We met at nine . . .  
We met at eight . . .  
I was on time . . .  
No, you were late . . .  
Ah yes, I remember it well.  
—Alan Jay Lerner, from Gigi

As little over a year ago, my brother-in-law introduced me to a young woman who had moved into his neighborhood. She was a novelist, he said (“Not yet,” she interjected, “I’m working on my first novel”), and I, he told her, was a memoirist. I immediately felt a need to exonerate myself. What was this discomfort about? In part, no doubt, guilt by association with liars: the James Frey scandal was still in the news. But that can’t be the whole of it. After all, there are impostors who write novels as well. No, the question leads me directly down the murky paths of memory that give the much abused genre its name.

When I was a boy, I had a father who lived on another continent, and another father—a stepfather, actually, but I thought of him as my father—with whom I lived. Both were writers. From both, in different ways, I received the idea of writing as a noble profession.

This vaguely aristocratic notion was not as foreign to the Marxist society I lived in—Communist East Germany—

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as American readers might suppose. When I was seventeen, I dropped out of high school and signed up as a bricklayer’s apprentice. At the orientation meeting, the master, addressing his students, said: “Masonry is a noble profession.” He meant that we would be building homes, schools, and hospitals, not just making a living. But the vocation of writing, as I understood it from the examples of my two fathers and from the hundreds of books in our house, was one of constructing a fit habitation for the mind, and a beautiful one, if my talent allowed it; indeed for the spirit as well as the mind, as the two are denoted in German by the single word “Geist.” So writing wasn’t a trade like other trades, because it was noble in a different sense that everyone, even the unread, acknowledged. Literature mattered supremely.

I was still in school when I read a novella by my American father. Or rather: I cut classes from school and took to the woods to read it. It was about a boy, roughly my age, who played truant from his parochial school on Good Friday, roaming the woods before dawn in the company of some rude classmates instead of keeping a vigil for the betrayed and crucified Jesus. There was a phrase near the beginning—“The night smelled like new milk”—that enchanted me. I knew that delicious smell, because every few days I rode a bike to a farm where you could buy fresh, unpasteurized milk that was sometimes still warm from the cow, so that on the way home, in the winter, steam rose from the can. But that it was “new” milk, not “fresh,” and that night in the woods had a scent (which I knew but did not know I knew till I read it), and that milk could be said to have something of night in its nature—all this surprised and excited me as no written words had done before.

My stepfather’s writing did not inspire me. This is, for me, a sad fact to
confess, because it must have caused him deep sorrow. It wasn't due to lack of talent on his part; there is much in his books that interests and moves me today. He wrote novels about the German men and women who opposed the Nazis and who kept alive, in that darkest of times, the dream of a better Germany. But by the time I read his books, in the mid-Fifties, that dream had become the myth of the state, and his characters' most sincere thoughts were unpleasantly echoed by the slogans and homilies of officialese. His truth had become a lie, and he knew it, though he couldn't admit it to himself. The expression of his mouth became bitter. He chain-smoked and drank incessantly. Writing became a visible torment to him.

It was when he was younger and I was a child that he represented to me the noble idea of the writer. It had nothing to do with the words he wrote, or with his political faith. Nor was it a performance. I was sometimes allowed to read in his study, but I was not to disturb his concentration under any circumstances. This was his work—that quintessentially adult activity. Naturally, I was curious about the difference between that and my own occasional writing, which was always for fun and to show off later, to him and my mother, the poem or fantasy I had written. It was hard to tell what the difference was, since he wrote in German, a foreign language to me at the time. He wrote by hand, as I did, but in a minuscule gothic script, crossing out many words and filling his wastebasket with rejected drafts. For long periods, he didn't write at all but sat with his face slightly raised and his eyes open, as if listening, or waiting. Sometimes he appeared to be smiling. At other times he looked worried, or frowned intensely.

When his texts were ready, he dictated them to a fast-typing secretary. Sometimes he dictated texts without listening, or waiting. Sometimes he appeared to be conversationally, and proffering, above all—knowledge of first things, which, I was convinced, could not be attained by accepting the hearsay of either philosophers or prophets, but only by direct experience. In exchange I would forfeit my common humanity, my ordinariness. I was deeply ashamed of being ordinary. It seemed a wager worth making. Not that I knew I was making a wager, but that's what it was.

A chemical substance, lysergic acid diethylamide, became my Mephistopheles, proffering beauty beyond all imagination, and proffering, above all—because I wanted it above all—knowledge of first things, which, I was convinced, could not be attained by accepting the hearsay of either philosophers or prophets, but only by direct experience. In exchange I would forfeit my common humanity, my ordinariness. I was deeply ashamed of being ordinary. It seemed a wager worth making. Not that I knew I was making a wager, but that's what it was.

LSD promised entry, as well, to the terrifying realm into which my younger brother was being drawn by a mental illness for which there appeared to be no cure. Maybe I could walk in there, clear-eyed and unafraid, take him by the hand, and show him the way out. Or, if that was not possible—but this would have been the darkest, least conscious of motives, and I suspect it only now, and can't be sure of it—maybe, by the magic of acid, we could trade places: I would be mad, and he could live out the life of a writer. For he was prodigiously gifted, especially as a playwright, and I was guilty of undeserved good fortune and needed absolution.

I wasn't able to save my brother. He died by his own hand at the age of twenty-seven. And I, Doctor Faustus, who had given up writing to conduct raids on the unthinkable, found myself compelled to think myself God the creator, an impotent god at the hub of an endlessly suffering, deathless, and infinite universe that was at the same time myself—eternal damnation, eternal rapture—until, locked up in a prison cell in East London with a thuggish Englishman who demanded my attention at all hours of the day, I was gently deposited on the shores of sanity, miraculously unscathed, as my blessedly ordinary, always provisional, everyday self.

After the nightmare was over, I thought: "You must write about this. You will never find better material." But I couldn't write about it. The thought of revealing to anyone what I had gone through terrified me. I would be the laughingstock of the neighborhood, and, with any success, of the city, the nation, the world. These fears were aftershocks of the disaster, of course, but they were also clear warning signs to desist.

"I could disguise it," I thought. "Make it a novel. The Faust novel you always wanted to write." But every fictional disguise I could think of merely drove home the realization that the story I had lived was itself a novel, already written and perfectly plotted in a perverted language of feeling and memory, needing only to be set in words. Or could I tell it in the third person, about someone other than myself? It wasn't possible: the pronoun "I" would not be replaced by any other. And it wasn't just anyone's "I," it was mine. The subject of this novel—in both senses of the word "subject"—was my self. I dared not write it.

Then one day, as I was reading Robert Lowell's autobiographical Life Studies, I came across a sentence describing the poet as an eight-year-old: "Whenever a girl came near me, my whole person cringed like a sponge wrung dry by a clenching fist." The sentence performed itself in my body,
transporting me with thrilling immediacy to an encounter in the carpeted lobby of a hotel in St. Petersburg, which at the time I was remembering—1948—was still called Leningrad. I was eight years old. A little girl in a sailor suit passed me with her parents as I passed her with mine. I cringed, she stuck out her tongue—impossible to say which came first. I looked up from Lowell’s book and felt a gust of relief to say which came first. I looked up from Lowell’s book and felt a gust of relief.

I made a surprising discovery in the course of writing that book. I learned that to remember is, at least in part, to imagine, and that the act of transposing memory into written words is a creative act that transforms the memory itself. This troubled me at first, because I had only recently obligated myself to a documentarian ethos under the oddly mixed influence of André Breton’s diatribes against fiction and my father’s demand, at the beginning of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, that the artist suspend or destroy imagination so as to perceive “the cruel radiance of what is.” But “is” becomes “was” in the blink of an eye, and memories are shadows. To recapture the radiance that had cast those shadows, I had no recourse except to imagine a host of possible and probable details, reluctantly at first and then with increasing confidence and freedom.

Today, for that reason, I find it difficult to disentangle the memories I had before writing Twelve Years from those I created by writing it. Was it memory or imagination, for instance, that, in the first paragraph, dressed a German harbor pilot in a black raincoat and, in the last one, endowed a kleptomaniacal friend with “a black trenchcoat he has recently stolen”? The neat aesthetic bracketing certainly looks suspicious, but I know I didn’t create that effect on purpose, and it certainly feels as if I remember black coats on both occasions—but I’m not sure. On the other hand, in a scene I believe I invented in order to depict the dismay of East Germany’s intellectual elite as they learned of an imminent ban on nude bathing, there are several details that ring so true in an intimate, déjà vu sort of way that I am half inclined to assume the scene was taken from memory after all.

When Twelve Years was finished and approaching publication, I learned that it was going to be called a memoir. The word had a plushy, haute-bourgeois aura. Wasn’t this the kind of thing prime ministers wrote? Also, the term would saddle the book with one of those catchpenny subtitles. “Can’t we call it a novel?” I asked my editor. He said it wasn’t a novel: novels are works of fiction. “But it isn’t really non-fiction either,” I said. And I began to explain. “Then you’ll have to write a disclaimer,” he said.

My disclaimer for Twelve Years takes up half a page. The first sentence is: “Everything in this book is true, but not everything is precisely factual.” One reviewer, Robert Coles, found this line of apology strange:

Why the distinction between truth and factuality? Mr. Agee is not a journalist, has no intention of documenting the facts of a given news story. He is relying upon a kind of witness—his memory, as it has been shaped by a moral intelligence. Ought we now ask our children to keep tape recorders handy, lest in future years they stumble into the terrible trap of “fiction” as they try to recall a conversation or a moment of action? Subjectivity and imagination have yet to be declared enemies of what is “true.”

Those words were written in 1981. Much has happened since then. An army of truth tellers has conquered large numbers of the dwindling faithful who still read books. Confession, in print and on TV, is fast becoming the primary public mode in which human interiority speaks and is heard. The self-avowed lies of fiction are no longer in fashion. Everyone is writing memoirs. Subjectivity and imagination seem to be declared enemies of what is “true.”

In point of fact, some of their labors—the ones performed gratuitously and unhidden, without our...
knowing—are less menial than one might suppose. The simplest acts of remembering, in daily life, are accomplished to a very great extent by the imagination; or, to put it more bluntly, what we think we remember is largely made up. According to Daniel Gilbert, professor of psychology at Harvard University, a great number of experiments in laboratory and field settings have “left most scientists convinced of two things. First, the act of remembering involves ‘filling in’ details that were not actually stored; and second, we generally cannot tell when we are doing this because filling in happens quickly and unconsciously.” I was recently given a startling demonstration of this when I reread something I had written with the most earnest intention of sticking to the facts.

I have for several years been keeping a journal in which I record moments when the mind, seemingly awake in broad daylight, becomes aware of its dream-weaving activity. Some worry or obsession will rise to consciousness and, seen through as the mind-made mirage, evaporate like a mirage. Sometimes this shift results in a blissful state of carefree and effortless presence that may last for seconds or an hour by the clock’s measure but has no duration in subjective experience. At other times, instead of dissipating the daydream, the attention follows it in a kind of aesthetic rapture. The mind is lucid and dreaming at the same time. These experiences, too, I describe in writing. The descriptions are not literary efforts. The truth of the matter is all that matters: how this particular awakening happened, what was the sequence of events.

On July 6, 1999, I described in this journal how, sitting on my bed, I had remembered, or thought I remembered, a phrase by Meister Eckhart: “Jeder Augenblick ist eine neue Geburt”—Every moment is a new birth. Had he really said that? “Augenblick” suggested seeing (the word, meaning “moment,” translates literally as “eye-glance”). Was seeing an act?

“At that moment,” I wrote, “a bunched part of the sheet took on the appearance of a dramatically shaped iceberg. It wasn’t a hallucination. That is, I never lost sight of the sheets and the bed, never forgot where I was. But the iceberg became part of a larger landscape that reminded me of Caspar David Friedrich’s painting of a ship sinking among ice floes. It was that real, that magnificent. This happened yesterday morning. I still remember the sight clearly.” There follows a lengthy description of the spectacular view as it took shape before my eyes, followed by an attempt to explain my awed sense, after a ringing telephone dispelled the vision, of having partaken “in an order of spontaneous creativity and intelligence to which ordinarily I have only a primitive, rudimentary connection.”

Three months later, on October 18, I recalled that experience but forgot that I had already described it. Confident of my powers of recollection, I began as follows: “Several weeks ago, an astonishing experience looking at a patch of bunched and crumpled sheets on my bed. I was thinking of Blake and the central role he gives the imagination—the contempt he had for conventional perception—which was probably what led me to look at those folds differently. I noticed colors, first of all—shades of blue and gray in the white that reminded me of Cézanne’s tablecloths. But the bulges and dips in the sheet recalled Chinese landscapes…” And so on. No mention of Friedrich’s ice floes or Meister Eckhart. The entry ends like this: “In a deliberate act of regression, I pretended these were tall mountains, deep gorges, and, like a child, walked two fingers into this terrain, with adventuresome emotion. Don’t recall how I moved out of that state. I believe it was a decision.”

How naive of me to suppose that I could track down a past moment of reverie and precisely recover it in words. I find it impossible to determine which of these two records is the more accurate one, because together they constitute all the memory that is left of the event.

It took me twenty years to write my second book. When I began it, I assumed I would complete it in two or three years. Since it was already written in memory, all I needed to do, I still was convinced, was translate it into language.

But something other than memory claimed my attention from the beginning. I don’t know what to call it, because, not being a memory, it has no content. It could be described as a vertical dimension, a sense of the height and depth of experience. And the way it is felt, it stands perpendicular to the horizontal plane of time. Perhaps the right name for it is “I.” I have often wondered at the regal appearance of this little word—as tall and upright as any royal “We”—like an announcement, inscribed in written usage of the English tongue, that Everyone is, in his true “I,” a King, and Everywoman a Queen, Everychild, for that matter, a royal personage; and this long before revolutions attempted the bloody enforcement of this truth as a political program.

Writing my memories gave time the appearance of a river. It flowed onward and forward, broad and unhurried. That was because the story started at midstream, when my character, Joel, sometimes also called “I,” was in his twenties. Where was he going? He had no idea, but I did. He was going on a downward spiral toward the discovery of the true “I,” about which no story can be told, because it is the witnessing mirror of life, forever unaltered by the scenes that pass through it. Downward because, in the topography of the soul, that is where the hell realms are. Even in hell, one can find the jewel without price. On the way there, he would pass through relationships, places, adventures, ordeals, all grist for the story-telling mill. But he would arrive at his destination in a region to which memory could have no access.

To achieve this descent in the writing, I would need a guide. He presented himself as a Mephistophelian spirit, half trickster, half sage, who was at home with the unspeakable and knew how to talk about it as well. He called himself my Counterpoint. From time to time he took over the narration. Together we discoursed about the questions that concerned Joel, and also myself, the narrator who was writing the book, sitting at his desk in Brooklyn. But was this narrator myself? Of course not. He, too, was a fictive “I.”

Fictive, as well, was the motive I gave him: to release the ghosts of past terrors—my own and my brother’s—by writing his way into the house of his fear. I experienced no fear while writ-
ing the book, but I needed my narrator to feel some trepidation. I gave him the anxieties I had had ten years earlier, when I had been unable to approach this material. There were other inventions as well. When asked what parts of the book are not strictly, factually, "true," I say that's my secret. I should add that I contrive only probabilities. There are improbable events in the book, but they were written by life. Can I be sure of that? Yes, to the best of my recollection.

Despite the lesson in taxonomy I had received with Twelve Years, I was convinced that In the House of My Fear could not and should not be published as a memoir. My publisher didn't agree. So I enumerated my reasons:

First, the book simply wasn't a memoir, because it didn't confine itself to the reports of memory, and because it wove facts and inventions together in an improvised form that was governed by aesthetic considerations alone. Second, because memoirs are invariably thought of as "memoirs of . . .", mine would perforce be a "memoir of the Sixties"—misleadingly, since in my book that particular carnival, along with the world in which it was performed, disappears in the magic theater of a mind lost in self-referential delusion. Third, by 2004, when the book was approaching publication, the memoir had become a subliterary genre, the publishing equivalent of daytime TV. But my strongest, most anxiously held objection was that the "non-fiction" rubric, to which memoirs are automatically relegated, would exile my book from the precincts of literature and reduce it to a kind of gossipy entertainment with subsidiary value as a source of counsel or information about drugs or mental illness.

On the other hand, how could I call it a novel? It was a story about real people and actual events. Yet it wasn't a "non-fiction novel." Maybe "true novel" was a viable term.

I spoke with a German friend about this. He was surprised by the quandary in which I had been put by two English words, "fiction" and "non-fiction." He knew their meaning, but he wondered how a work of literature could be defined by such categories.

"Is Goethe's Dichtung und Wahrheit non-fiction?" he asked.
"Yes, because it's an autobiographical work," I said.
"But it's a novel," he said.
"In Germany, yes, but here it's a memoir."
"And all the time I thought Germans were rigid."

Only then did I realize what he was getting at: Goethe's full title, Fiction and Truth from My Life, revealed the artifice of the dichotomy. How could anyone separate imagination from truth in an honest attempt to give a narrative account of a life? And yet the categories into which written works of this nature are pressed, not only in America but throughout the English-speaking world, insist on just such a division.

The German book market (I speak of Germany because I am familiar with that country's culture, but similar arrangements are made elsewhere in Europe) divides books into two different categories, Belletristik and Sachbücher. Belletristik means belles lettres and comprises all works of literary art, including poetry, irrespective of merit. Sachbücher is a term for which no English equivalent exists, but if there were one, it would be something like "about-books." There are, of course, about-books that qualify as literature, and there are countless novels that don't, so this arrangement is not fully adequate. But for the discussion of autobiographical writing, it encourages useful distinctions. Edmund Hillary's memoir of climbing Mount Everest is an about-book. Maxim Gorky's My Childhood is a work of literature.

I first read Gorky's wonderful book in Germany, where it is commonly referred to as a novel. Novels are not by definition works of fiction. Cordelia Edvardson's Burned Child Seeks the Fire, for instance, published here as a Holocaust memoir, appeared in Germany (and earlier in Sweden, where it was first published) as a novel. That was meant to signify not that the contents of the book were invented but that its author was an artist who had shaped her materials as novelists do.

All these deliberations foundered against the fiat of the marketplace, which my publisher delivered to me with a courteous firmness that would brook no argument. Presented as fic-

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tion, my amphibious book risked rejection by at least one of the major book chains. Under cover of "memoir," it would pass. Reluctantly, I agreed to subtitle it "A Memoir." But I came to regret that decision.

A few months ago, through the "Google Alerts" program, I was directed to a notice from MSN Shopping. There was a picture of the cover of In the House of My Fear and, beneath it, under "Product details":

Subject: Substance Abuse & Addictions—General
Pages: 00416
Dewey: B
Subject: Mental Illness

For curiosity's sake, I searched MSN Shopping for the title of Jonathan Lethem's The Fortress of Solitude, a charming novel that could be crudely described as a semi-autobiographical coming-of-age story involving a friendship between a white and a black boy, set in Brooklyn in the 1970s. Under "Product details," it said:

Subject: Literary

From the purgatorial gloom of "non-fiction," this looks like a glimpse of heaven. But it's not in my nature to re-pine for long, and besides, I can claim that heaven for myself. And it would be peevish of me not to take pleasure with a big gray wolf at his heels: literature was born on the day when a boy crying wolf, wolf came running out of the Neanderthal valley and, besides, I can claim heaven. But it's not in my nature to regret that decision.

Who, then, speaking of literature, has the organ of perception, the receptive talent, to experience the magic? The reader, of course—the good reader. Here, definition is possible, which is why Nabokov does so much better with this than he did with his trope of the boy who cried wolf. "The good reader," he says, "is one who has imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense."

I like the "some." It is a moderate requirement that can be met by many, provided their minds are not warped by too much and the wrong kind of schooling. But that is a subject for another essay.

I just bought a biography of the French writer and aviation pioneer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the author of The Little Prince. I remember him more for his Wind, Sand and Stars, a book that set me on fire with the desire to write when I first read it at the age of sixteen. In the store, I searched the biography's index hoping to find confirmation of a story my stepfather, Bodo Uhshe, had told me about how, in his role as political commissar on the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War, he had interrogated a presumed fascist adventurer whose plane had been shot down, and who turned out to be Saint-Exupéry. It seems possible now, even probable, that Bodo indulged in "creative non-fiction" to entertain me, and to make me admire him. It certainly was a colorful story. Should I regret that I retold it in my second book? And did I remember it rightly—that is, as he told it—false though it probably was? I trust that no harm has been done to any significant truth. Do I mind that he (possibly, probably) told me a falsehood in the first place? Not at all; this news fills me with fresh affection for him.

As to my other father, James Agee, I have long suspected that he departed here and there from his militant program of absolute facticity in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, especially in an episode titled "At the Forks," where he meets three people who, he says, "were of a kind not safely to be described in an account claiming to be unimaginative or trustworthy," because, he explains, "they had too much and too outlandish beauty not to be legendary," and whom he then proceeds to describe with a plasticity and immediacy and all but supernatural acuity of optic calibration that I find difficult to believe as "unimaginative" reproductions of memory, and quite possible to conceive of as dazzling effects of poetic legerdemain. Here is what I think he did: frustrated by the erasures of memory, especially by the clichés it makes of even familiar, beloved faces, he took physiognomic cues from two, perhaps three of Walker Evans's portrait photographs at the beginning of the book, disguising them (as he had to in order to keep his cover) by subtracting from them all ambiguity of expression and amplifying and idealizing the hints and withholdings of scorn, hurt, pride, and terror that suggest themselves in their features.

That, of course, is my imagining, and I have no proof of it, and only slim evidence. But reading the story either way—as a fiction cunningly disguised in documentary garb or as the heroic feat of documentation that it purports to be—what I find impossible to question is these demigods' ferocious claim to existence in my consciousness, where I am sure, barring brain damage or the ravages of senility, they will reign on their porch for the rest of my life.

Am I making a plea for liars, then? No, only for artists, and in particular, here, for those who make art of their personal lives and memories. Obviously, there are facts that should not be juggled or modified with impunity. But the beguélements of art are lies of a different kind. The ordinary liar betrays our trust, his counterfeit truth leaves us poorer. The artist-magician—even one who works in the service of a lie—cannot help but enrich us with value. That is the meaning of Cocteau's charming statement: "I am a lie that always tells the truth." Art is generous. The liar steals truth; the artist creates it.