

Review Essay

Autobiography Times Four

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HOW OUR LIVES BECOME STORIES: Making Selves. By Paul John Eakin. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. 1999.

LIGHT WRITING AND LIFE WRITING: Photography in Autobiography. By Timothy Dow Adams. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2000.

A LEG TO STAND ON. By Oliver Sacks. New York: Touchstone Book, Simon and Schuster. 1993.

CROSSING: A Memoir. By Deirdre N. McCloskey. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1999.

The riches and complexities of these four works in and about autobiography outstrip space and imagination to exhaust. The first two, Eakin's and Adams's, are critical studies while Sacks's and McCloskey's memoirs illustrate but also complicate theories. Despite different subjects and slants, Eakin and Adams share many assumptions about the literary enterprise so popular with present-day writers and readers. We live in an age of memoir, nearly every issue of the *New York Times Book Review* proclaims. Moreover, these scholars have many fellow players in their critical games. Everyone here faces a paradox. For some fellow critics are

post-structuralists with radically deconstructionalist views of the practice so many enjoy. How to balance widespread and persistent popularity against declarations of the death of autobiography?

To begin with, both Eakin and Adams seek to engage the entire autobiographical act. Eakin focuses on ways we become the selves who must write personal accounts of experiences and emotions. Neuropsychology is his prop in an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural approach. American studies teachers and students will learn much, not only about the dynamic field of brain research but also how to adapt the findings of scientists like Gerald Edelman, Antonio Damasio, Israel Rosenfield, and Oliver Sacks to illuminate texts and transactions normally treated under the literary-psychological categories of autobiography, memoir, history, fiction, confession, testament, apology.

Adams, too, is freshly enlightening. His study rings changes on the role of light in life studies and life writing. Specifically, light is the medium of still photography. The camera and its two-dimensional images are even more ubiquitous than autobiographies, with which they are frequently allied. Adams's analysis of photography in autobiography draws upon a different set of theorists than does Eakin: Roland Barthes and Arthur Asa Berger; Susan Sontag and John Szarkowski; Nancy Newhall and Nancy Shawcross. Some of these names, theories, and techniques may be unfamiliar in this context. Photography proves, however, under Adams's searchlight to be strange and often ambiguous when married to autobiographical texts.

Sacks's *A Leg To Stand On*, though originally published in 1982, has recently reappeared in accessible paperback with a new afterword. It still lacks photographs or discussions of them. The author is a clinical neuropsychiatrist well-known for many books and a humane concern for the persons others would call his patients. He also writes well, thereby joining a select group of scribbling physicians including John Stone, Richard Seizer, Robert Coles. Sacks's memoir is both an introduction to new theories and applications of brain research and a vividly personal account of trauma—a grievous accident to his left leg which precipitated an even more grievous wound to his personal identity. Consequently, Sacks strenuously rejects any mind/body split. Indeed, a thoroughly anti-Cartesian cast of mind and praxis characterizes all four of these writers; this consensus confirms the views of many feminists.

Deirdre McCloskey's *Crossing* offers a fundamentally different version of anti-Cartesian storytelling. She was until recently Donald McCloskey, a prominent economic historian, husband, and father. Her account of gender transformation, more sweeping and momentous than even Sacks's loss of a leg, dramatizes the travail and triumph of will and desire over birth, anatomy, and cultural expectation. Her story also is accompanied by thirty-seven photographs, strategically located to support and complicate this new woman's written text.

Though in some respects a random sampling, these four texts thus complement and complicate much present-day thinking about and writing the self.

Eakin brings to this table an impressive record as autobiography critic. Two books—*Fictions in Autobiography* (1985) and *Touching the World: Reference in Autobiography* (1992)—argue, first, that fictionalizing is a necessary, everyday activity in living and remembering, and, second, that such functional fictionality is culturally conditioned by the world thus touched. In this third examination Eakin develops even broader and newer narrative strategies. He asserts now that self-experience is a developmental, never-ending process rooted in our bodies, social relations, and culturally sanctioned ways of writing selfstories. In the final chapter, Eakin also revisits an issue often neglected by writers, readers, and critics: “how can I be truthful about my own life without infringing on somebody else’s?” This is a moral and legal question occasioned by confessions and collaborations in particular but grounded in basic cultural values of privacy, private property, autonomy, community, the need to know.

To address these matters Eakin draws on recent findings in brain and consciousness research. This leads him to replace “self” with “selves.” Following Ulric Neisser, a cognitive psychologist, Eakin revamps his own and others’ notions about the validity of traditional autobiographical terms, especially individuality, autonomy, separation. Neisser’s five-fold schema of a wider set of categories posits, in developmental order from infancy to old age, an ecological self, an interpersonal self, an extended self, a private self, and a conceptual self. Eakin concludes that “it is time to discard restrictive notions of the self and subject that make of them little more than metaphysical or narrative puppets opening the way for a much broader, experiential approach to the nature and origin of subjectivity” (25). This scientifically sounder extension of the writing self, together with the moral implication of overprivileging the individual, are Eakin’s not entirely original but much-needed contributions to the current dialogue about autobiography and culture. Gone forever, in this perspective, is the single self of traditional (often male) autobiography.

Olive Sacks’s *A Leg to Stand On* is understandably a major text, test, and justification for Eakin’s enlarged and scientific discourse. For Sacks has lived, worked, and written out of recognition of intimate ties between body, mind, and spirit in all meaningful human acts. Each aspect of Sacks’s *modus operandi* derives from the wrenching accident in 1974 on a Norwegian mountainside, which robbed him temporarily of leg and identity. Facing, surviving, and thinking deeply about that trauma is the burden of *A Leg to Stand On*. Weathering the ordeal led him to grasp experientially what his Russian colleagues had earlier learned in the laboratory. Regaining leg and self returned Sacks to full personhood, “that physical and moral posture which means standing up, standing up for oneself, walking and walking away—walking away from one’s physicians and parents, walking away from those upon whom one depended, walking freely and boldly, and adventurously, wherever one wishes” (108). His leg, once “an inert, immobile, lifeless white thing” (108), deprived him in several ways. A recovery which was not simply psychological and determining, nor merely masculine, also occurred, signalled by Sacks’s rediscovery of classical music. “Music, by contrast, while

having nothing to do with outer appearances, was the very prototype of inwardness inner being, soul" (180-1). "Body image," he discovered later, "is not something fixed *a priori* in the brain, but a process adapting itself all the time to experience" (194). Autobiography was, as Eakin's treatment of Sacks's story indicates, often as essential to recapturing life experience as are the rhythms of a Mendelssohn concerto.

Adams evokes both Sacks and, more frequently, Eakin in exploring photography and autobiography and, conversely, autobiography in photography. Essential linkages are announced in the opening pages of *Light Writing and Life Writing*. "It might be said that each of us constructs and lives a 'narrative,' and that this narrative *is* us," he quotes Sacks as declaring, "for each of us *is* a biography, a story" (xii). Adams is led to wonder how photographic images strengthen and complicate personal history. This new mode of self-representation should prove valuable to all living in the land of the Kodak. In his second book—the first is *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (1990)—Adams examines a broad range of texts and relationships. "I have chosen the eleven autobiographers and fourteen autobiographies . . . because . . . I organized this book into a movement from life writing made of words alone to personal narratives of photographers" (xviii). The move from words to images-with-words begins with Paul Auster, Maxine Hong Kingston, and the Ortiz Taylor sisters, Sheila and Sandra. Adams moves next to works by N. Scott Momaday, Michael Ondaatje, and Reynolds Price. He ends with what is to me the most familiar and convincing section on Eudora Welty, Wright Morris, and Edward Weston. (Omitted from his agenda is a work much discussed elsewhere, James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.)

Necessarily, this theme and these texts raise a perennial problem for all interested in autobiography at whatever level: referentiality. At the outset, Adams concedes that "the presence of photographs of the author within a text constitutes a clear sign that we are reading autobiography" (20). But then Adams demonstrates how tenuous and confusing the ties can become between words, photographs, and the world. Double-barrelled stories of the self offer mutable if not downright mute evidence. For the forms of complication and deception are many when it comes to photographs. These include poses, cropping, captions, omissions, location (a family album isn't the walls of the Portland Museum of Art), tricks, self-portraits, dodging, air-brushing, manipulations by the computer. Each practice can close or widen the gaps between words and visual images. Adams's central argument about this complex relationship is that both autobiography and photography conceal as much as they reveal. Hence the appropriateness of Eakin's discussion of the ethics of autobiographical confession and collaboration. For the camera, too, is a collaborator. Thus a mixed text like Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings* is not wholly different from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Adams quotes with approval a novelist's belief that "the strange persuasion of photographs rests on selective accuracy wedded to selective distortion" (241).

Adams ends his ambitious book by asserting what many ordinary readers and some scholars of autobiography have recognized: “no amount of sophisticated poststructuralist theorizing will ever replace a persistent belief in the referentiality of autobiography, what Paul John Eakin names as an ‘existential imperative,’ a will to believe that is, finally, impervious to theory’s deconstruction of reference as illusion” (242). The same will to believe also applies to looking at photographs.

Crossing, too recent a memoir to play a direct part in these discussions, offers many confirmations. These involve especially body, relational selves, identity, and photographs. But Deirdre McCloskey complicates, often radically, these very issues. Her gender transformation is indeed radical but, she insists, not all that eccentric. “It is strange to have been a man and now to be a woman. But it is no stranger perhaps than once having been a West African and now being an American, or once a priest and now a businessman” (xii). To be sure, this experience (and doubtless writing about it) has often been painful—extraordinarily so as it has subjected her bodily self to extensive, excruciating, and expensive alterations, and also her relational self to the loss of a marriage family and the obtuse perfidy of a sister. Still, neither text nor photographs compose a straightforward statement with visual documentation. Words are printed in two ways—in normal lower case and in italics. This allows both present and past perspectives, both others’ and the private self’s thoughts. Throughout, photographs document her journey to New Womanhood. Donald McCloskey was an occasional crossdresser from the age of eleven and there is a picture of a wistful little boy standing on a Cambridge streetcorner. Donald the Harvard fencer and the adult, bearded square-dancer are also represented. Dee in drag is the next stage doubly represented in word and image. Finally, Deirdre appears as the final female self. By this time the author is nearing her mid-fifties. Her several transformations authenticate her conviction that personal identity is indeed flexible; “gender is something ‘done,’ a performance, not an essence springing from genitals or chromosomes” (164). Changing genders also highlights class privileges, and the author is frank about the choices available to her but not to working-class Americans. On this score, *Crossing* is valuable fodder for culture studies, mixing gender, class, and even a bit of race.

In recording her crossing a major social divide McCloskey relies on what many will see as stereotyped models of American femaleness and maleness. Being a woman means thinking and behaving differently about hair, dress, shopping, crying, reciprocity, gifts, sharing, and caring. Being male, conversely, usually entails ego, aggression, insensitivity even to significant others, career, sports. Physical and social appearance are particularly ironic in this taxonomy. *Crossing* is candid in recording the trade-offs. She is very aware, for one thing, about her approaching middle age, which will inevitably affect performance. However, Deirdre offers a plausible excuse for stressing dress and coiffure. Passing is the crucial social and psychological sign of having achieved a newly gendered self. Success in this struggle is for the passer often a matter of health, safety, even life itself. Furthermore, she often qualifies her stereotypical assumptions. All men aren’t emotionally stupid. “I write, I teach. I don’t spend *all* my time shopping” (264).

Photographs, too, are complex, sometimes contradictory. Among the thirty-seven, two are to me notably arresting. One shows Dee after one face-altering operation. The bandaged head, the sad yet defiant eyes, and the brutally male—and ironic?—caption “Roadkill, said Richard” epitomize much that is in the text about the price she has paid for will and desire. As Adams writes, quoting an autobiographer, “memory heals the scars of time. Photography documents the wounds” (117). Even more suggestive is the dust jacket photograph. This evidently images the present self. Deirdre is sitting, legs crossed and prominently foregrounded by the camera angle. She is roaring with laughter, her head thrown back, mouth wide, and hands crossed near her throat. She wears a dark dress and discreet womanly jewelry. She is apparently happily a woman enjoying her body and sense of humor. Gaiety is not, however, a predominant feature of this text; indeed, it almost undercuts the power and pathos of passages like the one on page 153: “*I feel so alone.*” Within the text, we read that “women put their hands to their chests when speaking of themselves” (160). But in this picture, her hands are much nearer her throat, though clearly not covering the mouth, as some stereotypes of womanly gestures would have it. Readers sense, therefore, a slight but revealing disconnect. The performing self says several things at once—about her muscular male legs, but more about the mixture of covering and revealing the inner self caught here by the camera. Which self, we are led to wonder, are we to trust more, the arrested camera moment or the narrated self-in-process with a host of messages on her mind over 266 pages?

What cannot, in any case, be photographed (and isn't much mentioned in the text) is Donald/Deirdre's painful stutter, an affliction the surgeons haven't eradicated any better than Deirdre's deep voice or six-foot frame. What also goes unphotographed is a final autobiographical event—Deirdre's baptism along with several small children at the font of Trinity Church, Iowa City. Even more than her election as president of the Economic History Association, this brief event is momentous. For by it society names Deirdre officially as fully herself, fully a member, fully a soul.

As Maxine Kumin urges in the *New York Times Book Review*, *Crossing* is a book all sorts of Americans (and, I would add, Americanists) should read. One consequence would be to ponder that three of the four books discussed here are written by men. Would our understanding be altered of autobiography and photography, of identity and referentiality, of body, gender, and gender crossing, if we were to substitute other names, genders, and texts? What, for instance, would Sidonie Smith, Carolyn Kay Steedman, or Diane Bjorklund have to say that is different and maybe deeper about these theories, texts, and photographs? Would Jan Morris and Pat Califia contradict the insights of Sacks or McCloskey? Most of these names already appear in the pages of Eakin, Adams, and McCloskey. Why are they mentioned only now?