly Godlike; and although he never commits the impiety of confusing himself with God, his position and function in the narrative are formally analogous to God's role in the universe. Early in the narrative, Augustine makes God the eternal repository of all things that are lost in time: "For Thou are most high and art not changed, and this Today does not come to an end in you; and yet it does come to an end in you, since all times are in you; for they would have no way of succeeding each other, if they were not all contained in you. And since Thy years do not fail, your years are Today. And how many of our years and of our father's years have passed through this Today of yours, receiving from it the pattern and form of the existence which they had.... But Thou are still the same, and all things of tomorrow and after tomorrow, all things of yesterday and before yesterday, you will accomplish today and you have accomplished today" (23). God's eternal being gives reality, sequence, pattern, and meaning to all things known and unknown, remembered and forgotten, past and future.

God is thus the paradigm memory, the ideal to which the narrator aspires as he struggles to give past events an eternal presence, pattern, and meaning by passing them through the "most high" and unchanging medium of his own divinely instructed intelligence. To the unconverted protagonist, things seem to come and go or else to change so rapidly that he cannot grasp their eternal form. But the narrator stands above change with God, of whom he says, "you are always the same, and as to those things which do not always exist or do not always exist in the same way, you know all of them, always and in the same way" (165). Even his language aspires continually to divinity, as he labors to maintain a level of discourse that will move smoothly in and out of Scriptural quotation with no syntactic break or tonal seam, and thus to demonstrate rhetorically the consonance of his own words with the divine Word.

From his enlightened, unmoving position above the action of his story, the narrator gives to the protagonist's fallen life a literary form which aspires to imitate the eternal form given to the objects and events of the material world by the omniscient, unmoving mind of God. "I want to call back to mind my past impurities and the carnal corruptions of my soul," he says, "not because I love them, but so that I may love you, my God.... And gathering myself together from the scattered fragments into which I was broken and dissipated during all that time when, being turned away from you, the One, I lost myself in the distractions of the many" (40). The form of this gathering is repeatedly associated with the divine form; implicitly in the narrator's apostrophe to God as "the one from whom is every manner of form, you, most beautiful, the creator of beauty in all things, you who by your law lay down for all things the rule" (24); and somewhat more explicitly in those passages where Augustine uses the form of words to illustrate the principle of eternal form. Concerning material things, the narrator says in prayer, "So much you have given to them, namely to be parts of a structure in which the parts are not all in existence at the same time; instead, by fading and by replacing each other, they all together constitute the universe of which they are all parts. Our own speech, too, which is constructed out of meaningful sounds, follows the same principles. There could never be a complete sentence unless one word, as soon as the syllables had been sounded, ceased to be in order to make room
for the next" (79). The words and the material objects or temporal events they signify all pass away, but the forms of those words together, like the form of all things and events together, is eternal and divine.

Because the divine form is the absolute ground of reality, and is in no way contingent upon its material, historical content, it is sufficient in itself. Nevertheless, the totality of divine being includes all those conditional objects and events which it informs, and insofar as the narrative seeks to imitate the divine totality it must not only expound the eternal truth but also explain the relation between truth and error. Recalling how faith reconciled him to the existence of evil things, the narrator says, "So I no longer desired better things. I had envisaged all things in their totality, and, with a sounder judgment, I realized that while higher things are certainly better than lower things, all things together are better than higher things by themselves" (152). Doctrinally, the narrative establishes the relation between truth and error, higher and lower things, by asserting that the truth now known to the narrator was always present and available to the protagonist, who simply refused to see it. "And where was I when I was seeking for you," he asks. "You were there, in front of me; but I had gone away even from myself. I could not even find myself, much less find you" (91).

The form of the narrative imitates this doctrinal relation by making the narrator something more than a voice of recollection, recounting past events. As the voice of that truth which was available to the protagonist from the beginning, he in fact represents the eternally ambient truth in which the protagonist lives his false life. Monica's dream about her son's eventual conversion, the bishop's counsel of patience (67-68), and the narrator's stated belief that God was "doing everything in the order which [He] had predestined it" (103), indicate that his conversion was foreordained—which is to say, eternally true. Consequently, the converted narrator, who embodies that truth, exists complete throughout the narrative, standing alongside the fallen self as the voice of the eternally present truth to which the fallen self must awaken. Once again, narrator and protagonist are separated primarily by faith, not by time. Although the narrator is obviously older than the protagonist, his knowledge is not attributed to his age or his past experience, to wisdom achieved in time, but to the faith which he could have embraced at any time.

Augustine's stated intention to explain the relation between truth and error, requires that the protagonist's false life occur entirely within the context of the narrator's truth. That life must be presented consistently as an example of error, impiety, infidelity and personal insufficiency, never as something of interest or value in itself. Events from the life are chosen solely for their suitability as illustrations of the narrator's pronouncements or as topics of exegesis. The pear-stealing, for example, receives the attention it does, not because it is exciting, not even because it was an especially vicious act, and certainly not because it taught the protagonist a valuable lesson, but simply because it gives the narrator an opportunity to discuss at length an important doctrinal truth about the sinner's love for sin itself The protagonist is seldom permitted to speak in his own voice. When he does, he merely displays the negligence and selfseeking that are at once the cause and effect of his sickness, and his statements are immediately condemned by the narrator: "So I used to speak and so the winds blew and shifted and drove my heart this way and that and time went by and I was slow in turning to the Lord" (129). What he is allowed to say, moreover, makes him appear far more meanly inclined than we might suppose the young Augustine actually was, given his life-long passion for the good.

It is not enough to say that such self-hatred is conventional in spiritual autobiography; after all, Augustine established the convention. The point is that the highly unflattering portrait of the protagonist is dictated entirely by Augustine's determination to maintain the proper doctrinal relation between truth and error, showing them to be radically divergent paths, both of which were open to the protagonist at all times. Undue attention to the protagonist's less ignoble desires and inclinations, or to the sinner's own view of his situation at the time, might suggest that the path of error led him to the truth in time, that he made his way through error to the truth. Because faith alone is the way to the truth, all his previous efforts, lacking faith, must be shown to have been incapable of producing good results.***

The converted narrator's self-knowledge, on the other hand, is complete, for the knowing self stands in front of the experiencing self, where he can see not only those things that have already happened but also those things that will happen in the future. He can thus correctly interpret each experience in relation to the entire pattern of the life. Once again, form and doctrine are inextricably entwined. Conversion completes both the doctrinal lesson of faith and the form that was projected by the initial distinction between the self-deluded protagonist and the self-aware narrator. When the protagonist gives way to the narrator, his story ends. At the same instant, the narrator is born to tell the story already told. The end joins the beginning to form an endless circle, which is at once the figure described by the narrative, the symbol of a mortal life made eternal by faith, and the mystical emblem of God.
Use our free chapter-by-chapter summary and analysis of The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. It helps middle and high school students understand Benjamin Franklin's literary masterpiece.Â Benjamin Franklin was only 22 years old when he wrote himself an epitaph (source). Aside from the fact that this was kind of a pessimistic, suffering artist thing to do, what's really interesting is his description of what he imagined his legacy would be.