



Patrimony, Solitude and Obligation: Prodigal Sons and Absent Fathers

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ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

As a contribution to the verifiable moment that auto/biographical explorations of the father are undergoing in the first two decades of the 21st century, my paper focuses on four authors whose relational memoirs “go beyond the subject.” In particular, I focus on a comparative analysis of three hybrid texts — Paul Auster’s *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), Philip Roth’s *Patrimony* (1991), and Richard Rodriguez’s *Days of Obligation: an Argument with my Mexican Father* (1992) —, and I include a parallel reading of Dutch author Henri J. M. Nouwen’s spiritual journey *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1992). My transnational, transethnic reading of these very disparate versions of what has been called “patrimoir” (André Gérard, 2011) or “patriography” (Couser, 2011) will explore how these authors mix their own portrait with the extended portrait of their (real or metaphoric) father, applying different myths, borrowing forms and strategies from literary antecedents, transgressing norms of familial secrecy and privacy, but — in the end — paying homage to their paternal legacy.

ABSTRACT IN SPANISH

Como contribución a los recientes estudios sobre autobiografías centradas en la figura paterna, tan en boga en las dos primeras décadas del siglo XXI, mi trabajo se centra en cuatro autores cuyas memorias relacionales van más allá del yo del autor. En particular, me centro en un análisis comparativo de tres textos — *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) de Auster, *Patrimony* (1991) de Roth, y *Days of Obligation: an Argument with my Mexican Father* (1992) de Richard Rodriguez, y propongo una lectura paralela del viaje espiritual que el autor holandés Henri JM Nouwen emprende en *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1992).

Mi lectura transnacional y transétnica de estas versiones de lo que se ha dado en llamar “patre-moir” (André Gérard, 2011) o “patriography” (Couser, 2011) explora cómo estos autores mezclan su autorretrato con el retrato ampliado de sus padres (reales o metafóricos), aplicando diferentes mitos, utilizando formas y estrategias de diversos antecedentes literarios, transgrediendo normas de secreto familiar y de privacidad, pero, en el fondo, brindando un homenaje al legado paterno.

Keywords: “Patriography”, Philip Roth; Richard Rodriguez; Paul Auster

INTRODUCTION

That all identity is relational is an unquestionable idea, as John Eakin reminded us in his 1999 book *How our Lives Become Stories*. However, after the now classic ground-breaking essay “Women’s Autobiography and the Male Tradition” by Estelle Jelinek (1980), where she listed some thematic, formal, stylistic and identitarian characteristics that could be verified in most women’s autobiographies – as compared to men’s, feminist scholars of life writing insisted that relational autobiography was mainly a woman’s thing — because women’s identity is more relational than men’s. Emancipated from the strict gender/genre polarities of the 1980s and 1990s, today’s scholarship tends to liberate men’s autobiography from the inadequate (and unjustly assigned) myth of total autonomy and individualistic portraits because, as Eakin rightly asserts, “experience and comparative analyses have proved that the criterion of relationality applies equally *if not identically* to male experience” (1999, 50, emphasis in the original).

In the lines that follow, I will explore the relational aspects utilized in memoirs by four male authors that go beyond the subject: Philip Roth’s *Patrimony* (1991), Richard Rodriguez’s *Days of Obligation: an Argument with my Mexican Father* (1992), Paul Auster’s *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) and Henri J. M. Nouwen’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son: a Story of Homecoming* (1992). My transatlantic, transethnic reading of these very disparate versions of what has been called “patre-moir” (Gérard),¹ or “patriography” (Couser 2011),² will explore how these authors mix their own portrait with the extended portraits of their (real or metaphoric) fathers, applying different myths, borrowing forms and strategies from literary antecedents, transgressing norms of familial secrecy and privacy, but — in the end — paying homage to their paternal legacy. These narratives oscillate so clearly between the father’s biography and the son’s autobiography that they may also be termed “auto/biography” (Couser 2004, 56). In all cases, however, the texts under scrutiny would more generally be

instances of what Couser has named “narratives of filiation,” a term that he uses rather than merely “memoirs of fathers,” because he also seeks to highlight their relationality – their intent or tendency to assert or enact some kind of engagement with the father (2005, 635).

“All fathers except mine are invisible in daytime; daytime is ruled by mothers, and fathers come out at night. Darkness brings home fathers, with their real, unspeakable power. There is more to fathers than meets the eye,” says Margaret Atwood in *Cat’s Eye*. Indeed, one of the glaring ironies of this subgenre is that usually the authors’ mothers are literally more present and more vivid than their fathers, the narratives’ nominal subjects. And yet, the female parent, while present in the life of the narrator, is overlooked in the narrative, which is devoted to the pursuit of a relationship with an “elusive male parent” (Couser 2005, 637).

PRODIGAL SONS

The first two books of autobiographical essays I shall be discussing first, *Days of Obligation* and *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, were published in 1992. Beyond that chronological coincidence, they also coincide in that both works are clear recipients of the spiritual autobiography tradition.

As is well know, Richard Rodriguez writes his first autobiographical volume, *Hunger for Memory* (1982) from the perspective of the fully assimilated and successful American intellectual who, nevertheless, needs to return, to retrace his childhood steps in order to come to terms with the great loss that his Americanization demanded. But, while Rodriguez structures his text in the form of the secular conversion “from rags to riches,” from *barrio* to cultural elite, from private Spanish to public English, it is my contention that he is at the same time using the figure of the Prodigal Son as his typological biblical model. Let us recall that this is a parable in the New Testament (Luke 15: 11–32) of the younger son who gathered his portion of goods inherited from his father and took his journey into a distant country and there squandered his fortune with wasteful and prodigal living. But later there arose a mighty famine in that land, and he began to be in want. The young man decides to return to his father, who receives him with joy and celebrates his welcome with a big banquet. Bearing in mind Rodriguez’s title, *Hunger for Memory*, the resonances with the biblical parable begin to apply. Like the Prodigal Son, Rodriguez also gathered his Mexican cultural and linguistic parental legacy and took his journey — to mainstream America, to academic success and to monolingualism — where he “spent” with prodigality this legacy in his obsessive quest for total assimilation. But one day, as he’s studying at the British Library as a Fulbright

researcher in London, he begins to feel the “famine” brought by solitude and acculturation, and to feel hungry for the past:

After years *spent* unwilling to admit its attractions, I gestured nostalgically toward the past. I yearned for that time when I had not been so alone.... One day I heard some Spanish academics whispering back and forth to each other, and their sounds seemed *ghostly voices* recalling my life. Yearning became preoccupation then. Boyhood memories beckoned, flooded my mind. (1982, 72, my emphasis)

The language used in this passage inevitably reminds us of other climactic moments of conversion in spiritual autobiographies in which the converted “hears” a revelatory voice (reminiscent of the Augustinian *tolle lege* — “take and read”) that will foster the conversion. In fact, as Bill Shuter has suggested, although Rodriguez subtitled his first book “The Education of Richard Rodriguez,” it might as well have been titled “The Confessions of Richard Rodriguez” because as he recounts it, the history of his education is the history of youthful transgression. His sin was a sin against intimacy, a violation of the enclosed warmth of family life, of that private place to which, without reflection, one knew that one belonged (Shuter 99). We are not told if these “ghostly voices” he hears at the library make him go back to his father straight away, but, certainly, they propel a sort of secular conversion: it can be no coincidence that the book ends with a description of a Christmas dinner at his parents’ home.

In this family scene the focus is centered around the father – son encounter that occurs after the meal, as the father goes out to the porch to say goodbye to his now estranged son. Rodriguez concludes this scene with the following words: “In that instant I feel the thinness of his arms. He turns. He asks if I am going home now too” (1982, 195). To John Eakin, the father’s unanswered question means that Rodriguez knows that home is somewhere else and that his story takes him at the last to a point of separation from his family (1992, 135). To me, however, with the parable of the Prodigal Son as a referent, it means rather the contrary: the father is reminding his son that, once back, this will always be *his* home too. Richard has, significantly at Christmas, returned home, even if his public life is away from it. That is, the overall movement of Rodriguez’s journey is, eventually, a return to a Mexican home he once rejected and run away from. Ten years later, that story of homecoming would be exposed in a more challenging and symbolic way in his second autobiographical book: *Days of Obligation: an Argument with my Mexican Father*, a book that has been eclipsed by the never-ending controversy over *Hunger for Memory*. But this time the prodigal son returns to a triple father: Mr. Rodriguez, Mexico, and the Father God of his Catholic faith.

I wish to link my interpretation of the ending of *Hunger of Memory* above with *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, by Catholic Theologian Henri Nouwen, a Dutch-born priest and writer who authored some forty books on spirituality and religion, and who, after two decades of teaching at Yale and Harvard University, went to share his life with mentally handicapped people at a community in Toronto until he died in 1996. In *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Nouwen develops his chance encounter with Rembrandt's painting of the same title in 1983, an almost miraculous encounter which is described as a moment of supreme revelation that would change his life. Inspired by the painting, the book dissects each section of the biblical parable, applying it to Nouwen's own life journey, because in it, he saw himself as the son who needed to be embraced after so many years of wandering away from the Father. But what strikes me as most interesting in Nouwen's study of the Father figure in the painting is his detailed scrutiny of the father's hands, as painted by Rembrandt (*Figure 1*). One of the hands is masculine, says Nouwen, while the other is feminine; one is a paternal embrace; the other, a maternal one. "He sustains, while she caresses. He asserts, while she consoles" (108). Those hands, Nouwen contends, represent God, "whose *paternity and maternity* are always present" (108, my emphasis).

This is the element that has inspired my transatlantic bridge between a Dutch priest, contemplating a painting at the Hermitage in St Petersburg, and a Mexican-American intellectual, traveling from his hometown in California to his "Parents' village"³ in Mexico. Because, if Rembrandt's

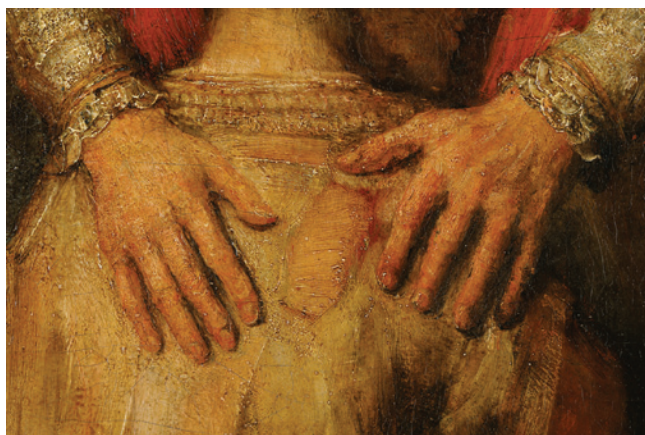


Figure 1. Rembrandt. "The Return of the Prodigal Son"
Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. Detail.

portrait of the welcoming father is bi-parental, according to Nouwen's analysis, so is the Mexico that welcomes Rodriguez when he returns to it.

In Rodriguez's *Days of Obligation* we have the image of a man who, after spending "so many years with his back turned to Mexico" (xvi), submerges himself in nostalgia, decides to return to his fatherland, and initiates his autobiographical journey determined to get rid of all the wrongly digested preconceptions of Mexico. And he is aware that he will present his life in reverse: after all, Rodriguez thinks, the journey his parents took once from Mexico to America was "a journey from an ancient culture to a youthful one — backward in time" (xvii). The son now decides to take the reverse path "if only to honor their passage to California" (xviii). In the introductory chapter, Rodriguez first appears as member of a TV crew; as the presenter for a BBC documentary on Mexico. This is the opening scene: "I am on my knees, my mouth over the mouth of the toilet, waiting to heave" (xv). It does not seem very appropriate to initiate a book with a vomit scene. But rhetorically speaking, it offers many possibilities, since, if his vomiting is real, it is, much more so, metaphorical. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva tells us that food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection, and she continues: "'I' want none of that element, 'I' do not assimilate it; 'I' expel it [...]. But since the food is not an 'other' for me, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself" (3). Likewise, Rodriguez is in fact expelling or throwing up himself, or, rather, he is spiting a wrong image of Mexico that he simply can no longer stomach, and he continues: "Bits and pieces of Mexico spew from my mouth, warm, half-understood, nostalgic reds and greens dangle from long strands of saliva" (xv)⁴. Having vomited old and prejudiced visions of Mexico, his newly established self undertakes his physical and mental itinerary to his fatherland, more inclined to swallow and to learn that he is Mexican too, after all; that "each face looked like mine. But no one looked at me" (21), because he belongs there, and because he feels, for the first time in his life, the comfort of recognition, of familiarity (Schilt 437).

Why do I keep placing emphasis on the word *fatherland*? Because in Spanish there is only one word to describe one's father/motherland. That word is "*patria*," and it comes from Latin *pater* (father). However, in Spanish we say *la patria* (it is a feminine word) and we often add the adjectivized noun "mother" and talk of "*la madre patria*" (literally, "the maternal fatherland"). In the chapter entitled "Mexico's Children" Rodriguez draws a comparison between America as a public country and Mexico as a private land; but one of the many dichotomies presented in this chapter refers to gender imaginaries, as applied to nations. America is a *he*; America is a father, Rodriguez contends: "George Washington is the father of

the country, we say. We speak of Founding Fathers..... When America is burned in effigy, a male is burned. Americans themselves speak of Uncle Sam" (62). Mexico, on the contrary, is female:

A true mother, Mexico would not distinguish among her children. Her protective arm extended not only to the Mexican nationals working in the United States, but to the larger number of Mexican Americans as well. Mexico was not interested in passports... No matter how far away you moved, you were still related to her. (57)

So, although he has a United States passport, Rodriguez feels he has returned to his *madre patria*. Because he needs both embraces, the protective arm of the motherland, and the reassuring arm of the fatherland that welcomes the prodigal son. And, in fact, Mexico, in Rodriguez's romanticized view of his ancestry, is the result of love, of Indian and European men and women mixing, intermarrying, and bearing brown children, *mestizos*, as he will explore in his next autobiographical book, *Brown: the Last Discovery of America* (2002), and as he feels now: "In New England the European and the Indian drew apart to regard each other with suspicion over centuries. Miscegenation was a sin against Protestant individualism. In Mexico the European and the Indian consorted" (1992, 13).

Some critics have accused Rodriguez of presenting a philosophical contradiction in some of his postures about Mexican miscegenation. However, he partially solves this problem by his unusual understanding of what it means to assimilate or to convert. In Madelaine Walker's words, there is a significant difference between the usual meaning of being absorbed *by* the dominant culture and Rodriguez's conception of absorption *of* that culture (78). In this sense, in his rumination about Indians and how Indian-ness matters to his own identity as an American, Rodriguez sets the Indian not in the passive role of being appropriated by the Spanish, but as an active agent that was able to welcome and absorb another culture, and mix it with its own, as his words make clear: "I take it as an Indian achievement that I am alive, that I am Catholic, that I speak English, that I am an American. My life began, it did not end, in the sixteenth century" (24). In fact, as Paige Schilt (433) has rightly put it, Rodriguez is able to champion both a universal cultural tradition and a specifically Mexican sense of history because the values that he associates with a maternal Mexico are transnational. That is, the Mexican sense of history that Rodriguez invokes is not the reverence for a rural past that he deplores in the Chicano or the *MECHA*⁵ movements, or a claim to a particular piece of land called *Atzlán*: instead, he suggests that, to maintain a Mexican sense of history is not to uphold a parochial and separate

cultural identity but to partake of a sensibility that stretches across historical time periods, and territorial boundaries.

Days of Obligation in many ways, constitutes an expanded dialogue (and “argument”) of the adult son with his Mexican father, around life issues in the United States and in Mexico. But this time the son is not just the assimilated American trying to convince himself — and his readers — of the gains that his departure from his Mexican heritage entailed; now he is also the Mexican who has returned to his father/motherland to observe it *as an insider*, with the more neutral, if more sensitive and emotional eyes that only age and experience can provide. The American son had to get away, Rodriguez explains, because “his father remained Mexican in California” (219); and this was in the son’s way towards Americanization. But now, the aged son finally understands the tragedy of his Mexican father; orphaned as a boy, who dreamt of going to Australia, but whose dream remained unfulfilled in the narrow life he lived making false teeth for Chinese dentists in Sacramento:

My father understands that life is as surprising as it is disappointing. He left Mexico in his late twenties for Australia. He ended up in Sacramento in a white coat, in a white room, surrounded by shelves of grinning false teeth. Irony has no power over my father. (228)

And it is this understanding of his father’s personal drama that brings the poetic closure to this argument with his Mexican father:

Ask me what it was like to have grown up a Mexican kid in Sacramento and I will think of my father’s smile, its sweetness, its introspection, its weight of sobriety. Mexico was most powerfully my father’s smile, and not, as you might otherwise imagine, not language, not pigment. My father’s smile seemed older than anything around me. (220)

Literally, “Days of Obligation” in the Catholic church are feast days when believers are obliged to celebrate Eucharist. And for Catholics, the Eucharist is nothing else than a family reunion of “brethren” around Jesus Christ, the Son of God the Father — represented by the priest —, in which they celebrate and commemorate the Last Supper. There we have, once again, the idea of a return to one’s father; in this case, the God of the Mexican Catholicism that is an integral part of his cultural and ethnic patrimony. But “obligation” can also be interpreted in its non-religious meaning. For the now middle-aged Richard Rodriguez, the days in which he feels the obligation to argue with his Mexican father have arrived. The obligation, I insist, toward both his biological father and his fatherland, to go back to his Mexican roots and to evaluate the heritage that this

prodigal son has neglected for so many years. In other words, the obligation to move from filial transgression to the assessment and recognition of parental transmission.

If Nouwen's book stems from the contemplation of a painting, considering that paratextual element in Rodriguez's case is also important. The cover painting of the 1993 Penguin edition of *Days of Obligation* (Figure 2), offers a detail of the anonymous painting "El Benévolo primer Virrey Don Antonio de Mendoza."

Leaving aside the undoubtedly intended historical fact that Mendoza was Hernán Cortes's superior, what we really perceive is a revert mirror scene in which a man confronts his self-image. The superior and inferior positions of the two faces could signify (a) God confronting man (since man is a reflection of God — according to the Book of Genesis 1:26, God said "Let us make man in our own image"), (b) a father confronting a

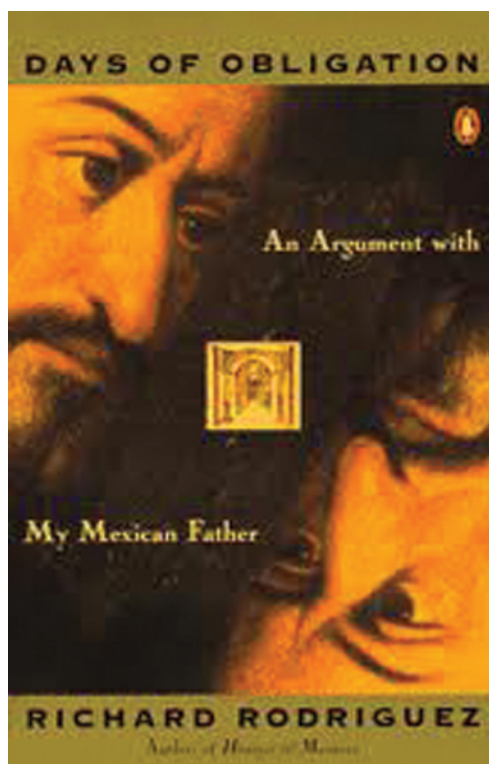


Figure 2.

son, or (c) a man confronting his own self. As a matter of fact, that triple “argument” or confrontation is what, to my view, constitutes the deepest essence and aim of Rodríguez’s book.

ABSENT FATHERS

“In the beginning, in the end, and at bottom, memoirs of fathers, whether by sons or daughters, are mostly about absence,” Thomas Couser has convincingly asserted (2005, 647). This second section deals with two narratives that speak of parental absence: *Patrimony* (1991) by Philip Roth, and *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), by Paul Auster. It is not my intention, however, to analyze them as samples of “Jewish-American autobiography” with an ethnic perspective, as those presenting coming-of-age stories in the Jewish immigrant ghetto, or the conflicting pulls between secular society and Jewish tradition as felt by immigrants and by their children.⁶ In her book *Transnational Matrilineage*, Silvia Schultersmandl studies how contemporary Asian-American writers portray second-generation women who look at their family’s histories through their confrontations with their own mothers. The term “transnational matrilineage” in her case refers to the distance and sense of disconnectedness the daughter protagonists feel as they investigate their matrilineal heritage from within an American perspective. Tempting as the task of tracing “transnational patrilineages” in these two cases may be, I will not focus on ethnicity, for I believe Roth and Auster are not so interested in coming to terms with the cultural distance between their Americanness and their fathers’ Eastern-European Jewishness, as with filling some emotional gaps erected by years of secrecy, absence, or mutual neglect.

So, the reason why I have grouped these two texts together is that both revert to alternative models of presentation of the father – son relationship — not so clearly the prodigal son model, and that both their texts are provoked by a dramatic event: a terminal illness in the case of Roth’s father, and death in the case of Paul Auster’s father. Moreover, Roth and Auster are not really concerned with telling their own life; they also, and even primarily, tell the life of their fathers. Could we, then, talk of their books as biographies?

Autobiography and biography are often distinguished according to whether the narrator is the subject, but Laura Marcus explains how restrictive such a clear division can be: “very recently ... the inadequacy of this conceptual divide has been clearly revealed and far more exciting conjunctures occur, showing how autobiography and biography function together. Recounting one’s own life almost inevitably entails writing the

life of another or others” (Marcus 273–74). On the other hand, in his well-known book *Metaphors of Self* (1972) James Olney, trying to explain “the philosophy and psychology of autobiography” (vii–viii), explored how the autobiographer’s chief means for bringing imaginative order and identity out of the welter of recollected experience is metaphor. From the events of a lifetime or a part of it, he selects what Olney calls “metaphors of self” — key images, tropes, symbols — which compress events into a pattern apprehendable to all readers and to himself. One could argue, taking Olney’s argument further, that one’s parent or any “representative other,” could be interpreted as a “metaphor of self” in autobiography, as a key trope of one’s life, in so far as one describes oneself through the trope of that other, as a specular image — as we saw in Rodriguez’s case.

But what happens, then, when autobiographers become biographers of their parents? Two main problems arise here. As Gudmundsdóttir explains, (186) the first problem is when biography becomes a kind of burglary since, whoever owns one’s life, the biographer always seizes it transgressively. On the other hand, one could also argue that we do not own our life-stories; so the biographer does indeed steal, but what is stolen is something not owned. The second element that plays a large role in the interaction between autobiography and biography is that in many cases the autobiographer is disclosing family secrets or mysteries without permission. Here, then, ethical issues of the right to privacy come to play a large role. In fact, the transgression of “do not tell” impositions is so recurrent in autobiographies that one could consider it a *sine qua non* of relational life stories. Going back to Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory*, he reveals that when her mother read one of his earlier autobiographical essays, she wrote him in protest :

You say too much about the family . . . Why do you have to do that? Writing is one thing, the family is another. . . . Especially I don’t want the gringos knowing about our private affairs. Why should they? Please give this some thought. Please write about something else in the future. Do me this favor. (1982, 178)

As we shall see below, what the two memoirs I discuss next prove is that the revelation of a family secret changes completely the way the authors thought and felt about their parents.

In 1989 Philip Roth published a first autobiography, *The Facts: A Novelist’s Autobiography*. This was a memoir of Roth’s life up to the publication of *Portnoy’s Complaint* in 1969. The book is a rather prosaic and straightforward look back on the author’s coming of age in America: his upbringing, his college days, and his disastrous first marriage. As critic David

Gooblar put it, “it must have seemed a rather conventional book from such a notoriously adventurous writer, had it not been for its prologue and epilogue” (33). The book is prefaced by a brief letter from Roth to his most recent fictional protagonist, Nathan Zuckerman, asking him to read the ensuing memoir and let him know what he thinks of it. Naturally, the book’s epilogue is Zuckerman’s response to Roth, a rather long trashing of the book we have just read, urging him not to publish it: “you are far better off writing about me than ‘accurately’ reporting your own life” (Roth 1989, 161). This meta-autobiographical trick seemed to prove that even when Roth chose to abandon fiction, fiction refused to abandon him (Gooblar 33). But in the preface Roth also wonders if the Rosetta stone of his manuscript may not have been the “eruption of parental longing in a fifty-five-year-old man” (9). That parental longing is what he will proceed to explore in full two years later, in his second autobiographical venture, *Patrimony* (1991), a book that starts with the words “My father,” and whose focus is trained upon Herman Roth throughout, after he is diagnosed with a massive brain tumor.

Like the biblical prodigal son, Philip has an older brother, Sandy. The elder brother, the one who comes second in the genealogical lineage, never betrayed his father’s expectations by becoming a writer like Philip, and, moreover, he gave Herman two grand-children, which Philip never did. In the first scenes of the book, fearing his father’s rapid death during his ordeal, Philip laments having been so stupid when he told his father he did not want to inherit any possessions. The writer son had instructed his father to leave all his money and possessions to his brother Sandy (103). But now, as the elder brother in the biblical parable, he feels brotherly rivalry and parental repudiation (“The feeling of having been cast out by him,” 104), and discovers he wants his share because it is what had been accumulated over a life time “by this obdurate, resolute father of mine” (104). And continues: “I wanted the money because it was his money and I was his son and I had a right to my share, and I wanted it because it was, if not an authentic chunk of his hard-working hide, something like the embodiment of all that he had overcome or outlasted. It was what he had to give me, it was what he had wanted to give me” (104–5).

But instead of the money, he inherits two symbolic tokens, or “metaphors of self”; a synechdoquic shaving mug that belonged to his grandfather, and a Jewish tefillin (the trappings of Orthodox Jewish prayer). But there is yet another piece of patrimony to be inherited by this son. The book’s title comes from the scene, probably the most famous in the book, in which Roth himself plays what can only be called a “maternal role” (Mellard 69). After a time in the hospital that has left him weakened and constipated, Herman excuses himself from a lunch with Philip and

some other guests to try to move his bowels again. After some time passes with Herman still upstairs, Philip goes up to check on his father. Detecting the “overwhelming” (171) smell halfway up the stairs, Philip finds his father naked, stepping out of the shower, and almost in tears.

In a voice as forlorn as any I had ever heard, from him or from anyone, he told me what it hadn't been difficult to surmise. ‘I beshat myself’ [...] The shit was everywhere, smeared underfoot on the bathmat, running over the toilet bowl edge and, at the foot of the bowl, in a pile on the floor. It was splattered across the glass of the shower stall from which he'd just emerged, and the clothes discarded in the hallway were clotted with it. (171–2)

Roth lovingly cleans him up and then cleans the bathroom. And it is there that he finds the true legacy. Almost in astonishment, Roth exclaims, when he realizes: “So that was the patrimony. *And not because cleaning it up was symbolic* of something else but because it wasn't, because it was nothing less or more than the lived reality that it was. There was my patrimony: not the money, not the tefillin, not the shaving mug, but the shit” (176). The beshiting scene, like Rodriguez's vomit scene, is another abject incident. But, according to Kristeva again, what we throw off or “abject” we then fear and desire “because ... [it] threatens to reengulf us and promises to return us to our primal origins” (10). So, having been transported to his primal origins, Roth's upgrading of his father's shit to the category of “patrimony” cannot be described but as sublimation of that abject, in Kristevan terms. Because “in the symptom,” states Kristeva, “the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control. The abject is edged with the sublime” (11). But there is more. Claiming that “the shit” is the patrimony because it is not symbolic paradoxically makes it as symbolic as Rodriguez's vomit, if only because the language works against not taking this scene symbolically. And this is Roth's double paradox: patrimony is not what is inherited or preserved, but also what is given. In the end, Roth proves that patrimony is an act of transmission that requires both connection and distance between generations, and Roth's *Patrimony* (the book), as Nancy Miller, has indicated, “is an attempt at reversing the flow of care between generations; returning, in some sense, the unreturnable, the incommensurability of parental devotion — symbolically” (31).

After having cleaned up his father's shit, we read the following dialogue:

“Don't tell the children,” he said, looking up at me from the bed with his one sighted eye.
 “I won't tell anyone,” I said. “I'll say you're taking a rest.”
 “Don't tell Claire.”
 “Nobody,” I said. (173)

The scene is important because the revelation of this secret poses so starkly the ethical dilemmas of life writing (Eakin 1999, 185). Herman Roth is mortified by his humiliating experience, and is absolutely clear in telling his son that this is an event he wishes no one to ever know. But the son does not fulfill his promise of silence; and yet, his book demonstrates that transgression of privacy is not incompatible with the most profound respect for the integrity of the person. The son-biographer feels he has the right to use this scene as a symbol of the horrors and blessings of one's paternal inheritance. Whether one agrees with this self-attributed right or not, is another matter. What remains clear, after a revelatory dream, is the sentence that closes the book; a sentence that speaks of restoration of filial relation "in obedience to paternal law" (Eakin 1999, 159):

The dream was telling me that, if not in my books or in my life, at least in my dreams I would live perennially as his little son, with the conscience of a little son, just as he would remain alive there not only as my father but as *the* father sitting in judgment on whatever I do. (Roth 1991, 238. Emphasis on the original)

This sentence inevitably speaks of mythic fathers: of God the Father sitting in judgment, of Freud's father complex as the conceptual core of *Totem and Taboo*, and of Lacan's description of the "Name-of-the-Father" (*le Nom du père*) in his seminars *The Psychoses*. Lacan puns with the similar French sound of *le Non du père* (the No of the father), and *les non-dupes errent* (the non-dupes err). Referring to Lacan in his description of "What's Wrong with Fundamentalism?," Slavoj Žižek convinces us that in the Symbolic Order the symbolic mask/mandate (*the* father in our cases) matters more than the direct reality of the individual who wears this mask and/or assumes this mandate. Thus, in man's symbolic order, the reduction to reality falls short, Žižek explains; so that when a judge (I would add "father") speaks, there is in a way more truth in his words (the words of the Institution of law) than in the direct reality of the person of judge: if one limits oneself to what one sees, one simply misses the point. This paradox is what Lacan aims at with his pun *les non-dupes errent*: those who do not let themselves be caught in the symbolic deception/fiction are the ones who err most. Philip Roth, just like Newman, Rodriguez and Auster, describes a Father who shares the common attributes of Symbolic Man, and so must be at once conscious and unconscious, individual and universal, physical and transcendent, man and "God" (Stone, 165). Hence, Olney's assertion that "definition of autobiography as a literary genre seems to me virtually impossible, because the definition must either include so much as to be no definition, or exclude so much as to deprive us of the most relevant

texts” (38–39). As we shall continue to prove with the analysis of Auster’s memoir, our narratives, indeed, somehow divorce autobiography from history, the wrestle with “truth,” and from traditions of genre with specific expectations and conventions. Instead, autobiography — as Olney hinted in his assertion above — is attached in new ways to metaphysics, myth, symbol and poetry.

Paul Auster’s 1982 memoir *The Invention of Solitude* is a two-part experiment with life writing: “Portrait of an invisible man” and “The Book of Memory.” Each of the two sections grows out of a profound dissatisfaction, which gives rise to a powerful yearning (Rubin 62). In the first section, Auster attempts to fix some aspects of his father’s personality by examining hundreds of photographs he discovers while sorting through Samuel Auster’s belongings after his unexpected death of a heart attack. In the second section, a “near-anonymous” (Liste 141) character called A. ruminates on the autobiographical act and the complicated lines of connection between Samuel Auster and Daniel Auster, Paul’s infant son.

The narrative part of “Portrait of an Invisible Man” opens with the sentence “The news of my father’s death came to me three weeks ago, and I was in the kitchen preparing breakfast for my small son, Daniel” (3). Just in this simple sentence we find two important singularities that give Auster’s text a special thematic intricacy, vis à vis Rodriguez’s and Roth’s texts: first, that Auster’s memoir is incited by his father’s death — the last installment in a lifelong history of absence; and second, that of all the authors we have discussed above, he is the only one who fathers a son; and this brings into his text further complexities in the father – son relationship. The next step after receiving the news of his father’s death is to go to his house in New Jersey, where he had lived alone for 15 years, after divorcing Paul’s mother. An “old, Tudor-style house” (5) that also becomes the haunted house of the past — where Paul will feel the sudden obligation to write about his father. So, this particular day of his father’s death also becomes a “Day of Obligation,” not to a Christian God, but to a Jewish father:

I knew I had to write about my father. An *obligation* that began to impose itself on me the moment I was given the news. I thought: my father is gone. If I do not act quickly, his entire life will vanish along with him. (4)

As on so many occasions, the genetic connection motivates and justifies writing a memoir, since the writer’s father would scarcely qualify for hagiography: if he were not the subject of a memoir, his life would remain unwritten (Couser 2005, 634).

Declared a postmodern autobiography, it is a transgeneric text that, in T.D. Adam's words, "performs a variety of the functions of life-writing, serving not just biography, autobiography, memoir, portraiture, self-portraiture, and family album, but also as confession, eulogy and epitaph" (Adams 20). At the same time, it attempts to also subvert the congruence of protagonist, subject, and narrator by various devices, including writing in the third person — à la Henry Adams —, and reproducing two photographs that problematize the narrative, instead of clarifying it.

The first photograph reproduced in the text (*Figure 3*) is the one that gives its title to the first section of the book "Portrait of an invisible man." What looks like five men sitting around a table is in reality a trick photograph, for all five men are Auster's father seen from different angles. Here's what the author says about the photograph:

There are five of him there, and yet the nature of the trick photography denies the possibility of eye contact among the various selves. Each one is condemned to go on staring into space, as if under the gaze of the others, but seeing nothing, never able to see anything. It is a picture of death, a portrait of an invisible man. (31)

This picture could well provide us with a theory on the elusiveness of any (auto)biographical subject, since there is no such thing as a self, but



Figure 3. (Auster, 31).

a multiplicity of selves behind every subject. Moreover, the comment that it is “a portrait of an invisible man” is a contradiction in terms, since one cannot do a portrait of what one cannot see. To complicate matters, his father is depicted throughout the book as a man with a blank nature:

Devoid of passion, either for a thing, a person, or an idea, incapable or unwilling to reveal himself under any circumstances, he had managed to keep himself at a distance from life, to avoid immersion in the quick of things. He ate, he went to work, he had friends, he played tennis, and yet for all that he was not there. In the deepest, most unalterable sense, he was an invisible man. Invisible to others, and most likely invisible to himself as well. (5)

And yet, this photograph is a focal point of the first part of the book; and nothing could be more realistically referential than a photograph. T.D. Adams has used the presence of this photograph to do an interesting De Manian analysis of “Portrait of an Invisible Man,” and explains how in his essay “Autobiography as De-facement,” the most famous and often quoted deconstructivist study of autobiography, De Man dismantles the autobiographer’s implicit claim to self presence and self recovery, by exposing the autobiographical act as an impersonation that induces a crippling constraint. If the border between autobiography and fiction is erected on a privileged notion of referentiality, then the study of autobiographical works will always be partly founded upon an illusion: “we assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but cannot we suggest...that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self portraiture?” The word “De-facement” that de Man uses refers to this un-referential quality of the supposedly most referential of genres; because *prosopopeia* (*prosopon poien*, to confer a mask for a face), De Man asserts, is the trope of autobiography (De Man 926). In other words: the persona we create in (auto)biography is at once a face, a mask, and a defacement. It is a faulty face, that represents the abyss that is the space between the signifier and the signified, between autobiographer and autobiographical subject. A postmodern author himself, Auster seems to have chosen this five-faced photograph to present a deconstructivist de-facement of his father, in order to support the impossibility of autobiography, while writing an autobiography. Or, to put it differently, he chooses not to err like the Lacanian “dupe,” and lets himself be caught in the symbolic deception/fiction of autobiography. And this view is again and again exemplified in some of the metaautobiographical comments that he inserts here and there, such as:

For the past few days, in fact, I have begun to feel that the story I'm trying to tell is somehow incompatible with language, that the degree to which it resists language is an exact measure of how closely I have come to saying something important, and that when the moment arrives for me to say the one truly important thing (assuming it exists), I will not be able to say it. (30)

The second photograph (*Figure 4*) appears only two pages later. And it is an interesting one to focus our attention on, in order to re-open the theme of autobiography as transgression. This family photograph, featuring his paternal grandmother with her five children (one of whom is Paul's father) is another "trick photograph" because his grandfather has



Figure 4: (Auster, 33).

been cut from it; Paul discovers as he revises newspaper clippings that reveal to him a family secret he had not known until then.

As a child, his own father had given Paul different versions of his grandfather's death, but "It was as though the family had decided to pretend he had never existed" (32). What Paul discovers in those paper clippings is that his grandmother murdered his grandfather, in a fit of jealousy, in the presence of his own father, then a seven-year-old boy. Though it is clear that she was guilty of the charge of murder, Anna Auster was acquitted because of mitigating circumstances (her husband was a philanderer and Anna Auster a hard-working immigrant mother who gained the sympathy of the jury) and was allowed to raise her sons who remained a close-knit group guarding a terrible secret. When Paul Auster sits down to disclose this family secret, he has mixed feelings about doing it:

Even now, as I write about my reluctance to write, I find myself impossibly restless.... It is not that I am afraid of the truth. I am not even afraid to say it. My grandmother murdered my grandfather.... in the kitchen of their house.... The facts themselves do not disturb me any more than might be expected. The difficult thing is to see them in print — unburied, so to speak, from the realm of secrets and turned into a public event. (35–36)

Having become his father's biographer, Paul Auster has transgressed the rule of secrecy about his grandfather; another "invisible man" who has been cut out from the family photograph. What right does the son have to make public an intimate secret that was silenced for almost eighty years? Again, like Philip Roth did, the writer feels he can and must "use" this information to try to partially understand the difficult patrimony he is now trying to evaluate. And, becoming his father's imaginary therapist, he concludes: "A boy cannot live through this kind of thing without being affected by it as a man" (36).

I would like to raise one last issue concerning "The Book of Memory," the second part of *The Invention of Solitude*; which also springs from a crisis. It begins on Christmas eve of 1979, not long after his father's death, with its protagonist, A. living alone in New York in a small room, and feeling totally lost and demoralized. We learn that he has separated from his wife not long ago, so that he fears he has lost his son Daniel too. This fear makes him dwell on happy moments with Daniel, during which he would read the story of Pinocchio again and again to his infant son. The fear of losing his son, and the obligation to save his father from oblivion join forces to inspire in Auster the model that will fit his literary requirements. And his paradigmatic father – son relationship will not be a biblical story of prodigality, but a children's

tale; that of Pinnochio and Gepetto. Because Pinnochio saves his father from the shark's womb, and because it is also a story of paterno – filial reunion. "In effect," Auster writes, "Pinnochio and Gepetto are separated throughout the entire book" (131), and the passage in which they are reunited is one that Auster and his son always find most satisfying. Reflecting further, Auster says:

And for the little boy to see Pinocchio.... become a figure of redemption, the very being who saves his father from the grip of death, is a sublime moment of revelation. The son saves the father. This must be fully imagined from the perspective of the little boy. And this, in the mind of the father who was once a little boy, a son, that is, to his own father, must be fully imagined. *Puer aeternus*. The son saves the father. (133)

Like Pinnochio snatching Gepetto from the jaws of the shark, Paul Auster would save his father from oblivion and, by giving him new life, justify his own existence (Bruckner, vii). But Pinocchio is relevant in the two relationships: Auster's desire to save his father — and thereby be reunited with him and become a real boy, and Auster's desire to save his young son Daniel and be saved by him and his love. At the same time, if in some ways Auster seems very different from his ghostly father, in other ways the son seems fated to repeat the father's life now that he is a father himself; and, indeed, "The Book of Memory" also stresses Paul Auster's isolation. Disturbingly and uncannily, Auster describes himself in the solitude of his room, in similar terms to those of his father. This is what he says about A.: "He feels himself sliding through events, hovering like a ghost around his own presence, as if he were living somewhere to the side of himself — not really here but not anywhere either" (78). Which brings us to the main idea we have been discussing all along: that all the titles we have analyzed above are as much portraits of the authors' fathers as they are the authors' self-portraits.

Likewise, if we go back to theologian Henri Nouwen, we find that he argues, towards the end of *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, that the ultimate destination of his spiritual journey should be that of becoming not the son, but the Father in Rembrandt's painting:

Rembrandt, who showed me the Father in utmost vulnerability, made me come to the awareness that my final vocation is indeed to become like the Father... Though I am both the younger son and the elder son, I am not to remain them, but to become the Father. (121)

And Philip Roth also understands that, in the end, he is going to father his father through writing about him: "I must remember accurately...

remember everything accurately so that when he is gone I can re-create the father who created me (1991, 177). Or, as José Liste has expressed it, “perhaps all autobiographies, especially those written by males, deal with the problem of the paternal for, after all, what they seek is the self-fathering authority that enables and justifies the very writing of the memoir” (150).

In his anthology of father narratives, André Gérard states that the first “patremoir” was Edmund Gosse’s *Father and Son* (1907), and reminds us that Gosse was credited by Virginia Woolf in “The Art of Biography” to have been the first writer who “dared to say that his own father was a fallible human being,” thereby opening the way for Lytton Strachey, and the “new biographers” (Gérard 13). Confronting fathers directly and publicly is not, and never has been, easy: in the Symbolic Order, the patriarch should judge and not be judged. To write about the father is to sit in judgment upon him, and for most cultures this was a taboo too strong to be overcome. As Gosse acknowledges in his concluding sentence, the book was an attempt to throw off his father’s yoke and “to fashion his inner life for himself.” It was an act of revolt, for in Victorian England — a rich period in spiritual, philosophic, professional or intellectual autobiography by eminent Victorians (such as Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, Harriet Martineau’s *Autobiography*, John Henry Newman’s *Apologia pro vita sua*, John Ruskin’s *Praeterita*, to name but a few) — the boundary between the personal and the public world was a formidable one, and, if to publicly reveal elements of one’s private self was something to be avoided, to speak intimately and publicly about the father was almost blasphemous or heretical (Gérard 13). Conversely, in her now classic *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), Adrienne Rich alerted us to the silence that had surrounded the most formative relationship in the life of every woman: “the cathexis between mother and daughter — essential, distorted, misused — is the great unwritten story” (225). After Rich demonstrated the absence of the mother – daughter relationship from theology, art, sociology and psychoanalysis, and its centrality in women’s lives, many voices came to fill this gap so that it became a salient issue in feminist scholarship.

As a matter of fact, while the presence of mothers as represented by daughters in women’s autobiographies has been the focus of feminist interest for decades now, and thematic recurrences such as “matrophobia” or “matrilineage” have been thoroughly explored, fatherhood and sonhood, as presented in men’s memoirs, have only recently become a central issue in Men’s Studies. Adrienne Rich described matrophobia as “a womanly splitting of the self,” in the daughter’s desire to become individuated and free: “The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman,

the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery" (236). Rich urges women to heal that split in a genuine reunion not only with the maternal principle, but with the real mother. From the perspective of Men's Studies, the same necessity to heal the father – son split seems to apply. Thomas Couser has hinted at the fact that as they grow up, sons know their fathers primarily as their fathers; only late in life, if at all, are sons able to interact with and assess their fathers as fellow adults. And much of the lure of the "narratives of filiation," Couser believes, has to do precisely with this inherent aporia, which tantalizes and defies sons. That is, built into the subgenre, is the discrepancy between the apparently direct and intimate connection between fathers and their sons, on the one hand, and adult sons' sense of the fundamental inaccessibility of important aspects of their fathers' lives, on the other. "The subgenre can thus be seen as emerging from, and attempting to close, that gap" (2005, 634).

The lines written above partake of the verifiable moment that auto/biographical explorations of the father are undergoing in the first two decades of the 21st century, as Stephen Mansfield proves in the special issue of the *Journal Life Writing* — devoted precisely to "Writing the Father" —, edited by him (2014). But I hope I have also proved that, if life writing as a literary genre is despised by some, it is because it is often misunderstood as an act of Narcissistic intimation, where writing becomes an isolating activity offering a celebration of the writer's uniqueness. Nothing of the sort. Unlike what has been described as an orgy of egotism (Bruckner xii), we find in all the texts discussed above not a solipsistic exercise of self-absorption but, instead, evidence of a renewed concern with the responsibilities of writing through and about others (Gooblar 35), and with the often conflicting claims that aesthetics and ethics can exert upon the writer. Richard Rodriguez, Philip Roth and Paul Auster have written stories of transgression but also of recognition of patriarchal ancestry, inheritance and transmission of spiritual and material property; they have engaged auto/biographically with their fathers, by creating monuments and tributes to them, mounting searches for them and arguments against them, laying out defences and denouncements of them, but always seeking dialogue, the closure of gaps, and resolution with them.⁷

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NOTES

- 1 "Patremoir (pa-tre-mwār): neologism coined to describe an essay, poem or film which is built around memories of the author's father" (Gérard 8) [...] Edmund Gosse is the father of the "patremoir." (Gérard 14).
- 2 "I had noticed recently that a good deal of contemporary American life writing takes the form of memoirs of parents by sons and daughters. I've dubbed memoirs of mothers matriography, memoirs of fathers patriography" (Couser 2011, 891).
- 3 The title of Chapter One is "My parents' Village."
- 4 Although it is beyond the scope of this essay, one could also do a close analysis of this vomit scene from the point of view of food studies, of course. And here, gender issues would play a major role. Interestingly enough, ethnic women's memoirs often utilize the trope of food as an indicator of the nostalgia of the immigrant, and the sense of community of the diasporic family. Conversely, male immigrant testimonies often use scenes of food rejection to indicate the cultural shock of return in the case of "narratives of return." An example would be Vietnamese-American writer Andrew X. Pham's *Catfish and*

Mandala (2000), which portrays “the long awaited return to the homeland of the foreign-born refugee as an almost traumatic experience that forces the returnee to reconsider his own sense of self, and his previous notions of belonging” (Torreiro 280), also expressed through vomit scenes.

5 *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Atzlán*.

6 As, for example, Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) or Alfred Kazin’s *A Walker in the City* (1951). See Durán.

7 Words borrowed from the CFP for “Writing the Father” (Special Issue of *Life Writing* Volume 10, 2013. Guest Editor: Stephen Mansfield. <http://www.theiaba.org/writing-the-father-special-issue-life-writing/>