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## **Changing Faces of Heroism: Some Questions Raised by Contemporary Autobiography**

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### Abstract

Autobiography has most commonly been a matter of lengthy retrospect on a dignified life and has assumed appropriately heroic patterns. Many contemporary autobiographies, in contrast, describe unfinished crises in the undervalued lives of minorities and need, accordingly, to evolve new patterns for autobiography. Defining and valuing one's own perspective and life represent a modern form of heroism.

SUSANNA EGAN

## Changing Faces of Heroism: Some Questions Raised by Contemporary Autobiography

### THE HEROIC MIND

Much of the study of autobiography so far has concentrated on the major works of the past. Saint Augustine, Gibbon, Rousseau, De Quincey, Newman, Franklin, Adams—the exemplars have mostly been men, and very distinguished men at that. Whatever their personal difficulties, they received strong support for their achievements: they were, for the most part, educated members of a prosperous middle class, from whom family and society expected much. The success they enjoyed was not always of the kind that was expected, but therein lay their idiosyncrasy. Most of these writers were members of a social or cultural elite and success in some form was no great surprise.

Furthermore, when they came to write their autobiographies, they were assured of an attentive audience. Even in those cases in which the audience was to be persuaded to alter its opinion of the writer, its interest was ensured. The autobiography usually arrived at the end of a distinguished career, the subject often well known. These men tended to write from the vantage point not only of old age but also of recognized achievement. They wrote, indeed, to document and explain what their readers already knew. Their perspective provided a teleological determinism whereby the autobiographer described how he ended up where we know him to be. The result, of course, is an absence of purely random events because the foreknown conclusion and the varying public nature of the subject's past both conspired to a selection of events whose purpose and meaning were clear.



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