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Fathering the Self - Autobiography and Biography in *Running in the Family* and *Fun Home*

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Abstract. "My true self, my character and my name were in the hands of adults, I had learnt to see myself through their eyes, I was a child, this monster they were forming out of their regrets." — Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots* Jean Paul Sartre's conception of the child as "the monster formed out of…regrets" throws into question the bildungsroman-esque that the reader encounters in most instances of autobiographical writing. If, during childhood, the self is formed from not only the regrets and expectations, but also from the passed-down familial histories and family dynamics among the adults in the childhood home, then it is insufficient to have a tunnel-visioned look at the development of one's personality solely through the first-person narrative of the autobiographer-protagonist. In this paper, I suggest that in lieu of the narrow focus of autobiographical writing on the author's self alone, an overstepping of the genre to include biographical sketches of peripheral characters in the life story locates the self in a more dialogic, heteroglossic relationship with the world outside the self, and acknowledges that the self is not limited to the figure of the author-protagonist alone. To this end, I examine Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), and Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* (1983) as instances of autobiographical writing, focussing mainly on the childhood years, where the author-protagonist paradoxically steps away from the limelight in order to root the childhood self within half-remembered apocryphal memories, gossip-laden accounts from other people, and more specifically, relationships with their elusive father figure and their varying complicated relationships with him. Is the autobiography then really an instance of isolated, self-centred work, or is the "finished" persona that the autobiographer presents to us really a communal act, pieced together from the fragments of other lives that briefly touch the author-protagonist's, and create an autobiographical subject out of them?

Keywords : Autobiography; family; father; biography; history.

Laura Marcus says, in her introduction to autobiography as a genre, "family genealogies are the traditional starting point for many autobiographers" (Marcus, 85), such as Gibbons, Gosse and John Stuart

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Mill. In the traditional structure, this is followed by an account of cherished childhood memories, the start of schooling, formative influences in the adolescent years and higher education—the main stages of the "making of a man". Seen this way, the family background and early childhood are merely stepping stones in the larger story of the self, stages to be crossed till the childhood self steps into its own as the adult autobiographer who can then give the reader a linear account of the plot of his life. But, as Gilroy argues,instead of the idea of a journey towards "the destination that a completed identity might represent, recent experiments with the autobiographical form allows for more contingent and temporary linkages, shifting webs or networks which allows us to perceive 'new understandings of self, sameness and solidarity" (129).This mode of autobiographical writing, I suggest, is increasingly adopted by authors seeking to explore identities that cannot be accommodated in a linear model of growing up, diasporic identities for example, which keep coming back to the place of origin. Nor can the claim to autobiographical "truth" be left entirely unquestioned in such a mode of writing– for such writing frequently takes recourse to unapologetically fictionalising what cannot be remembered with fidelity(going so far as to specify it on the blurb or preface) and in doing so, implicitly questions the division between autobiography proper and the Romans a clef. I will now turn to Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* to explore how this form of genre-defying autobiography is essential to his project of anchoring his self in the casts of his eccentric family, and how this project in turn, questions the very notion of "auto"- biography.

Running in the Family is the composite product of Michael Ondaatje's two trips to Sri Lanka, in 1978 and 1980 in his mid-thirties, driven by his desire to revisit the country he had left 25 years ago and write into remembrance "the family I had grown from—those relations from my parents' generation who stood in my memory like a frozen opera", which would perhaps guide him back to a "childhood I had ignored and not understood". In his mind, these two projects are intertwined, because—

> "We see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations that were destroyed. So our job becomes to keep peace with the enemy camps, eliminate the chaos at the end of Jacobean tragedies, and with the mercy of distance write the histories…I think all of our lives have

> been terribly shaped by what went on
> before us. (201).

However, instead of a methodical approach to the lives of others and of himself, Ondaatje prefers the approach that runs in his family— that of gossip and truth revealed in drunken moments. So, in the acknowledgement, he admits that the book "is not a history but a portrait or gesture" composed with raw material from several familial, historical sources and personal memory. This is despite the fact that it also poses as a photo journal of sorts, with old black and white photographs of the named family members at the beginning of each section, inducing the air of authenticity that the visual gives us. But, for Ondaatje, telling the "objective" historical truth of his family, and of himself, is directly at odds with his project, partly because the very nature of his family obfuscates such attempts, and partly because " in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts". The Ondaatje family were Sri Lankan Burghers, and like many others in the 1920s-30s Nuwara Eliya, of mixed Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British and Burgher blood, going back many generations, whose ancestry proved as difficult to trace for the erstwhile British governors as for Michael himself. It is also worth noting that in the wake of the Sri Lankan Civil War where strict lines of identity— Tamil/ Sinhalese, Buddhist/ Hindu— were drawn between the opposing factions, Ondaatje deliberately refuses to trace out a family genealogy along "pure" blood lines. The ledgers at St Thomas's Church in Colombo provide the only written records of his entangled ancestral roots, and even they do not suffice in their records of proper names— Ondaatje must weave a narrative out of it, based on his and his surviving family's guesswork, to give it some air of coherence. The rest, of course, has to be filled out by apocrypha of gossip. What is of interest to me here is, that if one cannot even rely on written records and photographs to piece together a truthful family history—that is, if the act of biographising one's family is so fraught with difficulty—then what of autobiography, especially autobiographical accounts of the childhood, where one does not even have a written record to fall back on for veracity? This essentially breaks down any truth-value the autobiography might claim to have, and contrary to Rousseau, who insisted that his reader believe his account of his self, invites the reader to believe or disbelieve at their own discretion. The autobiographer abjures responsibility for his own project.

As a postcolonial diasporic memoir that accepts the difficulty of constructing a coherent version of the self, *Running in The Family* offers a mobile "subject who must travel across spatial and historical

differences, assembling a narrative and a self from fragments of 'rumour', gossip and observation" (Anderson, 117). Surprisingly for an autobiographical project, Ondaatje's first person "I" is often relegated to the background, the search for the self does not so much extend inward as it sprawls outward, like his spread-out family tree. This opaqueness of the self, in opposition to autobiography's traditional mission of creating transparency has led William French to comment— "it clearly isn't a memoir in the conventional sense, for we learn very little about the author." Yet this "about" as a referent is problematic, because as Kamboureli points out, Running in the Family is not only a postmodern text, but it also "whimsically insists on inhabiting the terrain of autobiography while at the same time displaying its energy as a text that wants to be the "other" of what it declares to be", that is to say, it really masquerades as an autobiography while in fact being a collection of anecdotes and private histories. So, while he sets out to reinscribe himself in his familial and spatial roots, Ondaatje as author-protagonist ends up doing something very different. Instead of discovering himself overtly, he does so covertly by discovering his scandalous, larger-than-life father, Mervyn Ondaatje, and his scattered, iconoclastic maternal grandmother Lalla Grataien. In doing so, he sets the reader the same task that he has set himself, namely, that of discovering the subject of life-writing through the untangling of texts, oral gossip and vague hints, which is precisely what he strives to do in the case of Mervyn and Lalla :

> The reader's decoding problem resembles the writer's own perplexity about his father and his relatives. We are dealing here with an auto/biographical code which, like the Gordian knot, can be undone only by acts of wilful rupturing. The writer, as one of the subjects of his discourse, appears to be a rebus, lurking behind the figure of the father while well ahead of him as he, the son, attempts to rupture the father's silence (Kamboureli, 86).

Mervyn's life was defined by his drunken scandals, and as the author knows too well, scandal is preserved best in gossip. His aunts, siblings, and his father's friends in the army and the foreign services " knit the story together, each memory a wild thread in the sarong"— the story of Mervyn emerging naked and drunk from a railway tunnel, of his getting so drunk that he would stop a train, of his dipsomania finally

leading to his theatrical divorce with Michael's graceful, social mother, Doris, of his lying about studying in Cambridge but using all the tuition money sent by his parents to live lavishly in England. The scandals are public knowledge. But behind the salacious gossip also lies the privately-remembered moments of tenderness :

> …he was an utterly charming man, always gracious. When you spoke to him you knew you were speaking to the real Mervyn. He was always so open and loved those he visited. But none of us knew what he was like when he was drunk… (195)

And, " I remember when Daddy lost his job…he kept saying "I'm ruined. I've ruined all of you… and he would weep. And Mum kept comforting him and saying she would never leave him" (194). Further, "In the end, he used to come to Colombo every two weeks to bring me eggs and fertiliser for my garden. He was subdued then, no longer the irrepressible Mervyn we used to know, very kind and quiet." (198)

Ondaatje does not name these speakers in the section named "Dialogues". Their anecdotes merge into each other, and show that the subject of biography is a continuously shifting subject based on who you get your information from. Even all these biographical details, Ondaatje feels, are insufficient to fully know his father, to ground Mervyn and Michael in the intimacy of the filial relationship :

> There is so much to know and we can only guess…To know him from these stray actions I am told about by those who loved him. And yet, he is still one of those books we long to read whose pages remain uncut. (202)

When biography fails, Ondaatje turns to Shakespeare to make his dead, silent father speak the words of paternal recognition he longs to hear, the words that would validate this biographical effort —"Sweet Marjoram"— the words that blind Gloucester said to his son Edgar, who infinitely deferred that moment of recognition. But his father ultimately remains as inscrutable as the Sinhalese-Tamil gibberish song he used to sing when drunk, a realisation that points towards the unknowability of the subject of life-writing, be it biographical or autobiographical, and the impossibility of ever "completing" an account of one's life. The "finished persona" of

autobiography thus recedes further into the horizon, and indeed, Running in the Family endlessly defers the creation of such a persona, both for its biographical and autobiographical subjects and prefers instead to sit on the generic lines of novel, memoir, biography and gossip column. As Smaro Kamboureli puts it, "Running in the Family is only the preface to Ondaatje's autobiography" (90), which may or may not ever come to fruition.

The Sin of the Father— Fun Home and the mirroring of sexuality "Cartoons are like maps to me, and Fun Home "is a fairly accurate map of my life" — Alison Bechdel, at a PEN Conference Alison Bechdel's Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic is the simultaneous coming-out memoir of the author and her father Bruce Bechdel, where the blurry line between autobiography and biography is challenged by its graphic form. The cover picture, a cross-hatched reproduction of a photograph of her father, foregrounds the biographical subject before the autobiographical, and the opening panel, where the child Alison plays "aeroplane" with her father, suggests that she is the winged Icarus to his Daedalus—not just Bruce's biological offspring , but also the designed product shaped by his monomania, literary influences and sexual orientation. As Laura Marcus says :

> Recounting one's own life almost inevitably entails writing the life of an other or others; writing the life of another must surely entail the biographer's identifications with his or her subject, whether these are made explicit or not (273).

Here, in navigating her own identity as a lesbian, Bechdel is inextricably drawn to her father's lifelong experience of living as a closeted gay man, and to reconcile his double life as a husband and father and a furtive lover who slept with his male high-school students. While Ondaatje, who has no adult interactions with his father, but only blurred childhood memories and secondhand accounts of him, comes to terms with fragmented bits of his life through a fragmented form of writing, Bechdel, whose whole life till adulthood was shaped by her father's influence, uses the distinct possibilities offered by the graphic novel to trace her relationship with her father through archives, pictorial representations and literary materials. In *Fun Home*, she initially reads her family history suspiciously, plumbing family snapshots, letters, and favoured novels, interpreting against the grain, to trace her queer genealogy, to question her father's many failings and reconcile her fraught relationship with her

him with "her queer and artistic inheritance from him." (Richardson). But her reading of her father holds implications for her reading of her own life, because if she takes the obvious route and blames her father's closetted homosexuality and dishonesty to her mother as the cause of her fraught parental relationship, she would contribute to American media's distrust and condemnation of homosexual people as dangers to the family unit, and thereby colour her own identity as a lesbian with internalised homophobia.Bechdel however does not draw a straight line between her father's life and hers. She instead maps the identifications and differences between them through her use of temporal juxtaposition in the graphic form. Her father's absence through his death (by accident/suicide) when she was nearly twenty echoes back to the emotional absence she felt from him throughout her growing-up years, which is reflected in how she puts panels with the child Alison and thirty-something Bruce alongside panels with the Alison aged 18-19 and Bruce in his early forties. And it is this absence, both literal and figurative, that she seeks to bridge through her joint act of autobiography and biography by linking herself with him.

It can be argued that the narrative structure of *Fun Home* rests on three pivotal points in Alison's life— i)her own "big lesbian epiphany" in her first year of college and her subsequent coming out to her parents via letter ii) the discovery of her father's homosexuality by her mother, also communicated to her via letter, and iii) her father's death. In the comic, these events happen in the mere space of three pages, with the panels facing each other on the pages of the open book. In the topmost panel of page 79, a startled Alison exclaims in reply to her mother — "*Dad*? With other *men*?", and in the topmost panel of page 80, a naked Alison lies in bed with her girlfriend Joan, with books of lesbian feminist theory strewn about her. In the last panel of the same page, Alison learns of her father's death on a phone call. This arrangement of events haunts Alison throughout the book, with the question— did her declaration of her homosexuality, and the simultaneous shameful discovery of her father's, cause his death? She understands the logical fallacy of this causal connection—after all, she is not sure if her father died by deliberately throwing himself under a truck or by accidentally getting hit— but she is reluctant to let go of this "last tenuous bond" of life and death between her father and herself. The ambiguousness of his death tempts her to read his life, in search of the concrete understanding of his emotional truth that he eludes even in death. As Gudmundsdottir notes

> an attempt to offer some cohesion to the 'muddled', 'unclear', and 'loose ends' of

> a parent's life" creates "a solid base from which to view one's own life. Giving a sense of cohesion and closure to a parent's life can establish a sense of authority and meaning in the writer's own life story. (187).

For Bechdel, too, understanding his life and death is crucial to understanding her life, because Fun home is ultimately her attempt to animate and release the repression that she could have inherited from her father, "My father's end was my beginning. Or more precisely, […] the end of his lie coincided with the beginning of my truth".(33)

She seeks this closure through the secret her father kept all his life, and her own responses to it. She finds scattered evidence of his secret in his monomaniacal restoration of their Gothic house, and his obsession with propriety, and of her own rebellion against this sexual repression in her annoyed flouting of all that her father thought appropriate. To Alison, it seems that her father's obsession with artificial propriety is a way of making "things appear to be what they were not", to put a veneer of suburban conformity and aesthetic perfection over his deep self-loathing, to present his own life story as an ideal husband and father, when that was far from the truth. His attention to restoring the elegant embellishments of their dilapidated Gothic mansion and his impeccable maintenance of his own personal appearance is his artistic expression, his art not mirroring life so much as covering it. Bechdel initially herself poses as his opposite, taking Proust's antiquated definition of homosexuality as inversion— she is "spartan to my father's Athenian" (the panel shows a child Alison shooting a gun while Bruce reads), "modern to his Victorian" (child Alison tosses paper into a Smiley bin in the Gothic home), "Butch to his Nelly" (she contests his idea of proper necklines), and "utilitarian to his aesthete" (she grumbles about dusting the ornamental furniture). But even this inversion only confirms how dependant their identities are on each other's – in his policing of her femininity, Bruce tries to find his gender expression through her, and in her awe of her father, she tries to find hers through him, leading to a curious meeting-point of their desires, where they find the same thing erotic, but in different ways. Bechdel calls this their "slender demilitarized zone—our shared reverence for masculine beauty", where she, exploring her identity as a butch lesbian, wants the muscles and tweed she sees in men's magazines for herself, while her father is attracted to that beauty and wants the pearls and velvet that Alison rejects, for himself . Their

mirroring trajectories of exploring their sexuality come together in a panel where Bechdel draws her hands holding a photo of Bruce, in a girls' swimsuit and herself in a men's suit, seeing in it a translation between her father and herself.

However, even as she tries to establish this tenuous bond with her father, Bechdel accepts the fact that perhaps she cannot resurrect her father into words from beyond the grave. That unknowability of his life and death remains the site of her trauma, and the graphic form makes particular use of this by replaying over and over again the scene of her father getting hit by a truck. As Caruth points out, "to be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event" (4-5). The scene of that death weaves in and out of the text from the first chapter to the last, from different perspectives, but all boiling down to the same question—was it an accident or a suicide? In the last few pages of the book, she accepts, after all her puzzling, that she "shouldn't pretend to know what my father's [truth] was", neither of his death nor of his sexuality. Perhaps even her effort to write him as gay as opposed to bisexual or some other category is her way of making him her double, what she calls "an inverted Oedipal complex". Nor can she, as her self-admitted falsification in her childhood journal demonstrates, adequately trust her own memories of her childhood with him, even as she seeks to interpret them to give her story a narrative causality. But as Gardner writes, not having the surety of knowledge can also be a good thing in a memoir that blurs boundaries between self and other, because :

> Only by allowing the past to bleed into history, fact to bleed into fiction, image into text, might we begin to allow our own pain to bleed into the other, and more urgently, the pain of the other to bleed into ourselves (23).

In allowing this merging of identities, Bechdel reclaims her father from a one-sided view of him as a menacing homosexual who destroyed the family and acknowledges him both as her artistic and her queer predecessor, her father both spiritually as well and geneaologically. In the last page of the book, her father dies, metaphorically hurtling into the sea, and remains there to catch her as she too leaps into the water, into a life that both converges into and diverges away from her father. Her own life story as an openly lesbian artist can only start with this understanding of her father's sins, and like Joyce's "fatherless" Stephen Daedelus that

she alludes to throughout her text, her journey begins with an invocation to him— "Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead."

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