Like any text, an autobiographical text exists simultaneously in different universes of discourse. The same piece of writing may supply the psychologist with evidence, serve the sociologist as data, offer the historian information, and provide the literary critic with an artifice made solely of language to be studied in more or less exclusively literary ways. As a rule, scholars seldom approach a text in more than one universe at a time. When they make their inquiries and form their hypotheses, they normally stay within their own disciplinary boundaries and proceed on the basis of traditional assumptions. When they use information or specialized knowledge from other disciplines they are likely to do so only in approved and relatively proscribed ways. The controlled dialogue which results from such an intentionally narrowed perspective can be a mixed blessing.

Obviously it is the sharp focus a disciplinary approach provides that makes its particular kinds of insight possible. Yet that focus can act as a set of conceptual blinders. That is why—to cite an extreme example—fossil records proved one thing to fundamentalists and another to men like Lyell and Darwin. What each actually saw mattered less than the assumptions they made and the factors that influenced their perception. In a sense it is the old duck and rabbit problem writ large: if we decide to focus on one image it is extremely difficult to see the other—or others. Yet, there are those who argue that we can learn to see both visual images simultaneously if we try. I shall argue here that as literary critics we can—and should—do something quite similar with autobiographies. For, when we examine literary art in an autobio-
graphical text, I believe it is foolish to ignore the possible relationship between what we might call artistic choices in one universe of discourse and the normal operation of memory and perception in another.

Let me illustrate with an example from Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, a biography that was created in part by a series of autobiographical acts. In his journal for 16 May 1763, the day of his first meeting with Johnson, following the sentence, “I shall mark what I remember of his conversation,” Boswell penned the letter “x” and the words, “Mem. Garrick refusing an order to Mrs. Wm’s &.”¹ Some twenty-five years later when he composed the *Life* he expanded this note into nineteen lines of highly particular dialogue and reflections. It in fact became a memorable moment in his account of his first meeting with Johnson. There is no evidence that Boswell made any attempt to reconstruct the particular memories triggered by that marginal note until he actually sat down to expand it a quarter of a century later. According to Professor Frederick A. Pottle, this was a fairly common occurrence as Boswell worked on his final draft.² There is evidence, in fact, that a substantial percent of the strictly autobiographical materials in the *Life* were produced more or less whole cloth from memory during the final act of composition.³ For their shape, content, and accuracy they depended not on written records or research, but on Boswell’s reconstructive memory alone.

The implications seem obvious. If Boswell (like some biographers and most autobiographers) depended heavily upon his memory when he wrote, then we must suspect—if not assume—that the mechanics of human memory and perception played a direct role in the creation of his final text. If this is so, then some interesting possibilities arise. As a wealth of modern research makes clear, our perceptions are selective, and the principles of selection are to a certain extent unique to each of us. We perceive only a portion of what we experience, and what we perceive and preserve are only versions of what occurs in our presence. Our versions, though not lies or (usually) serious self-deceptions, heavily reflect our interests, our expectations, and our wishes. Moreover, as much clinical work now makes clear, when we have stored a perception in our long-term memories, we edit it when we store it and continue to edit it each time we recall the memory.⁴

This editing process is a creative act. Consensus among memory experts is that when we record a memory permanently, we store what they describe variously as “bits” or “fragments”—“pieces” of our experiences. When we store these bits and pieces, the brain condenses them for us, says Professor Elizabeth Loftus. The brain “seems to edit
the boring parts in order to highlight the interesting parts and cross reference them for storage." When we recall information and reconstruct a memory, our minds are equally constructive. When we successfully remember an event, Loftus says, "we can usually recall only a few concrete facts or bits and using these facts we construct other facts." We fill gaps between the bits of information unconsciously and with inferences supplied by common sense and more importantly with inferences supplied by our expectations, biases, present needs, and desires. If, as critics, we approach an autobiographical text armed with such knowledge, we possess a new source of explanatory power. Boswell's text, at least, suggests this strongly.

Scholars have been arguing for years that Boswell's biographical achievement (as distinct from his literary achievement) is flawed, because the portrait of Johnson in the *Life* is focused too exclusively on Boswell's own interests. Critics often imply that the book's focus and contents were entirely a decision of Boswell's, a matter of policy and artistic choice. He could have been more sensitive to the predictable interests of contemporary and future readers; he could have been more thorough in his researches, offered a broader spectrum of Johnson's views, a more complex and varied perspective, and so on. In general such criticisms are valid assessments of the book's limitations from a reader's point of view. But the underlying assumption about Boswell's decisions as a writer may be incorrect—or perhaps "incomplete" is a better term. For Boswell's "choices" may not have been either matters of decision or policy alone; instead, they may directly reflect the role his memory played. That the *Life* seems slanted heavily in the direction of Boswell's own interests may simply be because his memory was a more dominant factor in its final composition than we have realized.

Another issue that has puzzled literary critics is the question of Boswell's artistic treatment of important contemporaries other than Johnson in the great conversation scenes—men of the stature of Burke, Goldsmith, and Gibbon. This is an issue that pertains as much to Boswell's dramatic choices as to his presumed biographical responsibilities. Many have argued that Boswell's dramatizations of Goldsmith are slanted and that Burke and Gibbon are virtual shadow figures in the great dramatic moments at The Club at which presumably their presence and personal impact must have been more substantial. Many explanations have been tendered. There are theories of jealousy of Goldsmith, lack of compatibility with Gibbon, special care taken with Burke because of Boswell's own political ambitions. None of these
explanations is necessarily wrong; but the cause and effect relationship suggested may be. Figures like Burke and Gibbon may have the shad-owy existence they do in the great conversations in the *Life* for reasons no more mysterious than the fact that in these scenes Boswell was more often remembering than reflecting analytically upon data or con-sciously striving for this or that effect. His attention may never have been focused on Gibbon or Burke in the way that it was on Johnson, and he would have had few if any concrete memories of them to recon-struct. Moreover, his attitudes, expectations, and biases would almost certainly have colored both the editing that occurred at the moment of perception and the subsequent editing when the memory was recon-structed. If Boswell did in fact resent Goldsmith (certainly a possibil-ity) he would have viewed him from beginning through a lens tinted by this bias. The textual result might be the same as if he had con-sciously set out to undercut or slant our view of Goldsmith, but the creative process may have been preconscious rather than conscious and better understandable in terms of cognitive influences than explainable as a matter of either artistic choice or “instinct.” In certain kinds of autobiographical composition, there may be very little differ-ence between “memory art” and literary art.

The fact is that the more one studies the text of the *Life* by trying to see the cognitive duck beneath the literary rabbit, the clearer it becomes that there are many ways in which particular literary tech-niques and apparent artistic or biographical decisions seem directly affected by cognitive processes that must have influenced Boswell or anyone else who depended on his memory when he composed. As a final example here, I would point to clinical research into our ability to remember both the general content and the specific surface structure of sentences heard in conversation—a crucial issue in Boswell. Current research not only suggests the possible validity of Boswell’s claim to accurate reconstruction of Johnson’s conversation, but also identifies specific influences that almost certainly would have determined spe-cific kinds of materials Boswell was likely to have remembered and preserved most successfully. These sorts of examples raise the possi-bility of a more fundamental relationship between cognitive influences and biographical or autobiographical art.

The portrait of Johnson in the *Life* has always been considered Boswell’s major literary achievement. His book is still considered one of the world’s greatest biographies. Yet, from the beginning, it has been hard for critics to reconcile Boswell’s unquestioned literary achievement with his character and apparent intellectual abilities. We
all know that Macaulay’s famous response to this apparent paradox was to explain it by another paradox: “If Boswell had not been a great fool he would not have been a great writer.” Macaulay’s bluntness was by no means the only early response, yet for a long time the extraordinary power of the Life was explained largely as a case of literary serendipity. It was the meeting of perfectly matched biographer and subject: the fortunate collision of great weakness and great strength; idolator and idol; master recorder of dialogue and master of the brilliantly spoken word.

Modern critics have been kinder and fairer to Boswell. Unhampered by the need to excuse Boswell’s character, they have concentrated on his literary art. They have praised his style, his dramatic techniques, his mastery of the extended anecdote, his gift for dialogue and, more recently, for mythic qualities he presumably confers upon Johnson. Yet, though Macaulay’s rather brutal paradox has been rejected for years, it still contains the germ of an unsolved critical problem that ought to have been stated another way from the beginning. The question that should have been asked is not, “How could a man like Boswell create a text whose success seems so disproportionate to its author’s apparent abilities and character?” The question should be, “Why is this particular portrait of Johnson so much more powerful than the multitude of others that had been written already and that have been written since?”, a far more intriguing question.

Boswell’s art turned upon other inherently interesting subjects (Rousseau, Voltaire, Paoli, himself) is delightful but has created nothing with the enduring power or the hold on the common imagination that the portrait of Johnson in the Life has. However, in terms of categorizable techniques, it is the same kind of art. Boswell produced another major portrait of Johnson—in the Tour to the Hebrides. It was highly successful in his own day. History has treated it well and deservedly; it is a fine and powerful book. But I think all but the most die-hard admirer would agree that, by itself, it would not have produced the kind of imaginative impact on generations of readers that the portrait of Johnson in the Life has. Macaulay himself sensed the difference between the two portraits, as his famous review of Croker’s edition of the Life makes clear. As I have argued elsewhere, I believe the two portraits are apples and oranges; there are fundamental differences between the apparent purpose and the effect of Boswell’s art in each.

If the answer is not Boswell’s art alone, then—one might argue—it must be his great subject, Johnson, after all. Yet, if so, then why the
difference between Boswell's two major treatments of the same subject? Or, if we are unwilling to concede the existence of a truly significant difference between the portraits of Johnson in the *Tour* and the *Life*, then why hasn't Johnson been an equally powerful subject in the hands of other writers? If it is not Boswell's art alone that explains the difference between his and all other portraits of Johnson, and if it is not his subject alone (since Johnson has been so many people's subject) the crucial factor almost has to be Boswell himself. Not Boswell the literary artist viewed in a disciplinary vacuum but Boswell the unique medium of perception with a remarkable ability to dramatize those perceptions.

The past few decades have seen literally dozens of attempts to provide purely literary explanations of Boswell's achievement in the *Life*. Critics have pointed out patterns of significant difference between original journals and final text, and explained those differences in literary terms: they were artistic choices Boswell made—consciously or instinctively—in order to create this or that effect. The questions I think most worth asking now are, "What if many of Boswell's artistic decisions weren't choices or decisions in the ordinary senses in which we use those terms? What if the actions of Boswell's pen were surprisingly direct extensions of the 'editing' that occurred as he reconstructed autobiographical Johnsonian memories, gave them their final form and meaning, as he ironed out discrepancies, and smoothed potential rough spots in the rest of the text? That is, what if in circumstances especially common to autobiography there is no fundamental difference between what a literary critic would call imposing meaning and coherence and what a cognitive psychologist would call resolving cognitive dissonance? What if in some cases there is, in fact, a very direct connection?"

I would argue that the influence of common cognitive processes—specifically, Boswell's memory—is a plausible explanation for the transcendent literary power of the *Life*—just as surely as it is a plausible explanation for many of the book's most famous limitations. As has oft been pointed out, readers have never gone to the *Life* for information or penetrating analysis. It is the vision or idea of Johnson the book projects that has always captured readers' imaginations. Partly, of course, this is because of the power of Boswell's dramatic art, the art that gets his vision off the page and into our imaginations. But what is the source of the vision itself? As we have noted, those same artistic techniques employed upon other subjects produced no comparable effect. In fact, the same art turned upon the same subject but at a different
time produced nothing exactly comparable. I suspect that Boswell made Johnson the enduring symbol he did when he wrote the *Life* precisely because his perception and memory played so direct a role as he composed. It seems likely that the most direct influences on his art occurred first as he sought, traced, located, and reconstructed memories and then as his memory repeatedly added to the core of the original recollections, affecting their shape and conferring new meaning upon them, "stirring the dull roots," as Eliot suggests, "mixing memory with desire." If this is true, then it simply may not make sense to separate what in various universes of discourse we might call an artist's vision, a biographer's conception, and the normal operations of memory and perception at a particular time. As we know, the time when Boswell composed the *Life* was a particular moment indeed. The story of his profound despondency, Edmond Malone's kind and crucial intervention and the sanitive effects of working on the *Life* are too well known to need great elaboration; it was the psychic crucible in which the image of Johnson in the *Life* was created and must have made the needs (which influenced Boswell's remembering) more pressing and acute.

To a literary critic, the art on the page is the most familiar and accessible source of explanations for a book's power, and for many modern critics it is all we know in life and all we need to know. But the portrait of Johnson in the *Life* has had the impact it has had because it evokes deeply sympathetic responses and it meets readers' psychic needs that lie too deep for the artifice and the surface structures alone to explain. The human needs that influenced Boswell's perception of Johnson as he composed the *Life* were fundamental needs: a need for firm values, certitude, dignity, intellectual independence, the need to believe the world can be rationalized, a conviction of the value of human life and endeavor. When Boswell passed his memories through the prism of his wishes and satisfied those wishes with his art he satisfied some of our deepest and most abiding wishes, too. His oft-analyzed literary techniques make this "response" unusually accessible to our imaginations, but the shape of the idea—the vision of Johnson itself—and the source of its enduring power come from deeper down. The serendipity that produced the *Life*, therefore, is not simply the meeting of technically ideal biographer and subject. I believe it is the fact that when Boswell composed that great work his memory played as active a role as it did and that he was the particular kind of medium of perception he was.

The implications for students of autobiography may be vast. "The image of the self," says Professor Agnes Hankiss, "is never just a sim-
pie reflection of the experiences related to the self: it always includes a specific response to the ‘Why’ of the development of the self.”

Everyone builds his or her own theory about the history and course of his or her own life . . . Specific mechanisms are involved in this building process. Human memory selects, emphasizes, rearranges and gives new colour to everything that happened in reality; and, more important, it endows certain fundamental episodes with symbolic meaning, often to the point of turning them almost into myths, by locating them at a focal point of the explanatory system of the self. It is through this system that what a person has to say about himself is expressed in a particular way . . . this mythological rearranging plays a specific instrumental role within the self-regulatory system of the psyche which allows the subject to smoothly incorporate his past and his own life-history into the strategy or “script,” of his present life.12

As Professor Hankiss explains, autobiographical acts are among the most common human acts. Whether we write them down or not, we perform them continuously as we rewrite our pasts to solve problems or achieve psychic equilibrium in the present. When we cast our lives in the form of stories and especially when we decide to write those stories down, I believe that the connections between the literary techniques we use and the psychic needs that provoke them are direct. The thrust of Professor Hankiss’s brief article is that when people decide to tell or write their own stories, there is a limited number of basic plots or scenarios they will use. She singles out four of the commonest recurrent patterns and describes the narrative structures basic to each. For the student of autobiography, Hankiss’s basic patterns offer tantalizing echoes of the better-known plots of many classic autobiographies. More significant is her demonstration of how fundamentally human the act of “scripting” or imposing explanatory patterns upon one’s life really is, how conventional and predictable.

Hankiss’s research was based on detailed interviews with hundreds of ordinary people. But what about the extraordinary people the literary critic is likely to be more familiar with—the Mills, Gosses, Nabokovs and St. Augustines of the world? Obviously they share a common humanity with Hankiss’s subjects and yet they bring to the process of self-mythologizing highly sophisticated combinations of intelligence, self-awareness, awareness of historical, philosophical, and literary contexts and models, and a heightened ability to articulate their perceptions and dramatize their own stories. “The adult person’s life-model,” says Professor Hankiss, “is probably the result of numerous ‘mutations,’ key events either personal or historic in nature, which
constantly lead or force that person to select new models, a new strategy of life.”13 Where do these models and strategies come from? Obviously many of them come from literature and the various visual media, from current myth or myths ratified by tradition. It is no accident, I think, that Gosse’s Father and Son is a version of the portrait-of-the-artist story typical of much fiction written in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. It is not mere coincidence that Wordsworth’s “growth of a poet’s mind,” Mill’s history of his intellectual crisis, and Newman’s Apologia have broadly comparable plots, share structural characteristics, and reflect a common version of the self and self-development. If it is true that common cognitive processes shape the autobiographies we write, it may be equally true what we read and assimilate from the culture may influence our cognitive processes—the roles we perceive ourselves as playing, the patterns we impose on our lives and the nature of the editing we do when we remember. Motivated on the one hand by very common—even innate—impulses to “mythologize,” the particular versions we create of our lives may imitate art more routinely and more directly than Oscar Wilde imagined.

For literary critics, the lesson seems clear. If we accept the existence of connections between the common cognitive processes that apparently underlie the human act of telling or “using” one’s own story and the literary texts that sometimes result, then it seems necessary to accept the importance of finding out more about these cognitive processes. The possibilities for skepticism are, of course, endless. One sort of skeptic might suggest that what I am proposing is to bring back a thinly disguised version of the old biographical approach to literary criticism. Particular biographical knowledge is potentially relevant in the sense in which I invoked it in the discussion of Boswell. However, what I am actually suggesting is generic criticism: a better understanding of the way all men’s minds work when they perform autobiographical acts. As literary critics, the more we know about how our minds work when we autobiographize, the better we will understand the purely literary result.

Perhaps we can ultimately understand more. The mystery of the creative process is the El Dorado of literary theorists. I am not persuaded that it will ever be found where fiction, music, and painting are concerned. Autobiography may be another matter. Producing great fictional art is not a common or an ordinary human act, but self-mythologizing definitely is. If we have a good understanding of the cognitive processes involved in ordinary autobiographical acts and can
combine that with our knowledge of the dynamics of particular texts, we may come as close as it is possible to come to a cause and effect explanation of a writer's creative process.

Another sort of skeptic might argue that to bring this sort of out-of-disciplinary information to bear upon a literary text will destroy our pleasure in it as literature. We will end up murdering its beauty by dissecting it in this way. There is no absolutely definitive rebuttal to this kind of criticism, because such attitudes often reflect common biases not easily susceptible to argument, persuasion, or proof. I believe, however, that knowledge from the cognitive sciences is far more likely to mystify literary texts than the reverse. Though mind and brain are still vast unmapped territories, current clinical work suggests that as our knowledge increases, so will our respect and sense of wonder. More important, literary criticism is in fact not surgery and it never hurts to remind ourselves that many a text has been murdered in completely orthodox literary ways. Theories kill fewer texts than theoreticians do.

Let me conclude, therefore, with the following observations. It is still possible to argue that a literary text can be treated in isolation from literally everything: from its historical period, its textual history, and even from its author's presumed intentions. It seems to me extremely foolish to treat autobiography thus. Autobiographies are not technically dependent on memory; they are literally so. If an autobiographer makes implicit or specific claims about the role memories have played in his or her text and if clinical research can be found to support or qualify those claims, then it seems foolish not to know about it and take it into account. If most people's self-mythologizings produce "stories" of their lives that fall into a few basic and recurrent patterns (and if those patterns have differed at different historical periods) then it seems obvious that it is important for a student of autobiography to know about them. We possess valuable information if we know either that this or that classic text exemplifies a relatively standard pattern, or that it deviates from ordinary patterns in ways we did not anticipate. Obviously it is vital to understand how memory and perception work. There is perhaps much to be learned from the students of self-presentation. And so on.

Our attitude is as important as specific knowledge. When I was involved in an earlier investigation of the role played by Boswell's memory in the making of the Life of Johnson, I wrote to Professor Elizabeth Loftus (whom I have quoted above) and she was good enough to read a draft of my paper from the point of view of a psychologist and
student of memory. I was almost as interested by the tone of her responses as by the extremely useful suggestions she made. She said that she had enjoyed the background articles I had sent her (one by myself and one by Pottle), and, in a very matter-of-fact way, she expressed surprise at Pottle's and my quite typical literary-critical claims that Boswell's memory was "remarkable." We were unduly impressed with Boswell's memory she said, "because of the extensive circumstantial detail." She then pointed out that "the accuracy of memory and the completeness of a memory are two different things. . . . Nothing that I read in the Pottle piece (or yours), convinces me that Boswell's memory is all that incredible." If so, that's news to most Boswell scholars. It is also a healthy corrective. Loftus did not say that Boswell's art or literary achievement were not remarkable. She said only that the acts of memory he performs are commoner than we imagine. I am not less impressed by Boswell's art or his achievement in the Life because I know this; I am only impressed by slightly different things. That is the way, I believe, the altered perspective provided by taking relevant cognitive factors into account as a literary critic would work. It need not demystify autobiographical literature. It might explain a great deal and prevent us from mystifying the wrong things.

Psychologist R. D. Laing—in a different context—states the situation nicely. "The same thing seen from different points of view," he reminds us,

gives rise to two entirely different descriptions, and the descriptions give rise to two entirely different theories, result in two entirely different sets of action. The initial way we see a thing determines all our subsequent dealings with it. If we look only for the duck, we will never see the rabbit. Literary autobiographical statement seems so directly influenced by common cognitive process and vice versa that it seems silly to talk about one without knowing something about the other (an assertion, I suggest, that is as true for psychologists as for literary critics). And since an autobiographical text, like any text, will only speak to us in the critical languages in which we address it, why not learn as many critical languages as we can?

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NOTES

2. Confirmed in a conversation with Professor Frederick A. Pottle.
3. Pottle (in the same conversation) asserts that there is no evidence that Boswell ever expanded this note (or others like it) elsewhere until he began to compose the draft of the *Life* in July 1786. It is even possible that the note itself was not written till the time the *Life* was written. According to Professor Marshall Waingrow (in a conversation on October 5, 1987), this note, and others like it, may have been made as Boswell reviewed his journals in preparing to write the draft of the *Life*. That is, the reading of the journal may have triggered the memorandum. In either case, the role played by Boswell's memory is obviously crucial.

4. In this and the following discussion of the nature of memory I depend heavily on three excellent sources, each of which provides a concentrated and highly readable summary of current work. These sources are Elizabeth Loftus, *Memory* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1980); George Ojemann and William Calvin, *Inside the Brain* (New York: Mentor, 1980); and Morton Hunt, *The Universe Within: A New Science Explores the Human Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

5. Loftus, p. 27.


13. Hankiss, p. 204.