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High Noon in Geneva: The American Myth in An American Life

An autobiography is like a concentric maze with multiple entry points: the route to the truth, even the truth itself, is different for each reader depending upon how it is approached. This multiplicity creates numerous problems for the reader trying to discover (create) some meaningful sense of the text, or, rather, trying to discover (create) some stable concept of the life it (re)presents. Further complicating a reading, autobiography lacks the scholarship of biography because the subject is writing about itself. It lacks the disinterest of objectivity for the same reason. It may lack academic, even journalistic, credulity because it often does not rely on sources or experts. And, to make the genre all the more obnoxious, autobiographers seem universally disposed to telling us all how to live properly using the subject, themselves, as prime examples.

Publishers are compelled to publish presidential autobiography because of the prestige in being known as a president's publisher. The public seems indifferent to them; most are money losers for publishers (Korda 88). But I find the presidential autobiography worthy of study because within the office and the man we see embodied one of the essential conflicts of America. In one person we embody the head of government and the head of state. These roles often conflict because we may disagree with the actions of the head of government while we support, even revere, the symbol of president as head of state. This inherent conflict in our political system makes presidential autobiography, such as Ronald Reagan's An American Life, doubly upsetting. Readers expect these texts to display

a high regard for facts because of the vast public record available to check the veracity of the events as portrayed. But a presidential autobiography, like any such text, is far more than a sorting out of historical events and so by its very nature complicates our notions of facts and the public record. Further, autobiography is, as William Berry claims, a "narcissistic enterprise" in which the subject gazes inward and "discovers a landscape of surpassing depth and beauty" (610). This is a fanciful expression of the desire to make one's inner life and thoughts known and the concomitant desire of the readers to tap into those inner thoughts. I would argue that we look to presidential autobiography to celebrate the public record of the head of state while at the same time we hope it will reveal the inner person behind the public policy, the head of government, thus illuminating and, possibly, unifying both. And, in the process of this analysis, I would suggest we the people learn something of ourselves--who we are as a nation.

This illumination and unification only becomes possible, I think, in an ex-president's autobiography because it is, or at least is thought to be, unmediated by news organizations, pundits, and political aides. In the public record, the president is head of government--what policies he supported, what victories he won, what results he achieved or failed to achieve. But it is within the context of America's myths, and the related stories a president tells about himself, that he reveals the man who was head of state. Perhaps we desire this revelation because our national myths are the narratives of our national symbols, and the president is a national symbol incarnate linked to a history of famous man-symbols. Our head of state should be honest because George Washington supposedly chopped down a cherry tree and told the truth about the deed. Our head of

state should be a man of the people because Andrew "Old Hickory" Jackson was born in a log cabin. Our head of state should be eloquent because Lincoln composed the Gettysburg address on the back of an envelope. The myths an ex-president creates, and/or taps into, are the narrative vehicles that help blur the distinction between president as head of government and president as head of state--allowing the ex-president in retirement to become one person (at least within the context of the narrative, if not within the context of history or politics).

Depending on the critic, the critic's politics (as surmised from the politics of the publishing journal) and to some extent the critic's academic discipline, Reagan's autobiography is either a vacuous account of an unreflective man who stumbled into the ultimate American success, or it is the portrait of one of the century's most able politicians. For example, Bert Rockman, reviewing the text for Political Science Quarterly, concludes that Reagan as president was "a man of exceedingly limited range and curiosity" (717). But, John O'Sullivan, writing in The National Review, comes to a very different conclusion:

Mr. Reagan, then, is a somewhat different political leader from the bumbling idiot of liberal myth--in private a kind and gentle man, in politics a charming Machiavellian, economical in his use of power, manipulative in his use of people, and modest when it comes to sharing credit. In short, a master politician. (48)

On the surface this merely tells us that, possibly for political reasons, the scholar and the editorialist disagree. In either case, I would argue, the text reveals truths about Reagan and our society. Instead of claiming some polemical territory for myself (while understanding I cannot escape

the political), I will attempt to demonstrate how we might better understand what happens when ex-presidents write autobiographies by considering how they create myths of themselves that tap into larger American myths about who we are as a people, who gets included, who gets left out. I will resist O'Sullivan's apparent definition of myth, by which he seems to mean fabrication or falsehood, and forward the idea that myths, while often not factual, are indeed truthful. They are truthful in the sense that the lies, fabrications, amplifications, distortions, or fantasies a president creates about himself can be as revealing as the facts. By looking at the myths Reagan creates and the myths he taps into, and somewhat despite the troublesome generic nature of autobiography, I contend we can begin to discover (create) some meaningful sense of the text and to discover (create) some stable concept of the life and nation it (re)presents.

I say "begin to" in the previous sentence because, from the start, the genre and the political position of the writer create a critical/political quagmire even before opening An American Life. How might we view this text differently if the title had incorporated the definite article instead of the indefinite article? This question highlights an important American myth, which is the foundation of Reagan's book. If the topic of discussion is "the" American life, that suggests achievement of an ideal that stands above all other achievements in the American context. The president is the head of government and the head of state, and, because of America's position as the world's lone "superpower," the president is popularly called the leader of the free world. "The" would seem the proper choice in this context. But there is another more powerful myth operating here, the "power of the democratic idea in America--rags-to-riches--that ordinary

people...can achieve extraordinary results" (Rockman 717). The writer, I think, could have just as easily substituted "myth" for "idea."

Throughout the book, Reagan highlights the myth that ordinary people can achieve extraordinary results--an idea that plays well with American audiences used to such stories as Abraham Lincoln schooling himself, reading borrowed books by candlelight, and eventually becoming not only president but savior of his country. While the editors of Reagan's book hoped for an opening line similar to Nixon's ("I was born in the house my father built.") that taps into the log cabin myth, following a 5-page prologue Reagan opened with the ordinary man-extraordinary achievements myth: "If I'd gotten the job I wanted at Montgomery Ward, I suppose I would never have left Illinois" (19). Interestingly, he complicates this myth by ascribing his extraordinary results to two distinctly different causes that in themselves tap into other myths. First, he claims that "God has a plan for everyone and that seemingly random twists of fate are all a part of His plan." Two pages later he claims that "all men and women, regardless of their color or religion, are created equal and that individuals determine their own destiny; that is, it's largely their own ambition and hard work that determine their fate in life" (20-22). Critic Hendrick Hertzberg concluded that Reagan is "untroubled by the stark incompatibility of these two conceptions of will and destiny" (n.pag.). The body politic, however, should be troubled because this conflict in Reagan's mind had serious political repercussions.

The myth of individual achievement is strong in the United States and, to some extent for the lucky few, it is truth. Individuals with talent, or money, have risen to prominence in business and politics from modest beginnings. Many of the early presidents, including Jackson and Lincoln,

grew to prominence and power from humble roots. Starting with Jackson, who is largely responsible for the pluralist turn in American government in the early 1800s, it became fashionable for presidential candidates to claim having been born in a log cabin to prove they were men of the common people. The log cabin myth was long established by the time Lincoln, who actually was born in a log cabin, ran for office in 1860.

Reagan's title plays into this myth; indeed the title sells it before the reader ever cracks the cover. And the reader is not disappointed because Reagan, like many earlier presidents, comes from a modest background and achieved the American dream. As Hertzberg explains:

On the surface is the golden personification of the American dream: the small-town lifeguard who saved seventy-seven people from drowning, the movie star who saved the girl and the day in many a B picture, the citizen-politician who saved the conservative movement from sullen irrelevance, the triumphal president who saved his country from drift and decline.

(n.pag.)

Hertzberg qualifies his statement with "on the surface" because he maintains there is another story in the text of "stunning narcissism and unreflectiveness."

For William Berry, the autobiographer must display self-reflection and cannot help but display the narcissism (610). In many of the reviews of An American Life, critics both scholarly and popular agree with Hertzberg: Reagan tells the story of his life but fails to reflect in any meaningful way about what it means--his impact on the country and history, his influence on policy, his effect on the people, or his relationship with his family. Many reviewers claimed, quite accurately, that Reagan reveals

nothing in the text that is not otherwise available in the public record. One reviewer says the text reads like "a pile of yellowed press clippings" (Clift 36). It is left for readers to pick through the clippings and do the reflective thinking about what it means that Reagan did what he did and that we elected him twice to do it.

Susan Balee suggests that American autobiographers in general have had a dual task: "constructing themselves and building a national identity" (40). And for an ex-president, this dual construction seems to require fidelity to the yellow press clippings of the public record where we popularly assume is written the first rough draft of history and the daily record of our national identity. The model for the American autobiography, she argues, the one that clearly shows an American constructing self and national identity, is The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin precisely because it creates the myth of the self-made man in conjunction with an emerging (self-making) country. As she explains:

Franklin's autobiography not only outlived him by hundreds of years, it provided the template of the American dream as it would continue to be imagined until midway through the twentieth century. The rags-to-riches tale of the self-made man which Franklin originated in his autobiography has become a staple of American literature, both in fiction and nonfiction. In fact, revealing the secret of his material success is the reason Franklin gives for this book at all.

(55-56)

It is certainly all right to have been born in a log cabin (humble beginnings), but it is certainly not all right to remain in that condition. The American autobiography, as Balee suggests, is the narrative

of personal and national success told mostly in material terms. For ex-presidents, the material becomes the political but the movement from humbleness to notoriety (political success) remains the same. But Reagan plays both sides of the coin, claiming that success comes through destiny and will. Will the motto of the Reagan years become "God helps those who help themselves"?

Berry's thinking mirrors Balee's in that they both see within American autobiography the dual idea of self and national construction. As Berry claims,

American autobiography has been political and didactic, inextricably tied to and expressive of what the country meant to the people who were making it. That stemmed in part from the very nature of autobiography. It presents in vivid, individual terms images of particular communities, ideal and otherwise. (610)

Berry concludes that, since Franklin, American autobiographers have mostly identified with America for some fundamental idea(s) commonly thought to be American. This identification "supplies the basic theme and narrative shape of personal writing," and so the autobiography tends to celebrate the ideal and rarely to "denunciate" it (616). With Franklin as a guide, and the political, personal, and social investment one would surely have in the office of the President of the United States, it is no great leap of logic or faith to understand that presidential autobiographies fit Balee's and Berry's paradigms.

To summarize, as I begin to consider the opening myth in the Prologue to An American Life, the text should reveal Reagan's attempts to construct himself and a national identity in political ways within the context of

what America means personally to Reagan. Constructing this identity will shape the narrative. The didactic purpose should be to demonstrate the efficacy of following (mimicking) Reagan's values in order to tap into a concept (in this case political) of success. To this emerging definition of presidential autobiography, I would add that the narrative must include the mythic; it must include myths of the author that tap into and blend with standard American myths--the narratives that help blur the distinctions between president as head of government and president as head of state.

The lead editor of Reagan's book for publisher Simon & Schuster was Michael Korda. In an article he wrote for The New Yorker in 1997, Korda describes working with Reagan, and ghostwriter Robert Lindsey, to prepare the final text. Korda opens his article by claiming that "few categories are so littered with expensive failures as that of the Presidential memoir." A notable exception, however, is Grant's text which "remains among the all-time American bestsellers" (88). Korda attributes the popularity of Grant's text to a content that deals far more with the Civil War and far less with his presidency. In addition, Grant actually wrote his own book, pen in hand, sitting on his front porch, while in great pain dying from throat cancer. And he had an extra incentive to make his memoir memorable: he was broke and needed the revenue from his book to keep his family financially stable. Korda claims that, with rare exception, presidential memoirs have been "largely ghostwritten" since Grant. Eisenhower, Johnson, and Nixon used staff researchers to gather information and write portions of their books. Nixon, however, would re-write most of what his staff produced, and so he avoided the "unmistakable flatness" of ghosted prose that Korda claims is a main reason why these

texts do not sell well. Indeed, publishers "usually lose money on Presidential memoirs, but the glamour of the White House and the prospect of being a President's publisher are apparently all it takes to make book publishers go weak in the knees." Simon & Schuster believed Reagan's autobiography would be different and would sell well enough to justify the \$6 million advance, the largest given to any author at that time (88).

Despite Reagan's glowing praise of Robert Lindsey in the Acknowledgments, Lindsey complained to the editorial group that Reagan was good-natured and pleasant, but difficult to work with because he is "not a very introspective man and thus not an easy interview" (qtd. in Korda 90). Korda and Lindsey quickly discovered that in editing and consultation session, Reagan handled the project like he governed the country: "He would deal with the big problems, then go and play golf. We could settle the rest" (92). But Reagan did have two requests for his book. First, he wanted no mention of his first wife, Jane Wyman. The editors flatly refused to allow this request, so a single paragraph in the book covers the marriage.

Second, Reagan wanted to open the book with a prologue about his first meeting with Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev in which Reagan achieved the notable diplomatic goal of agreeing to two summits--one in Moscow and one in Washington D.C. The prologue deals with the Reagan-Gorbachev summit at Lake Geneva in 1985. The opening scene shows Reagan and wife Nancy looking out over the lake on a cold, gray morning, wondering what the events of the day would lead to. Reagan wrote in his diary that morning: "Lord, I hope I'm ready." (11). A few sentences later, Reagan tells his readers that nothing much was expected by Secretary of State George Schultz who told the president "that if the only thing that

[comes] out of this first meeting...[is] an agreement to hold another summit, it [will] be a success." Reagan ends the paragraph simply: "But I wanted to accomplish more than that" (12).

Reagan says he went to Geneva with a "plan" to "establish a personal relationship between the leaders of the two most powerful nations on earth." That plan was to speak to Gorbachev alone, man-to-man. He told his team he planned to ask Gorbachev to go for a walk to a nearby boat house on the lake and there speak to him directly without the interference of professional diplomats and aides. When Reagan first told the story to Korda and Lindsey, he said he met alone with Gorbachev in the boathouse--a fabrication or, perhaps, a lapse of memory because Reagan spoke no Russian and Gorbachev spoke no English. Translators had to be there, and the text as published does reflect this.

At Reagan's suggestion, the two men walked to the boathouse and did have a personal conversation, which Reagan relates as two men doing the honorable thing of speaking man-to-man and speaking in realistic terms. Reagan relates far more of his words than Gorbachev's. The dialogue portrays an American president speaking softly and carrying a big stick, as Reagan says to Gorbachev: "We have a choice....We can agree to reduce arms--or we can continue the arms race, which I think you know you can't win. We won't stand by and let you maintain weapon superiority over us. But together we can try to do something about ending the arms race" (15). Reagan pointedly states that he has been an ardent opponent of communism all his life and that he had "gone head to head with Communists who were intent on taking over our country and destroying democracy" (14).

When the two men came back from the boathouse, Reagan announces they have agreed to two more summits. Of the gathered diplomats and

politicians, Reagan says they "hadn't dreamed it was possible," but "I had extended my hand with warmth and a smile to its highest leader" and this made the impossible breakthrough possible. As Reagan concludes: "Yet I knew I hadn't changed. If anything, the world was changing, and it was changing for the better" (15).

This story taps into a powerful American myth that Berry describes: "Proud, inviolate stands the mythic American: uncontaminated by institutions and innocent of history" (613). Here we see the lone American cowboy extending his hand to the enemy, able to do so because beneath his quiet exterior is the threat of force. And while the world changes around him, he strides confidently into the sunset, sure of his actions, motives, and results.

Korda described Reagan's telling of the tale, prior to Lindsey's writing, this way:

Reagan told this story as if it were a scene from a movie, with vivid detail and real feeling--indeed, his sincerity was so obvious that all of us were touched. He was right: it was the perfect way to start the book. It was indeed a major breakthrough, for which the President deserved (and has since failed to get) full credit. There were only two problems....The first was that I wasn't sure whether either Reagan or Gorbachev was a grandfather at the time. The second was that, since Reagan spoke no Russian and Gorbachev spoke no English, they could not have been alone, 'man to man,' for a discussion. (92)

The published version corrects the notion that the two men were alone and eliminates the inaccurate statement about the men being grandfathers. A

Reagan aide confirmed the two had not been alone, rather "[t]hat's just the way the president likes to remember it" (qtd. in Korda 92). Korda concludes that Reagan "had a tendency to place himself in the foreground of events, and to confuse fiction and reality" (92). He even told stories from old movies he had been in as if they were true because "he was simply one of those born raconteurs who tell the same stories over and over again until they become truth" (93).

What is the truth of the Prologue? Indeed, the entire text? Reviewers disagree. Rockman, the political scientist, maintains that

Presidential memoirs typically produce self-serving pabulum. Ronald Reagan's are no exception....we learn little about the eight years of his administration other than what Reagan and his writers want us to know. Nor do we gain startlingly new insights about the person who occupied the presidency for the longest stretch of time since Dwight Eisenhower....Among U.S. presidents, Ronald Reagan is the least mysterious on the personal level. What he stood for and how he operated were not in the realm of state secrets. He was a president with simple, but ardently held goals. These deep convictions, however, reflect thinking that skims along the surface of first and often unshakable impressions." (716).

Should a presidential autobiography reveal "startlingly new insights?" I would say not. To be startling is to move outside the social mythos and that is just not the purpose of presidential autobiography. To be startling is to operate outside any unifying narrative that might reconcile the head of government with the head of state. "Self-serving

pabulum" it may be, but it is mythic American pabulum and telling of who we are as a people at that particular moment in history.

To review my earlier contentions, the text first should reveal Reagan's attempts to construct himself and a national identity in political ways within the context of what America means personally to Reagan. From the myth of the Prologue we see Reagan acting as guardian and savior of American democracy against an enemy he believes is out to destroy it. And he is only doing what any good American in his position would do, going head to head with the enemy and praying to the Lord that he is up to the challenge. Constructing this identity shaped the narrative by pre-positioning Reagan as American hero before his stories about saving 77 people as a youthful lifeguard. The didactic purpose is to demonstrate the efficacy of following (mimicking) Reagan's values in order to tap into concepts of success. In this case, the concepts conflict. Does Reagan enjoy his success because it was destiny or because he worked hard to achieve it. We never learn because Reagan never questions this dichotomy in the same way Americans do not question it (and did not in the rough-and-tumble 1980s). The narrative includes the mythic; it includes myths of the author that tap into and blend with standard American myths--the narratives that help blur the distinctions between president as head of government and president as head of state.

Michael Daumer sensed this social portrait when he complains, in his review for Harvard International Review, that in more than 700 pages "Reagan has little to say about homelessness, poverty, AIDS, or hunger and death in the Third World. Is this ignorance or negligence on Reagan's part?" The text "reflects the American psyche of the 1980s. From this perspective Ronald Reagan is more interesting as a phenomenon than as an

individual...Without admitting it, we all envied him and his simplemindedness, his ability to translate difficult issues into simple solutions" (58). And this, negatively stated, is exactly the myth of the Prologue.

While the Prologue does tell the story of an important diplomatic breakthrough, its focus on Reagan as lone cowboy, its marginalization of Gorbachev's role, and its simple, wondering conclusion, reveal the truth about Reagan, America, and Americans in the 1980s. The 1980s have been over-generalized, even stereotyped in the popular media as the decade of greed, when the rich got richer and more powerful. Lone-wolf investment bankers and arbitrageurs became both culture heroes and social villains in much the same way the cowboy is a conflicted American icon, alternately savior and savage depending on the circumstances.

We elected a cowboy-actor president in 1980. As head of government, he stood aloof--the cowboy silhouetted on the mountaintop--and watched governing happen as he delegated power and responsibility. But as head of state, he was the strong, self-assured cowboy riding into town to face the enemy man-to-man, with strong, even-measured words and a friendly smile if possible and with the threat of force if necessary. This same cowboy, like his townspeople, could prosper in a wide-open west because success was God's plan for the industrious--destiny and will in uneasy concert.

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