1988

Self Myths and the Autobiography of Renunciation in 20th Century North America

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Recommended Citation

As many of you probably know, some post-modern literary theorists have claimed that the self does not exist, that only language exists. I’m not sure that the idea can be proven one way or the other, but there are dozens of literary philosophers around who have given the idea both plausibility and respectability. However, what does seem clear is that language and reality are interdependent. What really interests me in the idea that language precedes self is its relevance to the subject of autobiography. The theory that language precedes the self leads to the inevitable conclusion that the only way in which a self can exist at all is by means of stories that we tell about ourselves. To fail to have some kind of autobiographical construct is in some important ways to fail to exist at all.

However, according to the same theorists, we do not simply make up stories about ourselves out of a vacuum as God is said to have created the universe. In fact, language is a cultural system, not a tool in the hands of autonomous individuals. Instead of using this verbal system to create our selves, the system creates or “writes” us. Meaning, in other words, is not ‘natural’ or ‘out there’ to be perceived or created. The way we interpret the world and define ourselves is a function of the languages that our cultures place at our disposal. What meaning we are able to make depends on the languages that we share in the first place (Eagleton, 107).

Given this assumption that language is a cultural fact that precedes and produces meaning and the self, it is not surprising
that some researchers have turned to the language of autobiography not for what it has to tell us about some individual (the so-called author), but rather for what it can tell us about a culture and about the kinds of stories possible in the language of that culture.

One of the projects undertaken by students of North American autobiography has been to root out from the great number of works in this genre the ways in which authors have repeatedly "emplotted" themselves, or rather the ways in which the culture's language has "emplotted" them. This is perhaps just a fancy way of saying that they are looking for those myths of the self that North Americans use, often unconsciously, when they tell stories about themselves. These myths seem to be rather limited in number; although, of course, the details and events of the individual stories that embody those myths differ considerably.

The more important of these myths seem to have arisen early in the country's history, to have arisen, in fact, in Europe, where Spanish, English, Dutch, and French visionaries dreamed dreams of America from which America has never completely awakened. The most basic of these dreams has revolved around the idea that the self can be regenerated on American soil. The plot structure most frequently employed by individual autobiographers whose lives are defined by this regeneration myth is the conversion plot, which derives from Christian conversion narratives. There are dozens of North American autobiographies that can serve as examples of this, beginning with the very earliest works in our colonial literature (the Puritan conversion narrative and the captivity narrative), it is reflected again in 18th Century works such as Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, it was picked up in the 19th Century by black writers whose narratives of escape from slavery follow the same conversion pattern, and it has continued into the 20th Century in the autobiographies of writers who experienced historical enlightenment under the influence of Marxism during the 1930s or New Leftism in the 1960s.

In all of these works, the narrator rejects his old self and assumes a new self created by a new faith or ideology. The old and new selves in this conversion pattern have been defined variously. In Puritan narratives these selves were still identified in Christian terms. The old self was the Pauline (or New Testament) Old Adam of the flesh. The new self was the Pauline New Adam of the Spirit. But even for the Puritans, the myth was beginning to undergo a secularization and Americanization that continued
over the course of three centuries. Even for the Puritans, and certainly in the next century for writers like Crevecoeur, the old self was increasingly defined as European; the new self as American. The emphasis of all of these narratives, however, was always on the NEW, whether that was defined as the New Adam of the Christian narrative, the new democratic and American self in the 18th Century narrative, the new free man in the slave narrative, or the new proletarian or socialist in the 20th century leftist narrative.

In the course of reading works in this vein, I became aware of a significant group of modern North American autobiographies which, even though they follow the traditional conversion pattern in some respects, introduce new and significant elements. In these new works, the basic conversion pattern of old self/new self is retained, but the narrator’s attention is almost entirely focussed on the old self and the old faith that are being rejected. In a distinctly un-America turn, these works display a new faith whose regenerative power is so weak that it cannot rival the rejected vitality of the old self’s faith (or ideology). The final state of the authorial self is, therefore, dominated by a sense of loss: the Old Adam is dead, the spirit and flesh have been mortified, but the New Adam has unfortunately failed to arise from the grave. The author, even with his or her new values, remains obsessed and haunted by the old self.

These works contain what I take to be a new American “plot” (and perhaps even something as significant as a 20th Century North American myth): they constitute a subgenre of North American autobiography that I call the “autobiography of renunciation.” One could even call them “deconversion” narratives, for they almost all relate the story of a dramatic loss of faith.

The differences I have briefly outlined above between the conversion narrative and the autobiography of renunciation are crucial, both in terms of the author’s intentions and in terms of what it reveals about North American life in this century. Those who undertake one or the other of these forms do so with different intentions in order to achieve different effects. In the conversion narrative, the author undertakes to retell his life story in order to win readers to a newly acquired faith. Conversion narratives are called such because they relate the (usually sudden) “turning” of their narrator and because they are intended to inspire a similar turning in their readers. So while the author of such works recounts the misadventures and sins of a former self, he or she does so fully aware of the seductive
dangers of relating those sins to readers. The wise conversion author, therefore, makes sure that the narrative dealing with the sinful self remains subordinate to the celebratory vision of the new self and the new faith.

The autobiography of renunciation, on the other hand, is a non-evangelical form; it bears no good news. The new identity and values of the author are, in other words, merely an incidental facet of the present perspective of the narrative persona, but the focus of the autobiography of renunciation remains fixed upon the renounced faith and the renounced, former self. As former insiders (as former dreamers of some lost American dream), such authors can lay claim to a uniquely privileged view of the weaknesses of that dream; they have special access not only to the tenets of its ideology, but also, presumably, to the psychological mechanisms that motivate its followers. The motivations for such stories are a blend of those that lie behind the expose and the confession. The author feels compelled to make public the hidden evils of his former faith, while at the same time he/she seeks readmittance into the community through public self-castigation.

Since the twentieth century has often been characterized as a period of lost and shaken faiths, particularly of those faiths that have attributed meaning to history, it is not surprising that this form has flourished in modern times. (It has also been the period during which the American Dream has lost much of its credibility.) To cite one well known example: many North Americans who identified themselves with communist historicism during the 1930s went through a severe personal crisis after those historical events that disconfirmed their notion of history: at the time of the Moscow trials in the mid-1930s, or later after the Hitler-Stalin Pacto of 1939, or later yet after the Khrushchev revelations in 1956. Reacting to these events, a number of Communists wrote autobiographies in which they renounced the former self that had placed faith in the Marxist view of history. Whittaker Chambers’ Witness (1952) is the best known of these self-renunciations, but there are a number of others, most notably Benjamin Gitlow’s I Confess (1940), Louis Budenz’s This Is My Story (1947) and Elizabeth Bentley’s Out of Bondage (1951). Chambers’ and Budenz’s books are both written from the perspective of a new, and all-embracing, ideology (Capitalism/Quakerism and Catholicism, respectively), but the center of interest in each work remains the Communist faith.

The 1960s constituted another period during which various forms of historicism thrived, although the particular pre-view of
history held by members of the New Left of the 1960s was never worked out in such dogmatic detail as was that of North American Marxists during the 1930s. But in spite of their greater flexibility, many leftists of the 60s were clearly seduced by a prophetic vision of U.S. history that it subsequently failed to live up to. The autobiographies that arose out of this “betrayal” of faith were never as virulently self-renunciatory as those that arose out of the betrayal of the hopes of the 30s. At the same time, one can see a roughly similar historical situation giving rise to a similarly reactive autobiographical form. Three examples of the autobiography of renunciation from this period are Dotson Rader’s *Blood Blues* (1973), Jerry Rubin’s *Growing (Up) at 37* (1976) and Jane Alpert’s *Growing Up Underground* (1981). [In order not to give the impression that it is only the left that produces such autobiographies, I hasten to add that the political right has also produced its share of such works: the autobiography of renunciation is probably the major pattern of Vietnam War memoirs, where the author (a disillusioned veteran) renounces a former self (a blindly patriotic soldier) and a former faith (the American Dream).]

Jane Alpert’s *Growing Up Underground* (1981) stands in relation to the experience and identity of the 60s generation in roughly the same way that the autobiographies of renunciation written during the 40s and 50s stood in relation to the experience of those who “went left” in the 1930s. Like many of these 30s writers, Alpert went through a process of politicization (actually her first conversion) that ended in her commitment to the destruction of “all of the values of the military and corporate enterprise” in the name of some vaguely conceived socialism. Alpert was motivated, according to her own retrospective account, by sexual insecurity and her need for the approval of a sociopathic man with whom she had fallen in love. Her seduction by the idea of revolution was, in other words, really a much more mundane seduction.

Although Alpert belonged to a very small group, consisting of hardly a dozen members, she firmly believed that her bombing of buildings in Manhattan would be supported by “thousands” who “would support us, cheer us, imitate us” (176) and that she was representative of a large constituency of North American youth who simply lacked the courage to act out their beliefs (123). Later on, when the New Left began to disintegrate and the apparent unity of her generation began to show signs of weakening, Alpert was forced to reassess her adopted self. She
realized that there was no effective collective movement behind her identity, and that she had committed herself to an illusion.

Alpert's re-emergence from this conception of her self eventually proceeded through two stages: during the first transition or conversion, she rejected her Movement identity and adopted a second identity as a militant feminist. Like her first identity, the feminist one initially provided her with a "revolutionary ideology that explains everything - sociology, economics, psychology, anthropology, and religion" (346).

In spite of the fact that Alpert's rejection of the New Left and her conversion to radical feminism are central features of the plot of her narrative, her book is a good example of my earlier definition of the autobiography of renunciation. Alpert's narrative is not told from the point of view of her radical feminism, and she is not interested in winning converts to that political persuasion. Instead, the narrative is told from a perspective that she has acquired after the story told in the narrative ends; she has, in other words, undergone a final deconversion that is not narrated in the autobiography, but which is implied by the authorial stance. I would call this final self a moderate-feminist/psychological one, but its vagueness of definition is characteristic of the autobiography of renunciation. The true center of interest in Alpert's book is not her present self, or the ideology that it has adopted, but her past selves and their ideologies. She narrates the story of her radical left identity and her radical feminist identity in order that she might renounce them both. "How I came to believe and act as I did," Alpert writes in her preface, "and later, in a spirit of renunciation, to surrender and go to prison - that is the core of this autobiography" (18).

There are a good many more things that could be said about Alpert's book, particularly in relation to the entire subgenre, but I see that my allotted space has just about run out, and I would like to conclude these remarks by posing some questions and making some observations about the possible implications of this group of works.

The fact that the conversion autobiography has been an important form of self-construction in America for the last three centuries is sufficient testimony to the continuing strength of the idea that America is a place in which the self may be radically renewed and of that strain of our religious heritage that gives priority to emotion and instantaneous vision. Even authors of renunciation autobiographies, who appear to reject the conversion
experience, usually do so by means of yet another conversion. Thus, for example, Jane Alpert extricates herself from her initial conversion to the extreme left by undergoing another conversion to militant feminism, from which she later has to extricate herself by her final deconversion to a moderately feminist psychologism.

But even though the strength of the belief in the renewable, disposable, replaceable American self continues to dominate the culture in obvious ways, a significant segment of the society has begun to experience doubts. I think it is clear too that the demographics of this disillusionment do not follow traditional political lines. The North American belief in the New Adam and the American Dream is so strong that it is shared, it seems to me, just about equally by people on the left and people on the right. Most of the books I have talked about here have been by members of the American left, but I could just as easily have spent my time discussing the narratives of converted patriots of the right who deconverted in the wake of the collision of the American Dream with Vietnam. For all of these writers, the American Dream Machine and its principal lubricant, the conversion narrative, failed to live up to their advertising.

One final observation and one unavoidable question. The observation is that the most recent of these writers have not produced old-fashioned conversion narratives primarily because they couldn't conceive of yet another Newer American Adam. The question is: what does this failure signify about the United States today? As a tentative answer, I would venture that this failure is an indication of the problem that the U.S. as a whole is having in resuscitating a belief in itself after the disillusionment that marked the end of the era we now call the sixties. But from the outside (from Spain, for example), it must appear as if Americans since the election of Reagan have simply decided to give up trying to re-invent themselves with any sense of originality. It must appear as if we were all crowding into a dark theatre where we can forget the complications of modern life by imposing upon them a scenario imagined by a second rate writer of American Westerns. But I think that this is a mistaken impression. Americans in the 80s, if I may end on a note of grand generalization, are much more self-doubting than the bravado of Reagan would have you believe, and this self-doubt is, it seems to me, a quality that partially redeems them from their often misguided dreams and the power that has allowed them to enact those dreams. The autobiographies of renunciation provide the plotted forms of that doubt.
WORKS CITED


