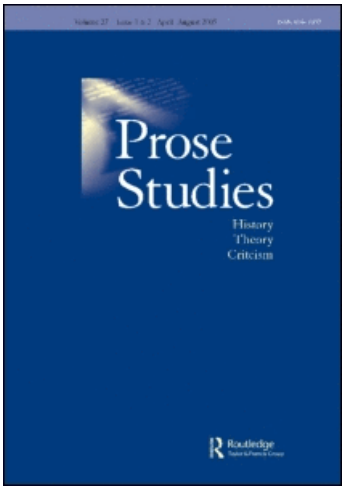

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Thomas C. Austenfeld

LOOKING FOR ACADEMIC FAMILY
Learning and teaching in David Levin's *Exemplary Elders* and Frank McCourt's *Teacher Man*

In recent years, autobiographies in the spotlight have often been stories of underprivileged women who achieved unexpected success. By contrast, this essay looks at autobiographies by men who achieved somewhat predictable success as teachers under certain historical circumstances which they subsequently thematize in their texts. Frank McCourt approaches self-writing through Catholic devotional practice even though he dispenses with Catholic orthodoxy, while David Levin interrogates his status as an American historian in writing about his own American self. McCourt recognizes teaching as the activity which shaped his life and thus enabled an autobiography. Levin inscribes himself into a disciplinary genealogy. Both writers employ autobiography to establish their "family relationship" with the world of their potential readers.

Keywords Teachers' autobiographies; David Levin; Frank McCourt; Catholic autobiographies; Jewish autobiographies

Reading the retrospective academic autobiographies of two male teachers who, by conventional standards, succeeded in their professional lives, requires us to adjust our perspective. In our day, the formative episteme in the academic appreciation of autobiographical narratives is shaped by the study of women's autobiographies published over the course of the past thirty years – and in many cases, women of color, women without privilege, women immigrants, abused women.[1] The arc of these narratives regularly extends from hardscrabble beginnings towards eventual recognition, often in connection with a worthy social cause. With women as their protagonists and social improvement as their subject, these texts share an emancipatory trajectory which finds particular resonance in the United States, a country and a society fundamentally committed to meliorist principles.[2]

Within the narrower category of academic autobiographies, teachers' autobiographies or narratives of the teaching profession form a smaller subset yet. Jessica Wells Cantiello, in her article in this issue, traces the contributions of teachers' narratives, especially those of women teachers from Nancy K. Miller to Jane Tompkins, within what we now consider the American memoir boom of the mid-1990s. Cantiello calls attention to the interrelatedness of intellectual history, institutional experiences, and pedagogical apprenticeship that characterizes such

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narratives. Her sensitive examination of teaching and learning finds a kind of analogue in my deliberations as well, even if the male subjects and authors of the two texts on which I focus have less to say about institutionalized barriers to success and, moreover, shape their stories to a large extent as American success stories.

While memoirs of eventual social success abound, specifically academic memoirs often adopt a woeful note. Do they point to a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the writers' professional lives? Should the figure of the "unhappy academic," *homo academicus infortunatus* or, more precisely, *malcontentus* (to form a neologism), be given room besides such shopworn models as *senex amans* or *puer aeternus*? While unhappy academics do exist, and while some of them write autobiographies, the academic life is normally considered one of privilege, immune from such tribulations as worrying about the next meal or where to sleep at night. As I look at the narratives of two male academics who ascended to relative social stability and financial comfort, I find myself in the house of "happy academics."

However, these seemingly happy writers are also English teachers. Writers of academic autobiographies share a natural inclination to use their professional status as the central defining feature of their life stories. Critics, beware! This tendency to make the job, not the writer, the focus of attention is heightened when both writers are English teachers. As a result, we who study these texts also need to pay attention to our own view of the academic edifice in which we live and have our being. We are looking, if not at mirror images of ourselves, at least at sepia-toned portraits of our elders, our predecessors, our models. We are investigating our extended family.

While every good biography, whether of self or other, requires the shaping of documentation "into an unfolding *story* . . . infused with explanations, judgments, [and] informed speculations," as Diane Middlebrook observes (5), English teachers as authors of their own biographies should make us sit up and exercise caution with respect to the "shaping." Yet in reading David Levin's *Exemplary Elders* (1990) and Frank McCourt's *Teacher Man* (2005), the first written by a professor of American literature at the University of Virginia, the other by an English teacher in the New York City public school system who had already swept the bestseller charts with memoirs of his Irish childhood, I notice that even the category "academic autobiography" seems insufficient. McCourt's narrative exhibits some features of the family memoir and the self-deprecating rogue's tale, while Levin's chapters amount to a multivocal biography of persons he admired – half of them other teachers – and, once in a while, veers off into the didactic tract. These generic shadings notwithstanding, I still wish to compare the two texts as the literary products of men of an advanced age who both found teaching to be their vocation and who found in a deliberate encounter with history their academic paths and their mental balance. Personal history is the very stuff of autobiography, of course, but for Levin and McCourt, their respective nations' histories and their attendant literary manifestations became the beacons of their academic journeys.

The very existence of autobiographies like Levin's and McCourt's is made possible by the perceptual shift in human consciousness that took humanity from "myth" to "history" – a shift that Janet Varner Gunn diagnoses in describing "The Autobiographical Situation" and which, continuing Mircea Eliade's thoughts on the subject, she extends by claiming that autobiography "continues to make tolerable the fullest inhabiting of that perilous domain" (4); i.e., history. In our lifetime, James Olney argues, we have turned "from *bios* to *autos* – from the life to the self," and have

thus made specifically literary investigations of lives more likely (qtd in Gunn 3). The teachers whose lives I'll be looking into here use that historical bent for all it is worth. With his academic specialization in seventeenth-century Puritan thought and his scholarly biography of Jonathan Edwards, Levin is predestined – if such a Calvinist term may be appropriately borrowed for the life of a Jewish academic – to historicize his own life story and hence to borrow generically from hagiography in calling his work *Exemplary Elders*. McCourt, too, born in the U.S. but raised in Ireland and returned to America at age 19, is steeped in an Irish consciousness of history that he feels his New York City school kids conspicuously lack. The intermingling of personal, national, social and religious history – or histories – becomes for McCourt the pattern that shapes his writing. Born in 1924 and 1932, respectively, Levin and McCourt both are members of the generation that experienced the Depression, scraped by seeing action in World War II, and gained their professional footing in the 1950s. Their vantage point is historical as well: both men wrote their books retrospectively, either shortly before or just after their retirement from official duties. Levin died in 1998, McCourt in 2009.

Both writers connect directly with history through their ethnic and religious affiliations. Levin begins his homage to teachers with a chapter about his childhood in York, Pennsylvania. Levin always consciously speaks as a Jew, a man with deep historical roots, though he goes to some length to aver that he did not feel any strong or persistent anti-Semitism in his early socialization. Here Levin draws a distinction between his small-town youth and the typical adolescence of his big-city contemporaries Philip Roth, Alfred Kazin, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Norman Podhoretz who agree (and this is the only thing they agree on) that Jewish childhoods in America, between 1910 and 1940, were uniformly taking place within controlled ethnic neighborhoods and that initiation into the gentile world occurred late and with difficulty (Levin 1). McCourt makes much of his formative years in Ireland where his parents returned shortly after his birth. Irish ancestry is now less determinative than it was 80 or even 50 years ago, because membership in the Catholic church is less ethnically predetermined and less socially determining than it used to be before Vatican II. However, for McCourt, being Irish and Catholic meant to be shaped for life. He relishes the moments in his autobiography that suggest a deliberate departure from the precepts of his early upbringing. More importantly than for many of our contemporaries now, the "voices" of these men are shaped by circumstances before the Civil Rights movement and before full American introspection about ethnic diversity.

An academic autobiography is not a whole life; its initial adjective qualifies it as focused on a particular professional path. Family is somewhat less prominent in these narratives than in autobiographies built on ties of blood and affection. Academic autobiographies, for the most part, are not a "sentimental education" in matters of love (although McCourt can't resist the interweaving of love stories with his academic maturation). More likely, they will be non-fiction versions of a *Bildungsroman*. Furthermore, academic autobiographies are necessarily highly ordered narratives that, in looking backward, impose a pattern on developments which – perhaps – did not have a pattern at all when they originally occurred. Even in one of the most famous proof texts of academic autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams*, Adams complains about the uselessness and dilatoriness of his education while at the same time imposing the most careful order on his narrative by silently passing over 20 years of personal sorrow and setbacks. Thus in reading these academic autobiographies, we must

carefully peel back the studied nonchalance that retrospectively discovers an order where there was none to begin with.

The narrative we read is never really in the voice of the apprentice; it is always already in the voice of the master. If the main narrative thrust of a teacher's autobiography, then, is the development – however episodic – from apprentice to teacher, we should ask how the narrator frames the transition from what I would like to call "the learning I" to "the teaching I." The features I have already alluded to – professionalism in writing, strong "shaping," a sense of the historical embeddedness of the self, ethnic and religious determinants, the *Bildungsroman* tradition – in turn can tell us something about how intellectual history and cultural memory in the twentieth century are affected by such texts. Let me turn to a closer analysis of the narratives I have chosen.

McCourt divides *Teacher Man* into three large sections which chronicle the successive steps of his pedagogical apprenticeship. In his highly ironic Prologue, he lambasts the inherent nobility of the teaching profession by highlighting the realities of the abysmally low social standing of the public school teacher in America. Beginning with a round-up of the obstacles that impeded a normal life or career – life in Ireland, the iron hand of the Catholic church, the constant state of the consciousness of sin – McCourt proceeds to debunk all the myths that teacher organizations and elected officials continue to perpetrate about the glories of teaching. Teaching, it turns out, is learning. The teacher needs to learn before, during, and after all of the public encounters with students, because the teacher himself is the one in greatest need of learning. McCourt recounts how he published his first book when he was 66. "So what took you so long? I was teaching, that's what took me so long" (McCourt 3). Readers slowly realize that the process of teaching turned out to be the process of learning a skill – namely the skill of writing the material of the teacher's life into the subject matter of a book about teaching. And here is where it gets interesting.

The first long portion of the narrative, "It's a long way to pedagogy," accomplishes several things at once. Frank is just as comfortable hauling supplies at the dock and having bloody fistfights with other dock workers as he is teaching a class. He describes his exams as futile and his chance successes in classroom management as mere happenstance. In an ironic counterpoint to the effective teaching of elementary writing and the composition of grammatical sentences, the climax of his early teaching experiences is an extended lesson in the art of writing an excuse note. Knowing that most of the excuse notes his students write are forged, McCourt takes the opportunity to turn subterfuge into a method. With the school board examiner looking on, he asks students to write excuse notes for the Garden of Eden – an excuse from Adam to God, from Eve to God, from Eve to Adam. Behind the social and theological banter, there is a serious intention: at this point in McCourt's professional life, the act of writing culminates in the art of writing excuses, a practice instilled in him by his Catholic upbringing and the constant consciousness of sin. This theme persists through the book and through the various episodes of sexual peccadilloes. These are recounted as part of a practice that is, in fact, a religious precursor to biography: the famous "examination of conscience" that precedes the act of going to confession. And as that practice is ridiculed, so is the writing of excuse notes a use of a skill that had better remain just a transition on the author's path to becoming an accomplished writer.

But an excuse note, for a Catholic Irish boy, is also an *apologia*, a form of life writing highly familiar to Irish writers. The literary form of the apologia would be

familiar to McCourt as the biography of a Christian defending the faith. John Henry Newman's 1864 *Apologia pro Vita sua* would have rung in his ears. Newman went to Dublin in 1854 to become rector of the Catholic University of Ireland. Recalling his Irish teacher in elementary school, McCourt explains, "We were to look inward, to search the landscape of our souls" (36). The recollection of this deeply pedagogical practice occurs to McCourt as he tells his New York public high school students about growing up in Ireland: "My students ask about my family and *bits of my past* drift into my head. I *realize* I'm making discoveries about myself (34, emphasis mine). Note the seamless transition from "bits of my past" to "realize" to "myself." The past becomes the material for biography.

I would like to claim that in this examination of conscience, an exercise designed to ferret out the mistakes of the person in relation to the plan meant for him by his creator God, lies the seed of the autobiographical impulse that governs McCourt's pedagogical narrative. Over the course of the book, the narrative becomes a stubborn justification, an apologia, of a life lived, in great parts, in contradistinction to the rules of the Catholic Church. "Storytelling is teaching," asserts the narrator (31), and the obverse is the subject of the book, "teaching is storytelling." The Irish, poor, Catholic childhood of the narrating teacher contributes to a plot that in itself is teachable. "My life saved my life," (24) McCourt states.

Part II of the book, entitled "Donkey on a Thistle," is an account of McCourt's repeated, failed attempts to take his life into his hands and run with it. His own attempt at further education results in a two-year absence in Dublin where he manages to destroy his marriage. The section ends as he hits professional rock bottom when he remains employed only as a substitute teacher, somebody on call for emergencies, himself a non-entity.

Part III is a miraculous recovery; one is inclined to see it as the Easter Morning that ends the suffering on the cross. At Stuyvesant High School, McCourt's teaching finally works because the social and intellectual possibilities of the students make it possible. Haven't we all experienced this? Good students are easy to teach, and their results make us proud . . . even when we realize that the results are only in small part our merit: "Now I taught where I would never have been one of the seven hundred" (217). The entrance exam wouldn't have been the main obstacle. As McCourt explains in an interview, "I had no high school education myself. I had never been in a high school so I had to – I was – nobody told me what to do" ("Academy of Achievement"). This third part of the book is more literarily self-conscious than the others. Several pages are dedicated to a detailed class discussion of Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz." The choice is not accidental. Roethke's poem is another version of a literary autobiography, a poetic retelling of the speaker's troubled childhood, a coming to terms, by an intellectual, with an abusive parent. McCourt employs the poem as a *mise-en-abîme*, and it leads almost automatically into his final and most challenging assignment, the teaching of creative writing. His principal has to reassure him: "I know nothing about writing or the teaching of it. Roger says don't worry. Across this country there are hundreds of teachers and professors teaching writing and most have never published a word" (McCourt 226). What is good for the students at Stuyvesant High turns out to be even better for the teacher. In the writing classroom, the formerly dilatory and escapist conversations about Ireland and McCourt's upbringing become the deliberate subject of investigation and critique. McCourt completes a hermeneutic circle that

encompasses the facts of his life: life lived in Ireland and New York turns from being the topic of classroom conversation into the material of writing a biography about teaching. Writing is both the means and the method of ordering confusion; it provides the bridge of transition from the "learning I" to the "teaching I" and back to the now adult "learning I." "Every moment of your life, you are writing," insists the narrator. "Even in your dreams you're writing. When you walk the halls in this school you meet various people and you write furiously in your head . . . Dreaming, wishing, planning: it's all writing but the difference between you and the man on the street is that you are looking at it, friends, getting it set in your head, realizing the significance of the insignificant, getting it on paper . . . You are your material" (290 – 291). McCourt's academic autobiography, then, is the slow realization that teaching is learning, that the learning accomplished is a life well lived, and that this life provides the material for an autobiography that would have been impossible but for the teaching that enabled it.

In switching to Levin's book now, I violate the chronological order of publication but I preserve the chronological order in which most of us pass from high school on to university. Levin's biographical sketches of "exemplary elders" give persons from his high school years short shrift. Instead, high school years are folded obliquely into the opening chapter, "We're the team from York, P-A," which is dedicated to the particulars of a Jewish upbringing in a small town; an upbringing circumscribed by the instilling of local patriotic pride and by the casual mention of some early examples of elders admired and emulated by the writer. The "elders" of the title confirm the deep indebtedness Levin feels to his Jewish identity, both ethnic and religious. In Jewish traditions as elsewhere, elders are respected for the authentic historical knowledge they are assumed to hold and which they are expected to embody in leading lives worthy of emulation. But the education of David Levin is only in small part a narrative of educational giants who somehow shaped the writer into the American scholar he turned out to be. All elders have at least two features in common.

First, although the sketches purport to chronicle the shaping of an academic life (the Preface refers portentously to R.W. Emerson's "The American Scholar"), the personal character of the mentors, in fact, takes center stage. Dress (such as Samuel Eliot Morison's wearing of his naval uniform, see 19), mannerism, and speech patterns (F.O. Matthiessen's hesitant speech, see 45), along with personal shortcomings ranging from alcoholism to eventual tragic suicide, are remembered as more formative than academic training per se. Second, the overriding lesson Levin learns from his mentors is their largely unspoken, yet evidently lived introduction into a consciousness of class difference in U.S. culture of the 1940s and 1950s. This class consciousness, once gained, requires the ability to negotiate it. That negotiating ability becomes an index of the various elders' educational accomplishments and of their exemplary nature; Levin's eventual ability to negotiate social class is the most palpable fruit of his university education, and he later applies his admiration for the ability to transcend class to non-academic mentors.

The social agenda traditionally assigned to American high schools – the task of integrating, instilling mutual respect, leveling the playing field (to use an overused cliché once again) – is transferred in Levin's book to the university. Childhood and public school were a mild form of indoctrination in local patriotism that in classic American fashion glossed over differences by subsuming them under general American values of flag, allegiance, and Fourth of July parades. Education in the literal sense, the "leading out" of ignorance, did not occur until college: "I never heard of any

parental protest against [pledging allegiance, reciting the Lord's Prayer, reading Old Testament passages, and singing "Faith of Our Fathers"] in the public schools. Not until I studied the flag-salute cases in a college course in constitutional law did it occur to me that we had regularly violated the First Amendment" (Levin 8).

What, then, are the peculiar qualities that qualified the so-adulated elders? In the chapter on Perry Miller, Levin acknowledges the older man's powerful delivery. Yet, "his chief exemplary value was not in the performance. For me the great point was his insistence on the complexity of human experience, the perplexity of historical human beings, the contradictory or at least paradoxical tension within systems of ideas" (24). The embodiment, then, of such qualities as "complexity," "perplexity," and "paradoxical tension" in the person of Perry Miller, literary historian of seventeenth-century Puritanism, is the reason for Levin's admiration, as Miller is living proof of what he intends for his students to accomplish: "When scholarship had identified a literary convention, the most valuable work had only begun. One had to try to understand how the convention functioned as a way of giving meaning to human experience" (25 – 26).

Levin's undergraduate program in American history and literature at Harvard goes some way towards explaining his attitude to his elders. Studying how history and literature illuminate each other in the American context, Levin came to appreciate the direct links to the past that his teachers provided through their persons, a past going back not just one generation, or into actual combat experience in World War II, but into a mythic American past peopled by the historical occurrences of New England. The professional interest of the subjects of this group biography, an interest devoted to biography and history as twin lamps that would shine on the study of literature, made them eligible to be regarded by Levin as exemplary elders. His book is thus in part an exercise in disciplinary genealogy.

Wallace Stegner, Levin's senior colleague at Stanford, provides another example: "The qualities that made Stegner exemplary for me were discipline and versatility. I never learned to follow his strict routine during the academic year – writing for at least a couple of hours every morning and teaching in the afternoon" (Levin 118). "What set Wallace Stegner's versatility apart was the easy grace with which he seemed to manage his demanding activities. It was not effortless, but natural; one saw no sign of strain" (120). Here again, academic class is a matter of performance. Levin admires what Stegner made of himself; how he shaped American opportunities into an admirable self.

In labeling these texts "American success stories" I did not intend to invoke a strictly defined literary category. The successes described by these writers are better characterized by a more homely analogy than by literary genre. As Levin and McCourt master social grace along with professional expertise, they gain tickets of admission to a closed-in circle. The "elders" of Levin's life and the professional teachers of McCourt's quixotic narrative form a guild, or even a family, that finally admits these two to the privileges of membership. Garry Hagberg, following Ludwig Wittgenstein, calls attention to the "family-resemblance metaphor" when describing the appeal of biographies. In other words, literary categories are neither served well when one tries to make sharp Platonist distinctions nor when one reverts to the Heraclitean "all-is-flux" escapism that has marked the noncommittal disoriented pluralism of recent decades. Instead, categories of the middle kind are "made to cohere [. . .] by features that overlap in interconnectedness as do, say, the facial features of a family" (Hagberg 164).

The pragmatist tradition of C.S. Peirce, against Cartesian concepts of the self, argued that meaning resides in praxis, not in theory[3]. Especially in the writing of biography and autobiography, meaning is revealed in external, relational acts (see Hagberg 165). This is precisely mirrored in McCourt and Levin. Hagberg characterizes literature as a "mode of interaction" in which, by "imagining self-identities like our own, we better understand, and are better able to articulate, ourselves." He even suggests that such reading can take on "the character of an autobiographical exercise" (180). But Hagberg stops short of saying what I want to say today: as academics who read academic autobiographies which are biographies of relation(s), both in their own conceptions, and as read by us, we discover that we are imaginatively joining distant family members. We recognize the features shared by these remote cousins. Since Peirce further argues that mental content is only available to us *after* it has taken linguistic shape, *writing* is the privileged form of knowledge for pragmatists, no matter how strong their insistence on lived praxis (see Hagberg 165). Thus, academic autobiographies written by persons who are professional writers or teachers of writing perform, to stay within the image, a marriage of two families with features we recognize on both sides. In reading McCourt and Levin as academics, we extend our circle of academic relatives on the one hand. On the other hand, we see the family resemblance in the writer *as* writer. Reading academic autobiographies is thus the celebration of re-encountering long-lost relatives, or elders. We read our prodigal fathers, and we welcome them home.[4]

Notes

1. I am thinking of such celebrated cases as Rigoberta Menchu, Jung Chang, Rita and Jackie Huggins, Ruth Underhill and Maria Chona. See also Kathleen Mullen Sands' "Collaboration or Colonialism."
2. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson call such texts "Autobiographical Manifestoes" (433 – 440).
3. Elizabeth F. Cooke explain, the matter cogently in ch.4 of her *Pierce's pragmatic theory of inquiry*.
4. My remarks about McCourt and Levin would remain incomplete if I did not acknowledge in closing why I chose these two books and what the notion of academic autobiography means to me at this moment. When I was working on my academic degrees at the University of Virginia, I wrote a dissertation on Robert Lowell under the direction of J.C. Levenson and got to know David and Pat Levin quite well, though I never studied with Levin extensively except for having taken an undergraduate seminar on "The Image of Europe in American Literature" from him in 1982, my first exchange year abroad. Yet when I began teaching composition, in my first year as a Ph.D. student in 1986, it was David Levin who was assigned to supervise me, who saw me teach, and who co-corrected my first batch of freshmen essays. I'm happy to say that he let me off easily and graciously after he had assured himself that I would meet his "old-fashioned" standards of English prose. We became friends, and when I approached the end of my degree program and the associated funding, he and his wife, as did the Levensons, employed me as their "lawnmower Ph.D." during the heavy growing season of Spring 1991. I came to appreciate Levin's writings only later, when I had occasion to fill in the deficiencies left in my education in American literature by reading up on the Puritans. By that time, I had become a fan of Wallace Stegner's work on my own, had developed a fondness for the American West, and was serving as Assistant Professor at a

small Midwestern college. As the arc of my own academic career begins to occur to me more than a quarter-century after first meeting Levin, I want to take this moment to thank David Levin for supervising my teaching and my editing of freshmen essays. Comparison and analogy are the tools that help us make sense of literary texts, but also tools that help us shape ourselves for life.

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