

# Autobibliography, A Place in Time: On Shaping a Collection (1971–2006)

Howard R. Wolf

I take the title of this personal bibliographic essay from a talk I gave on November 18, 1996, at Amherst College on the occasion of the opening of my collection in Archives and Special Collections of the College's Robert Frost Library. This was a charged event for me, a defining moment of my academic literary life, and one that I approached, if not with fear and trembling, then at least with apprehension and a measure of anxiety. I would be exposed, after all, on many levels: as an amateur collector, as a collector of my own work (twelve books and about 200 articles to date of literary and psychoanalytic criticism, literary journalism, autobiography, book reviews, educational theory, fiction, travel, and op-ed pieces) and the work of contemporaries, and as an explicator/commentator on all these efforts. In addition, I was returning to my alma mater for this celebration of a life in letters (epistolary and humane), so it was a homecoming and reunion as well.

The audience for the talk and the events surrounding it, a luncheon and the opening of the exhibition of my collection, would be attended by family, friends, colleagues, members of the Amherst College community, and the public. I would be facing, as it were, representatives of my life and, in a sense, re-presenting it for them. Many literary artifacts from my life, including letters, were in the collection—the vital tesserae of a life's mosaic.

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Such a confrontation could be nothing less than Fitzgeraldian in its intensity for me. Everyone present would define, in some way, someone absent. The audience would not be large, but it would be significant. The meaningful sectors and vectors of my life would converge in a rehabilitated room in Converse Hall, previously the old Converse Library, where I had spent many atmospheric and obligatory hours as an undergraduate. Some minutes of those hours had been spent wondering if ever I would achieve enough to be asked to return to Amherst College to give a talk about my life and work as a writer and collector, as well as the connections, confluences, and confusions between them. These were, you might say, proleptic retrospective moments: looking forward to looking back, a habit of mind with which modern writers are familiar.

Those speculations had been prompted by a series of English 2 assignments at Amherst College in spring 1955, my freshman year, that included the following statement: “You are selecting documents about yourself and your society which you will put in a chest and keep safely for a historian to examine at some undefined time in the future” (Louis 212). At the time of the assignment, I felt, I recall, an ineffable shock of recognition since I was already a collector of personal memorabilia. Looking back after all those years through the history of my collection, I realized that, as a freshman, I had known I would take the assignment as part of my life’s work.

The opening of the “Howard R. Wolf (AC 1958) Papers” would be at once a retrospective and pre-imagined occasion for me, a Proustian ceremony of sorts for someone who had read only *Swann’s Way*, but who had been influenced by the implications for memory of *Remembrance of Things Past* through Theodore Baird’s legendary English 1–2 course during the high period of Amherst College’s New Curriculum, a rigorous general education program, requiring a year of both English and physics, designed after World War II with ex-GI’s in mind. This course is described in John Carpenter Louis’s 1971 Harvard thesis: “English 1–2 at Amherst College: Composition and the Unity of Knowledge.” It is clear now, looking back, that Baird had been deeply impressed by the “petites madeleines” revelation of the “Overture” section of *Swann’s Way* (Proust 34). He included it, in fact, in his pioneering *The First Years: Selections from Autobiography* in 1935 (196). Baird’s interest in the construction of a personal vision of the world had been influenced as well by Robert Frost’s emphasis on “voice” in his years at Amherst College (1917–20, 1923–25, 1926–38, and 1949–63). During his years as a teacher at Amherst College from 1953 to 1959, John Francis Butler also

promoted these autobiographically subjective values, and Professor Roger J. Porter of Reed College, college roommate and lifetime friend, has carried this autobiographical tradition forward in his teaching of autobiography and his personal and critical *Self-Same Songs: Autobiographical Performances and Reflections* (2002). So, in returning to Amherst to summarize and explain a collecting enterprise that by then encompassed twenty-five years, I would be looking back at myself as a young man and my generation of Amherst College contemporaries, to say nothing of my generation of Americans who had looked forward into an unknown and uncertain future.

Always struggling with and for my identity, I would not be able to say confidently with Henry James, “I wanted to do very much what I have done, and success, if I may say so, now stretches back a tender hand to its younger brother, desire” (Dupee 113). When in college, I had the unformed ambition to be some kind of American writer, but was far from certain whether I would make it. I also was far from certain that America and the world would survive the thermonuclear terrors of the period. I should add that I graduated a year later than my official Class of 1958 because I had taken a year out 1956–57, for a Grand Tour, if I may call it that, with an alienated uncle whose diasporic psyche and its impact on mine I later wrote about in poems, stories, and a memoir, *Forgive the Father: A Memoir of Changing Generations*. The artifacts of my life’s efforts as a writer are deposited in the collection for which the current curator of Archives and Special Collections, John Lancaster, prepared a provisional “finding aid” in December 1997. A definitive finding aid, including substantial deposits since 1997, is promised in the near future and may be completed for my fiftieth reunion in 2008.

When you get in the habit of writing “description letters” about what you are putting into a collection (along with CV’s and bibliographies, to keep the records straight and up to date), you become fussy about temporal matters. Times and dates become important as the descriptions, taken together, begin to make up something like an “autobibliography” (my coinage), and their sequence becomes crucial in order to make sense of the emerging story of the collection.

The description letters serve several functions: they describe the contents of each deposit, and they establish a timeline for these deposits, so that, all together, the letters become a kind of chronicle of the growth of the collection and my relation to it as writer, critic, social historian, and collector. They also establish a rationale for the

deposits and a context in which to place them. Increasingly, as I devoted more time and thought to the collection, I began to establish connections between deposits in a somewhat thematic way. The description letters make it possible to get a sense of the collection as a whole in somewhat the way a software program enables one to find linkages between data and to bring data together. I do not mean this in the fashionable sense of hypertext, but merely as an epistolary adjunct to building a collection that will make it possible for the collection to be used with relative ease.

In simple terms, one might distinguish my collection from many others by imagining two trunks full of the same material. One would be sent to a Special Collections department with description letters, the other, without them. One curator could make sense of the deposits pretty quickly and establish a procedure for cataloguing the material; the other curator would be at a loss without a great expenditure of time and study to know where to begin. A version of such a situation might make an interesting starting point for an experimental assignment in a writing class.

These letters serve several pragmatic functions and, if they are read in sequence, form something like an autobiography shaped around and in relation to bibliographic matter. Although many of the letters describe aspects of my life as a teacher, traveler, critic, parent, and friend, they primarily address items in the collection. As autobiography in a traditional sense is a biography of the self; autobibliography is a history of the self as a collector and of a collection that includes one's own written work. As one might imagine writing a biography of a writer through his unpublished material and publications, so one might imagine writing mine as a collector of literary materials other than my own as well as my own. I use the term "autobibliography" as well to mean that the collection is essentially self-curated.

This concern for establishing accurate dates of composition, publication, and bequests was especially true for me from the beginning because I wanted to self-curate the collection, to whatever extent that was possible, so that the curator's burdens could be lessened. This desire to construct the curatorial record of the collection myself, I confess, has led to a degree of tunnel vision about the relation of my collection to the Amherst College Library. It's all too easy as a writer-collector/collector-writer to think that one's archival tomb is the only burrow in town, or in the case of the Amherst College Library, "bunker," since a former Strategic Air Command base

beneath nearby Mt. Tom now serves as the library's storage extension.

Although I was pleased and flattered that I would have a chance to open the collection in a formal way, even as I had been more flattered at an earlier point that I had been invited to have a collection at all, I was deeply concerned about what I might say and what the response to it might be. To write is to assert one's importance in some fashion, to collect one's work adds to the apparent self-interest of writing, and then to comment on the project of self-expression and the preserving of its history is to invite some jealousy and criticism. In fact, I almost lost one good and old friend in this process, but that is another story (one that in fact I have written, titled "Near Ancient Gardens," in my *Of the Bronx and Manhattan a Son*, a copy of which is in the collection).

Narcissism is the great modern sin, along with the misuse of power, and it's almost impossible for a self-collector or collector of self to exculpate himself wholly from this allegation. My partial defense then and now is that, in creating the collection, I made myself into a generational specimen and had expanded the collection to include as much, if not more, work of others as my own. Indeed, a few people who may have resented the fact of my having a collection may live in the future mainly through it and because of its existence. I have "saved" more colleagues than might have saved me—in several senses (see my "Library of the Lost" in the collection).

At the end of August 1996 I went to Portland, Oregon, to spend a week with my college roommate, Roger J. Porter, to whom I have written more than seven hundred letters over the years (Porter 114). Our letters to each other are in the collection and should help a future scholar, if there is to be one, look into some of the complexities of interpersonal relationships lasting over a half-century and the ways in which such close friendships, captured in letters, mirror and encapsulate larger generational, historical, and global issues. Given our long friendship beginning in college, it seemed to make sense to work up some notes and an outline for the "opening" talk in the library of Roger's bibliographically inspiring house overlooking the Willamette River, sun flashing off the upper slopes of Mt. Hood to the east. Never has such an avalanche of facts and ideas flowed into my mind. I set down facts and impressions and tried to put them in meaningful categories on legal foolscap. It was an exhilarating kind of agony to try to wrest some order and coherence out of the history of my collection.

As a hanging concentrates the mind of the condemned and spectators, so I worked with great concentration in the early mornings, when I always have written. The occasion for which I was preparing something between an essay and a speech loomed in the distance like Kilimanjaro. I felt at times not up to the task, like Harry in Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro": "Now he would never write the things that he had saved to write until he knew enough to write them" (54). This was a particularly ironic self-reflection because I had met Hemingway ever so briefly in Paris in my year abroad, and we had talked, of course, about writing. Now, here was I, no Hemingway, trying to make a statement about a life's work. The occasion for which I was preparing a draft of a talk would not be one of "biblio-bliss," as A. Edward Newton calls it in the dedication of his *The Amenities of Book-Collecting and Kindred Affections*, but it had its pleasures, especially when I came up with the neologism "autobibliography" to name the process in which I had been engaged since the origin of the collection in 1971, a process in which I provided a provenance for each deposit and defined myself as a person, collector, writer, teacher, and critic through these commentaries. I might add at this point that the Newton book is a double "association copy" and will go into the collection with *this text* when it is finished. The book bears the handwritten signature "OAS," standing for Oscar A. Silverman, Roger Porter's first cousin once removed, who from 1956 to 1963 was Chairman of the Department of English at SUNY at Buffalo, where I have taught since 1967. He was also Director of Libraries there from 1960 to 1968 and Director Emeritus from 1968 to 1977. Professor Silverman played a key role in the acquisition of the now invaluable Joyce papers for the Poetry/Rare Books Collection at the University at Buffalo and helped edit *James Joyce's Letters to Sylvia Beach: 1921-1940* with Melissa Banta (1987). My copy, a discard signed by Banta, is a gift copy to Raymond Federman, a well-known Beckett scholar, postmodernist fictionist, and former member of Buffalo's French and English Departments whose work is represented in my collection.

These kinds of connections between the personal association and the intrinsic value of the artifact are typical of the many kinds of deposits in the collection. These diverse artifacts, when considered along with the description letters, tell the story of a developing self and its relation to a community, academic and literary, in local, national, and international contexts over the course of a half-century. Soon after the first phase of the collection ended in 1977, the linkages between that self and others became crucial in my thinking

about the future value and use of the collection, when the publication in 1978 of *Forgive the Father: A Memoir of Changing Generations* led me to believe that my work might become more visible and thus make my associations more compelling to potential future scholars.

In working up notes for the opening of the collection in "Oregon," I naturally looked back to the "origin" (forgive the pun) of the collection. What, or rather who, had set this life-commitment in motion, a commitment that in about a decade after its beginning turned into a form of lifewriting? The launching of my collection and its transformation into "autobibliography" began precisely on a certain day, just as Winston's diary in *Ninety Eighty-Four* begins dramatically on 4 April 1984: "To mark the paper was the decisive act. In small clumsy letters he wrote: April 4th, 1984" (9-10). The collection became a possibility when I received a letter dated October 18, 1971, from J. Richard Phillips, Special Collections Librarian of the Amherst College Library, whom I unfortunately never was to meet. Mr. Phillips says in his letter:

I have been assisting Mr. Aldridge (Richard Aldridge, freelance writer and editor, Amherst College '52) a little in connection with his anthology of Amherst poets, and it has occurred to us that you might consider joining ranks with other alumni such as Richard Wilbur, Mr. Aldridge, and the late Rolfe Humphries in establishing a collection of your manuscripts and papers here at Amherst. We would be pleased to begin such a collection and wonder if you have given any thought to eventually placing your papers in a library. If you have not already made such arrangements, I would appreciate an opportunity to elaborate on our arrangement concerning the gift of such materials. I shall look forward to hearing from you at your convenience.

I was taken aback by the invitation; I might even say nonplussed. If ever I had thought about climbing the stairway to fame, I had not included a library collection as a rung of the ladder; and I no longer was writing poetry.

After some, but not too much thought, I wrote a letter of acceptance, as it were, to Phillips. I did not keep copies of my correspondence in those days. Saving letters began when I started using a personal computer in 1989, so I don't know exactly the date of my response and inaugural deposit (they are in the collection). I would have to conduct some research about myself on this point and thus become a biographer of myself and work. I shall leave that to a possible scholar of the future, someone interested in the American

literary academy in the second half of the twentieth century as it was anthologized through the prism of a specific autobibliographer. I do recall that I was greatly relieved that I would have a chance to preserve several shoeboxes full of juvenilia and letters. I never had been able to discard such personal material; I treasured school yearbooks and photographs of childhood friends and summer campmates. I do recall wrapping up a fairly large trove of material and running into a colleague, the poet Irving Feldman, on the way to the mailroom to post it. I mentioned somewhat proudly, sotto voce, what I was on the verge of doing.

He smiled faintly, as writers are prone to do, when the work of other writers is the subject, and I realized then that it would be best to keep the collection a private matter both as a way of protecting myself and making it possible to collect, discreetly, the work of those creative colleagues in my department and university at large. This policy applied in particular to any form of correspondence where rights of privacy (moral and legal) came into play. As much as writers crave recognition, they insist as well, as a rule, on privacy. When Irving went on to garner many literary honors, including a MacArthur, I smiled to myself. Little did he know that I was doing my best to preserve his work, as well as my own, for posterity. It's hard to know, as reputations fade, if only for a while, how important archival traces will be in the fullness of time and under the aspect of bibliographic eternity.

The first phase of the collection during J. Richard Phillips's curatorship of it from 1971 to 1977 was not too active. I mainly made deposits of my own material: preparatory notes, drafts of manuscripts, rejection slips, acceptances, ceremonial objects (memorabilia), correspondence with editors and publishers, and published work. The collection began in earnest on July 20, 1977, when Phillips's successor, John Lancaster, wrote to me: "As the new Special Collections Librarian/Archivist, I have been impressed and gratified at the interest in our collection on the part of the alumni, and I hope to be able to maintain and perhaps increase that interest. [. . .] I look forward to meeting you." It was not until April 24, 1978, that I heard from John again: "Congratulations on the acceptance of your book for publication. However often it may have happened before, that is always a major event; all the more so when the road has been rocky." The book in question was *Forgive the Father: A Memoir of Changing Generations*. The story behind this book from composition (1973) to publication (1978) was quite complex, and I was impressed and moved by John's sensitivity to a writer's struggle.

Before money and fame ever become issues, most writers crave recognition of their creative existence. Most serious writers care more about aesthetic quality and identity than they do summer homes in the Hamptons, at least at the beginning of their careers. Good curators communicate sympathy and impartiality toward the writer/collector's efforts while keeping a cordial and professional distance. The relationship between writer/collector and curator has something in common with the dynamics of the patient/doctor or analysand/psychoanalyst relationship with respect to a confidential and nonjudgmental ambience. John's affirmation of the collection became an implicit affirmation of my writing as well.

From 1977 through 1996, John Lancaster and I exchanged about 200 letters, his, as a rule, in response to a deposit and description letter of mine. Some of his responses were even holographs, thus defining poignantly the end of an era. After 1996, our exchanges have been letters and e-mails from my side and e-mails, pretty much exclusively, from his. As is now well understood, bibliographers of the future will have to contend with the complexities both of hardcopy and electronic data.

Usually, John Lancaster's responses have been acknowledgments of receipts with the occasional comment and observation. One important observation, which gave me a sense of controlled freedom, is this of February 2, 1991: "I think it's fair to say that your collection here is unique, or nearly so (I don't know of any other like it). In a sense, it's an experiment, in just letting the collection grow by your direction rather than mine or the institution's. [. . .] I like your *anthology* analogy" (my emphasis).

Another of John Lancaster's liberating observations is this of July 29, 1991: "Just one point I should respond to: you ask about the commentaries that accompany books, clippings, etc. In fact they are not only useful, they are crucial to the collection, I believe. I xerox each one as many times as necessary to put with the thing(s) it refers to—this provides both a date and a context." Needless to say, I have been appreciative of John's meticulous archival procedures and his common sense from the outset. This collection would not have been possible without his steadfast commitment. He has been, in an archival context, Maxwell Perkins to my Thomas Wolfe.

As I've said, in the collection's first phase, I deposited mostly my own material. But I realized at a certain point that it was risky for me to base the collection solely on my reputation. What if I remained only a minor writer in my lifetime? I decided, or felt a necessity, to include in the collection the work of literary colleagues (writers,

critics, scholars) in and out of the academic world, in America and overseas whose work, along with mine, could serve as guide to many of the complexities of the culture of writing in our time. The collection would become, in time, an anthology of our generation and demonstrate that writers shape the culture as much as they are shaped by it.

Let me list some of the literary friends and colleagues who are represented in different ways in the collection, the Buffalonians and Americans first: television critic Michael Arlen, Jr.; poet Ansie Baird, Oscar Silverman's daughter; prose mentor and great editor Sheridan Baker, late of the University of Michigan; Shakespeare scholar and humanist C. L. Barber; freelance critic and economist David Bazelon; postmodernist poet Charles Bernstein; college roommate, philosopher, and former Dean of Trinity College W. Miller Brown; Buffalo colleague and poet-mythologist Jack Clarke; polymath Albert S. Cook; 2002 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry winner Carl Dennis; poet Robert Creeley; Arthur Efron (many issues of whose journal *Paunch* are in the collection); Jewish-American poet Irving Feldman; distinguished critic Leslie Fiedler; American diplomat Dr. Helena Kane Finn; late colleague and poet-novelist Lyle Glazier; college roommate, TV producer, and film scholar Laurence Goldstein; late colleague and poet Mac Hammond; former colleague and Americanist George Hochfield; freelance and former science fiction critic for the *New York Times* Gerald Jonas; scholar Alvin Kernan; playwright and composer Wendy Spiegel Kesselman; John Lancaster; late colleague and Catholic-American poet John Logan; critic and poet Kandace Lombart; college roommate and international cooperation worker E. David Luria; Canadian-American scholar Irving Massey; poet and former colleague Jerome Mazzaro; artist Patrick McCarthy; novelist and short story writer Leonard Michaels; Holocaust scholar Charles Patterson; art scholar and Americanist Martin L. Pops; Roger J. Porter, autobiography scholar and Professor of English, Reed College; medievalist and Native American poet Carter Revard; experimental poet Aaron Rosen; Michael Rosenthal, friend from Horace Mann High School in New York, Columbia University Professor of English, and biographer of its former President Nicholas Murray Butler; Steven Schrader, Washington Heights childhood friend, writer, and publisher of Cane Hill books; Americanist Mark Shechner; film critic Alan Spiegel; poet Robert Sward; classicist and poet William Sylvester; editor Joan Tapper; Max Wickert, translator of Tasso; editor Adele Westbrook; college friend and psychoanalyst Dr. John Zinner; and my brother Dr.

Ronald C. Wolf, author of *Trade, Aid, and Arbitrate: The Globalization of Western Law*, among other works.

Some overseas writers and literary academics (including editors) are represented in various ways. They include Americanist Necla Aytur (Turkey); French aviator, anthropologist, and Sinologist Jean Berlie; 2003 Nobel Prize for Literature winner J. M. Coetzee (South Africa and Australia); the late Piers Gray, dramatist and critic (Hong Kong); fiction writer David Ehrlich (Israel); literary scholar Manju Jaidka and British literature expert Devindra Kohli (India); Professor of Childhood Education Eeva-Liisa Kronqvist (Finland); popular novelist and model Anna Toppin (England); novelist and folklorist Biyot Kesh Tripathy (Orissa, India); Professor of English and survivor of the Cultural Revolution Xiao Anpu of Chengdu (China); Viet Nam and Holocaust scholar Adi Wimmer (Austria); Americanist and postmodernist Jaroslav Kusnir (Slovak Republic); poet Muhammed Salleh (Malaysia); and medievalist/ editor Margaret Raftery (South Africa).

As one might expect, each person is represented in a slightly different way: published worked, works in manuscript, articles about them, announcements of readings, letters, posters, even some graphic work and souvenirs. In writing description letters about these people, my interest, already serious, in biography and individual character deepened and led me to a renewed commitment, after abandoning psychoanalytic criticism, to writing fiction.

The center of the collection, however, is my own work: some of my personal library, manuscripts, professional and personal correspondence, published work, some press coverage and publicity, documentation of honors and awards, and notebooks. There are several unpublished book manuscripts as well: *Ends and Other Beginnings: Mainly Sunday Letters from Hong Kong*, *Looking for America: Towards a Global Education*, and *Mourning Letters for My Father*. A significant corner of the collection is a group of dissertations about American literature from India for which I have served as an outside “adjudicator.” I inherited this role through three lecture trips to India between 1988–92. This part of the collection may be a unique holding among small liberal arts colleges.

The collection has many radial spokes that constitute something like a social and intellectual history of a portion of the American literary academy from the end of the Second World War to the War in Iraq. These spokes include a category that I have called “cultural miscellany,” a gathering in batches of documents concerning the artistic and cultural life that has affected me and that I have lived in

America, in my years as an overseas teacher in Turkey and South Africa on Fulbrights, Malaysia, India, Hong Kong, and in other countries in which I have traveled and lectured. Included in this miscellany are playbills, concert programs, tickets, LP's, CD's, etc.

Closely related to cultural miscellany, but somewhat different, are visual materials that serve as a background to the literary materials: posters, calls for papers, newspaper clippings, magazine articles, department and university publications, some artwork. This category also comprises some representative technological matter that illustrates changing methods of composition and production over the past half-century: typewriter ribbons, one typewriter used by Nobel Laureate J. M. Coetzee during a term in Buffalo, printer cartridges, etc. Some of these items, trivial and unimportant in themselves as discrete data, assume significance in the "field" of the collection. When one knows, for instance, that an important writer's fingers have touched the keyboard of an old Remington, that typewriter is then not just "another" typewriter. It takes on, in ways that no one fully understands, some talismanic and primitive quality as a "sacred object" of sorts. No less than a potsherd from an ancient site, the pen, if it was held by Robert Frost, becomes something other than just another pen. As the time in which we live becomes the past, we must make decisions as to which aspects of that lost time we choose to anthologize, aspects on which to bestow what might be called "museum status."

Any use of "etc." in this autobiographical essay gets at the distinction between being a collector and the collection itself as it will be curated, that is, the sense that will be made of this life's work. Even though I have written description letters (somewhere between 500–1000 words each) about most of the deposits, I have not written them for all, and I don't have copies in any case of letters I wrote prior to 1989. And where I do have copies, I would have to go through 45 volumes of letters (each volume about 200–250 pages), 30 of which are in the collection, in order to cull all the description letters that were written in the elusive flow of time and consciousness. As a result, to categorize the collection exactly and comprehensively, beyond the terms in which I have done so here, will require a serious act of biographical and bibliographic research in the future. I am too close to the work to do the job, and I would not wish, in any case, to relive my life a fourth time. I have lived it, I have written about it, and I have collected it.

In addition to the general points about the function and significance of the collection I have made already, I would like to add some

further observations. The “voices” in the collection, an echo chamber of sorts, especially the voices of the poets, represent a dialogue between humanist and postmodernist tonalities. Carl Dennis, Lyle Glazier, and Mac Hammond are on the traditional side. Charles Bernstein, Albert Cook, Robert Creeley, and Aaron Rosen (master of surfaces and the exiguous line) work at the boundary of the avant-garde. The postmodern voices have been dominant in my teaching and writing lifetime, a fact that has had great significance for me, since my teaching and writing life has taken place within the context of this dominant “aleatory” atmosphere. A progressive in the classroom, my writing has been traditional, so I have been writing against the current and *au courant*. This is one of the major themes that has emerged through building the collection and writing about it—a dual project, with each side affecting the other and becoming finally conjoined, “auto” (or self) shaping “bibliography,” “bibliography” forming the “auto.”

I should mention that two of the poets who read at the opening, Lyle Glazier and Mac Hammond, are now deceased. Their deaths speak poignantly to the ways in which collections are fragile mirrors of mortality. In building the collection, I become more sensitive to the loss of those represented in it. This heightened sense is reflected, I am sure, in my own writing, however comic and satirical it has become over time.

Because it has required writing description letters over time, a daily five-finger exercise and training ground for writing as well as collection point of ideas and associations, the collection generated a form of writing which exists as a genre somewhere between the epistle, bibliographic research, and a history of America in the living time of the collection. In this sense, the collection as a somewhat new form of writing—an unpublished “autobibliography” (biography of the self written in the first person as a record of a life of writing and collecting)—constituted a somewhat vexing paradox for me: I had put my greatest writing effort, all told, into “work” that would in all likelihood remain unpublished and invisible. If this had a virtue, it was as a counterweight to the self-centered and self-serving interests of the collection—interests I do not disavow for all the reasons I have given, but about which I feel some guilt nonetheless. Call it literary survival guilt.

To some extent, I began to live, travel, and write in relation to the collection. I wanted to write significantly for it, as if it were a “double” and secret sharer making demands of me. I had felt and known since adolescence that travel helped writers write. But it

wasn't until I went to Ankara University on a Fulbright in 1983–84 as a Lecturer in American Literature that the world opened to me as a platform for travel and writing and for exploring the connection between them. After Turkey, I traveled widely and wrote about the countries in which I lived and taught: Malaysia, India, Hong Kong, and South Africa. I have put together these essays, many of them published, in a book manuscript mentioned above, *Far-away Places: Lessons in Exile*.

If the muse, lower back, and American Express continue to smile upon me, I hope to write essays on the Czech Republic, England, Florida, Israel, Lithuania, New York's Lower East Side, and Portugal, where my brother has lived for five decades, all in relation to my family's Jewish European background and its American foreground. I hope to write about Egypt as well, where a cousin, Henry Boyar, a pilot in the Rhodesian Air Force during WWII, lies buried in the Sinai; the Israeli Defense Force discovered his grave in 1974. My working title for this series of essays is *Excavations of Loss: Site-Seeing in the Diaspora*.

My generation of writer/teachers is coming to an end. One of the things my collection demonstrates is how many dedicated and talented people in America have worked below the media radar to make America and the world a more civilized place. This fact—documented in my collection (letter to John Lancaster, July 10, 1996)—is one response to a recent letter from my brother in which he says, “I cannot understand why you would wish to reveal such intimacies of your life. Opening your heart, as you have done, detracts from the ownership of your own destiny, to be forged by you, and not others” (December 1, 2005). Without opening my heart (and other faculties) in the collection, I would not have been able to document as I have the life of my times and the people who, in part, made and made up those times. I haven't exposed myself completely (even exhibitionists don't want to exhibit everything), but I have revealed a good deal about myself.

In his Nobel Lecture, Harold Pinter says, “A writer's life is highly vulnerable, almost naked activity. We don't have to weep about that. The writer makes his choice and is stuck with it. But it is true to say that you are open to all the winds, some of them icy indeed” (11). At the end of the day, the collection will be a homecoming and meeting place of sorts for many people in my life who never have met one another but whose lives, making up a symbolic community, will be bound together. I published a volume of travel letters about a

decade ago: *Letters from the World: A Version of Home*. My collection might be thought of as a “version of homecoming.”

I assumed, when I began to teach in a Department of English, that a sense of community would deepen over the years. We would all become, in the fullness of time, members of a literary club. We would sit back in leather chairs, cordials in hand, and revisit in tales and anecdotes the pleasures and follies of our years together. Mr. Chips would have nothing over us. Alas, this has not been the case. Alienation and Mr. Micro-chips have, to a large extent, displaced these images, but something of that spirit lives, I hope, in the time capsule that is the collection I have described. It would be nice to be around when that time capsule is opened in 2058, a century after my college commencement, and to uncork a bottle of champagne. I’ll have to imagine it for now.

### Works Cited

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