

Growing Up As Ben

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First Acts: A Memoir, by B. L. Reid,
*Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia
Press, 1988. xi + 243 pp. \$16.95.*

NOT EVERY AUTOBIOGRAPHER can assume with John Updike that his work of personal retrieval, *Self-Consciousness* (1989), should also constitute a gesture toward democratic inclusiveness, a tribute (and reward) to the self for having lived "a specimen life." That is, a life that in its collocation of facts, feelings, and daily textures and colors and smells is "representative in its odd uniqueness of all the oddly unique lives in this world." Perhaps Updike himself should be cautious in that assumption. Brilliant as his essays are, even the title suggests a life more intensely singular than broadly representative; and the chapters dramatizing this talented writer's struggle with his psoriasis and his stuttering simply introduce another kind of specialness.

B. L. Reid's *First Acts* may also not be the memoirs of one who has led what most readers would regard as "a specimen life." There is nothing here to feed our curiosity about the academic personality of the late Benjamin Lawrence Reid, superb biographer of John Quinn and Roger Casement; and little enough concerning his early success as a graceful essayist and literary critic. The ten substantial chapters of *First Acts* cover approximately his first thirty years. As he bluntly notes in a preface, "I have never wanted to write about my professional life." But Reid's account carries a more representative cast than Updike's – in part because in reiterative theme,

the struggle with poverty and the emotional dislocations it imposes, is more available to our common awareness. "My early life in the South had been tough and untidy," writes Reid, "but it had always been *interesting*, at least to me." *First Acts* converts that unexceptional state into a narrative of wide-ranging relevance that comes to us as a low-keyed recital of a life defined in candid details and nuances and whose sheer accrual and persistence of its shaped segments establish the ordinariness of that life in its linkage to our own stories. "Impersonal egoism" is Updike's term for his manner in *Self-Consciousness*, but the same volatile mix of passion and dispassion, involvement and detachment, tinctures the emerging persona of "Ben" through the steady unfolding of his young manhood.

For all its generic classification, *First Acts* is the first-person narrative of a life: a protagonist makes a distinctive place for himself out of a social context of relatives, friends, and a broad spectrum of acquaintances. Specificity of detail, as we have now come to expect, is as crucial in the depiction of events that enrich or mar actual lives as those that shape the lives of fictional creatures. It is of course also a trickier tack in autobiography, since memory, a less reliable instrument than creative invention, customarily benefits from all the compositional arts. Like the hero of any other narrative, Reid identifies precisely the names of people, streets, roads, towns, shops, parks, businesses, hotels, cars, churches, schools, teams, crews, clubs, institutions. But unlike the normal unspooling of

memory, with its overlapping blurs backgrounding a few sharp-edged moments that compulsively emerge over and over again, *First Acts* reads as if the memoirist had constructed his story with atlases, diaries, letters, city directories, and class yearbooks open at his fingertips. It reads, that is, as the kind of narrative with which any lover of fiction is gladly familiar—the detailed specificity completing an imagined world that is immediately accepted as believable, accurate, and authoritative. (A map lover might even miss the one marked lapse in Reid's geography, but any Huckleberry Friend will surely know that the Ohio meets the Mississippi not at Paducah but at Cairo.)

The finely textured immediacy of *First Acts* derives finally from Reid's sensibility—a tool, nicely calibrated, that shapes his seeing, feeling, judging, long before his wordcraft performs the actual making. In the preface Reid, convinced that his early style was burdened by “phoni-ness and floridity,” confesses that he first undertook the writing of biography because of its priority of facts over opinions; that pursuit, he lectured himself, might make “your writing straighter, more modest and honest.” Perhaps it did. But even when he accepts himself and his family as biographical subjects, the effort to record those experiences “in a style deliberately flat” has its genesis in sensibility: “I began to feel bored and deprived at the way my students and even my colleagues seemed to be perceiving and reporting their lives, as a set of accidents within privilege.” From this statement a number of motifs spin out in the narrative that follows: the emphasis on perception, the rejection of happenstance for justifying personal behavior, the notion of destiny threading the account of a young man who nevertheless learns to exercise will, the grinding psychological effects of growing up *without* privilege. Although this narrative proper

ends when its protagonist is about 28, we must assume that these motifs, and perhaps others, are permanently relevant in the sensibility of the author, for after all, this account of time past comes to us out of time present.

Flatness and fact dominate *First Acts*, but the generative energy of its seventy-year-old composer arises from the compelling roil of affective relationships. They are tautly held by the strands of straightforward reportage—but just barely. What is often predictable and depressing about Reid's generation, at least those members who write and talk about it, is that early deprivation, in blue-collar suburbs as well as academic communities, is too readily transformed into anachronistic cautionary tales out of McGuffey's Readers: What Builds Character is laced with a nostalgia of comfortable indulgence because Things Got Better. In *First Acts* there are no bouts of nostalgia and no lesson-learning classes. Flatness and fact preserve the recalled pain of deprivation; indeed, memory is potent because of deprivation, and the restrained style is itself the scar. Reid resists even that most compulsory piety of our secular age—paying filial homage to parents—and the most chilling, uncomfortable passages concern his bitter mother and ineffectual father, who in their summoning up stand unredeemed by sentiment. Reading about them makes us squirm not because we suspect Reid of being an ingrate child but because, whatever the specific needs in *his* portrayal, *we* want parents to be rendered by a mode other than flatness and factuality. Reid's achievement is unsettling in its effect, for the style is so allied with the sensibility behind it that we marvel at the apparent and continuing cost of such honesty, such distancing, such unblinking appraisal.

Our awareness of another's unannealed griefs is not often inscribed by flatness and fact: we expect rather

high-decibel proclamations and assertions, italics, and exclamation marks. At one point Reid writes of the psychological difficulties he faced as an adolescent growing up poor but genteel in Louisville as friends of the sons of the town's older families whose financial doings and charitable graces were regularly featured in the pages of the *Courier-Journal*. These young well-mannered and elegant students at Male High School, even the athletes among them, defined for him a "traditional gentlemanliness" that rendered palpable the old idea of noblesse oblige. It was, he writes, a society "full of surprises and instruction for me," yet a "kind of civilization I could never hope to know." But Reid makes the most of his marginal status by invoking the stamina of determination: "After a good while it dawned on me that I was not really sorry. There turned out to be an odd Spartan pleasure in deprivation and the need to struggle, in having to fabricate a life."

Having to fabricate a life: the fierce but cheerful stoicism which allows Reid to transform deprivation into pleasure is not a momentary solution to the problem of adolescent competition; it is a habit of being that he learns early as part of his survival techniques. The story of young Ben that we follow is particular. But what we also realize is that Reid's particular story unfolds according to the familiar fictional paradigm of the Provincial Hero, a persistent cultural figure because, as Julien Sorel or Nick Carraway, he is both product and source of all poor-but-genteel spirits. Equating poverty with shame, Reid's mother emerges out of the shadows of their early family life as an eloquent harridan, an enraged antagonist of his father, an unremarkable minister unloved by successive congregations and whose very distracted lack of focus is both cause of his failure and refuge from it. The mother's perspective shapes the son's. Belonging to a class of "failed professionals, people who had no

business to be poor," poisons the family's affectional life in the Depression Thirties, and a "sense of aborted destiny" haunts young Ben as the family fortunes take their "dull downward path." His mother's rage itself eventually dissipates into bitter silences, which become equivalent to his father's pottering ineffectuality.

Reid accepts his psychosomatic childhood illnesses as a natural response to the emotional tensions flowering "within the hectic simplicity of our lives." As memoirist he quietly tolerates the suffering self and its source in family circumstances. But there is cunning as well as tolerance. The child develops a posture of detachment, a tactic that allows the independent ego to flourish even as the self participates in the familial sense of "aborted destiny"; the memoirist develops a prose style in which the itemized bouts of humiliation are recounted in measured, candid periods: a rhetoric announcing how serenely the shame has been surmounted. The detectable pride surely derives from the emotional satisfactions of time present, with the memoirist awarding an important role to deprivation in his persona's self in time past; but serenity itself is never quite an achieved style. It is a kind of calculated holding action preventing such demons as shame and bitterness from engulfing the persona, demons that would stunt the moral growth of a sensitive, talented, and conscientious young man who must needs be about fabricating a competent life.

First Acts is finally not a litany of disappointments—however strength-giving such shapers of one's destiny can be. There are undisguised, unsurrogated pleasures as well. Reid is especially effective, for example, in transmitting the joys of honest labor, in setting Ben's mind and hands to work at tasks that can be learned—first at a chair factory, later at a plant turning out wooden radio cabi-

nets—and whose competent performance is rewarded with payment. The chapter on Ben's job as routeman delivering milk products for a Louisville dairy is Agee-like in the luminous way it extracts zest out of the rituals of routine. Past pleasures, when they have importantly configured as routine, invite a rhetoric of generalization, ambience, impressionism; but the resonance of such interpretation in turn requires a prior gift for the sharp image, the telling and precisely perceived detail that anchors the special moment. Reid is a master at both. Like all good reporters from the growing-up front, he knows the distinctions between the singular event and the habitual sequences of events, the first erupting out of the predictability of everydayness, what Lionel Trilling once called "the buzz and hum" of ordinary life. The rhythm of predictability in young Ben's life involves amateur sports (softball, basketball) and the problem of proper equipment, cars (getting them, losing them), reading, and movie-going.

Except for David Madden's *Bijou*, I can think of no other account that so accurately evokes the boyhood magic of the movie theater as Reid's. In a brief page-and-a-half the evocation is truthful and emotionally satisfying: "The movies of these years have all gone to mush in my mind. I remember them not as single events but as a state of nerves in an atmosphere, a dream place for which one longed like a drug and from which one reentered the street world feeling stunned and dislocated." This is emotional precision, a description of a mental state established by repetition, the routine of delight in which expectation, Saturday after Saturday, was always routinely met. But like any other kind of narrative, Reid's story of himself as Ben is not carried solely by such appeals to a generalized state of mind, since these renditions assume authority because the narrator has already invoked a more

humdrum but necessary precision of observation and fact. Even Ben's indistinguishable movie experiences are not *all* "mush." If the Saturday westerns are memorable only in the repetitive blur with which they produce happiness, the adult who remembers the theater pleasure can also recall the harder-edged specifics associated with it: the order of items on the reel in the projection booth (Pre-Vues of Coming Attractions; newsreel; half-length comedy; feature film) or the action logo of Fox Movietone News ("beginning and ending with a shot of a camera with a turning crank, shown first in profile then swinging round to stare you in the face as the words 'The Eyes and Ears of the World' appeared across the lens").

Similarly, Reid characterizes the early Ford and Chevrolet of his early world as "stark, simple, indomitable vehicles that seemed to take on a primitive or organic relationship with their owners." This suggestion of a kind of mechanical animism might be merely hifalutin were it not for the fact that such is also the *felt* truth for many others of his generation; what also helps is the ready availability of prior observations packed away in a boy's consciousness, such as "the sharp list to the right of the Wests's Model T under Mrs. West's weight."

The seamless consistency of Reid's sensibility can be seen in several glimpses of the developing self. If he is dispassionate in his portraits of family members and acquaintances (a telling candor that desentimentalizes character but not scene), the memoirist is not notably indulgent toward the young Ben. The analysis of his relations with women in these years, for example, recalls Dreiser, who wrote his romances of honesty as solemn confessionals that actually celebrated his clumsiness and egoism. Reid's most crucial example of candor, however, constitutes two entire chapters.

During World War II Reid was a conscientious objector, not because of his religious beliefs (he grew up in the Disciples of Christ, the “Christian Church,” one of whose favorite hymns as I myself remember was “Onward Christian Soldiers”), but because of genuine philosophical conviction that to take up arms against others was wrong. Even in retrospect, against the nearer background of the peace movement resisting the Vietnam War, this is surely not a decision and a substantial phase of one’s life that could have been easily recreated. To his credit Reid refuses as appropriate moral posture to invoke either heroic right conduct or willful self-indulgence; self-righteousness and guilt are both rigorously excluded from his account. He admits the reality of peer pressure and the drive toward patriotic conformity in his wartime society generally, and he also acknowledges his conviction that to make a pacifist stand was to refuse “the great comprehensive experience of my generation.” Despite its power, he decided that the common generational experience was nevertheless “negative and immoral.” But Ben rejects it not in the simple mode of his brother (“the first CO to be drafted in Louisville”) but with “a tricky strategy of playing for time”—based on his being his family’s provider: “I would not declare my pacifism unless I was forced to do so by imminent induction, then I would fight my case.” As he admits, “My low scheme worked, in that it kept me out of the draft for two years and kept the family more or less solvent; but my flesh crept all that time at the thought of my own deviousness.”

Much of *First Acts* is characterized by just such candor. Judgments of the self and others are not rare in classic texts of autobiography, but in vulgarized contemporary versions by former madams, politicians, actresses, and automobile executives, they have become so peccably formulaic that candor serves

largely as a device for self-aggrandizement. With his chaste respect for factuality and a discourse of flatness, Reid provides a matrix into which candor can be fitted without distorted emphasis and so returns the genre of the self-told life story to its distinguished tradition. It is a welcome return.

Christianity Under Assault

A Search for Wisdom and Spirit, by

Anne Carr, *Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988. xii + 171 pp. \$16.95.*

Many Mansions, by Harvey Cox,

Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1988. 216 pp. \$18.95.

Christ and Reason, by George W.

Rutler, *Front Royal, Virginia: Christendom Press, 1990. xi + 211 pp. \$9.95 (paper).*

The Assault on Religion, edited by

Russell Kirk, *Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1986. ix + 115 pp. \$9.25 (paper).*

Twin Powers: Politics and the Sacred,

by Thomas Molnar, *Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1988. xi + 147 pp. \$9.95 (paper).*

TAKEN TOGETHER, these five quite different books provide a picture of Western Christendom at the close of Christianity’s second millennium. What they reveal is a religion under assault from both within and without. They give us a snapshot of a religion under attack from elements of its priestly class within and from elements of its culture without.

Of course, Christianity is under attack for more reasons and from more enemies than this small sampling of books reveals. Nonetheless, these books do point