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http://dx.doi.org/10.21412/leaves_0814

Foreground and Backgrounding Intimacy in Family Narratives: The Ethics of Representing Children in Maggie O'Farrell's *I Am, I Am, I Am* and Sally Mann's *Hold Still*

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As counterintuitive as it may seem—mostly on account of the unequivocal meaning of its prefix—autobiography is ontologically as centrifugal as it is centripetal. Indeed, "[i]t is in the nature of autobiography to be about 'other things' and 'other people' as well as being a depiction of the autobiographer's life" (Munro & Gray 41). Is there any autobiographical work exclusively centered on the narrator's life and *persona*? Is such a work even conceptually possible? When recounting one's life or parts of it, one would be hard-pressed not to make any mention of relatives or friends or colleagues, people we usually come in contact with during the course of a lifetime. For instance, "[i]ndividuals are almost always brought up in families, which is another way of saying that there are no exact boundaries between a memoir of childhood and a family history" (Munro & Gray 41). Even if your memoir deals with a later period in your life, unless you live on a desert island, some form of social interaction will have to surface at some point in the narrative, or else your narrative will almost be unnatural. Talking about people, writing about people is part and parcel of any autobiographical project and for this reason, in this configuration, someone will narrate and someone will be narrated. Marie A. Danziger pointed out that "[s]torytelling might just be a situation that does not lend itself well to a peacefully democratic balance of power" (107), and though this remark was aimed at fiction writing, it is also relevant, for different reasons, in the case of autobiography. In a similar fashion, Philippe Lejeune underlined the "primary violence" ("*violence première*") inherent in the will, even the drive to be published and read by unknown readers (Lejeune 305), but there is also an undeniable form of violence in the representation of the other (especially without her/his consent).

Consequently, any autobiographer should feel compelled to answer, even partially, the three following questions: "what can decently be said about others; what ought to remain secret; what simply cannot be said?" (Munro & Gray 58). As researchers in the field of life writing, we must constantly wonder why "by virtue of being […] published" a "text exerts a certain power" (Miller 153). Nancy K. Miller goes further by asking the following questions: "Can such publication ever be fair? Can ethics share the side of power? Can we imagine—would we want to—an ethics of betrayal? An ethical betrayal?" (153). This is made even more problematic by the fact that there is a "greater willingness of contemporary autobiographers to relate more intimate detail" and the "same authors who might, say, 40 years ago, have

been circumspect are now less restrained and move with the spirit of a more candid age" (Munro & Gray 47). However—and this might be viewed as collateral damage—there is also a greater willingness "to relate more intimate detail" about others, or fewer scruples about exposing others (regardless of the, often legal, consequences). A large majority of memoirs arguably evoke the author's childhood to a greater or lesser degree. As a consequence, if in the past family life was an enclosed space, it is nowadays laid bare for all to see; for instance, "[a]buse narratives and explicit accounts of family tragedy are becoming commonplace" (Munro & Gray 58). Memoirs have been "weaponized," used by authors to settle scores by therapeutically narrating their ordeals. Even if autobiographical writing has always been prone to generate controversy due to its intrinsically intimate material, it seems that this trend has lately been accelerated by new standards of what constitutes intimacy (one's own and others').

However, it is a fair assumption that in an overwhelming majority of cases, the narrative sources and targets are always the same: children (whatever their age, as you remain the child of your parents even when you are a parent yourself, or simply when you get older) write about their parents. Autobiographical family narratives are essentially "parents-oriented" for some obvious reasons that do not constitute the main argument of this article but that nevertheless need to be briefly mentioned as they have a direct link to what will be developed further:

- Without even resorting to Freudian theory, one can reasonably claim that children are psychologically molded, or at least heavily influenced by their parents and are at the receiving end of the family dynamics. It is then logical for them to feel the urge, as potential victims or simply "influenced subjects," to share a narrative of their experience.
- Following from the previous point, it is now generally accepted that, to a certain extent, narratives of abuse or particularly damaging experiences can be published as they may help people with similar backgrounds to better understand and process what happened to them, but also because we naturally and understandably sympathize with victims.
- Children often wait for the passing of their parents before writing about them, as publishing uncompromising portraits of failing fathers such as John Burnside's (*A Lie about My Father*) or Karl Ove Knausgaard's (the first volume of *My Struggle*) during their lifetime would have been more sensitive and hurtful. Even if parents are occasionally described as "monsters," there seems to be mostly a tacit consensus that the decent thing to do is not to write about them while they are still living.

- And the last, but probably the most important reason stems from the fact that making sense of one's upbringing and assessing our relationship with our parents and the impact it has had on our personality represents a substantial part of what adulthood is all about. According to Erik Erikson, "[t]o be adult means among other things to see one's own life in continuous perspective, both in retrospect and prospect" and "[i]n this sense, psychologically we do choose our parents, our family history [...]" (111-12).

Pondering our parents' impact on our life is a constant feature of our psychological life, and it seems, if not natural, at least logical to mention them once one ventures into autobiographical territory. In a sense, because memoirists often feel to various degrees victims of their parents' education, they allow themselves a form of betrayal to refer again to Miller's "ethics of betrayal" (whether their parents are still living, or not, depending on the extent of the victimhood). For the reasons listed above, and probably for many more,

> [o]ne of the most significant ethical dimensions of life writing is the writer's evaluation of his or her parents. This process of moral assessment is not as parochial or private as it might at first appear, for in thinking about one's parents, a person may consider how one agrees or differs with parents' beliefs and values related to religion, gender roles, work, race, political matter [...]. A central theme in many autobiographies is judging one's parents, as the author sorts out what parental virtues and values he affirms and which things he denies, at least as normative for his own life. (Barbour 73)

Thus, if autobiography is parents-oriented, it is mostly narrated by grown-up children, who write about their parents, and often complain about them.

What about children? Not this time studied as narrators but as subjects in their parents' autobiographical works. This in a way constitutes an even more treacherous ground as children, and especially minors, are highly sensitive topics, mostly for two main reasons: a symbolic one and a pragmatic one. First, it is reasonable to assert that even though the "cultural construction of childhood" varies from one community to another, children are almost uniformly regarded as innocent, often linked to the idea of purity as "[p]urity, once a concept accessed solely through religious metaphors, collapsed into the secular figure of the child. As with Christ, the power of the innocent child rested in his powerlessness" (Menefee 106). Thus, the figure of the child "combines vulnerability with purity to create the illusion of absolute impressionability. Whatever the innocent child is exposed to immediately becomes part of his experience and structures his vocabulary" (Menefee 107). Children are impressionable, therefore can be harmed and even maimed psychologically by adults. When you write about children, even with the most benevolent disposition, the possible negative

long-term consequences must linger at the back of your mind. Symbols as powerful as the innocent child are not easily trifled with.

This is made worse by the fact that you never know how your children will react once they are old enough to read and understand your autobiographical piece about them. Maggie Nelson sums up perfectly this uncertainty and the related potential qualms of the autobiographer: "But who am I kidding? This book may already be doing wrong. I've heard many people speak with pity about children whose parents wrote about them when they were young" (174). This potential "time bomb"—and children might simply resent the fact of having been written about, publicized—is the second reason why writing about them is not as congruent as writing about other members of your family, for instance. As children, they cannot talk back, write back. As adults, it is often too late, as the harm has already been done. Even as autobiographical subjects, children are harmless as they do not know what is happening (too young to read) and will in most cases never have an opportunity to give their own side of the story (it will be too late to react when they can eventually read what has been written about them, and will probably not be in an influential position to do so). Furthermore, even with the best intention, parents as autobiographers never know the impact public attention will have on their offspring. It is sometimes not what you write about them, but the fact that they have been written about, publicized against their own will (as they are generally ignorant of it) that will disturb these children, in the short or long term. As mentioned earlier through Lejeune's quote, there is a form of violence intrinsic to the act of publishing, even more so when you have no say in the same act and nevertheless end up being involved in it (as a subject of the text). To conclude on this aspect, owing to their strong symbolic value briefly developed above, real children in autobiographies invariably are, consciously or not, conflated with "the generalized innocent child" (Menefee 108), or at least the author's vision of this innocent child; and this might be another form of violence, as "the very act of treating the idealized subject as synonymous with the real subject is a violent act of epistemological colonization" (113). There are of course other potential reasons why it is difficult to write about one's children: "To be fair, writing well about children is tough. You know why? They're not that interesting. What is interesting is that despite the mind-numbing boredom that constitutes 95 percent of child rearing, we continue to have them" (Nelson 88-89).

For the reasons aforementioned, memoirs about children, or dealing more or less extensively with children (the autobiographer's own of course) represent a good yardstick of how far you can go in an autobiographical piece and offer unique opportunities to discuss issues such as the limits of referential representation, of decency or intimacy. Including (therefore involving) your own children in your memoir brings an immediate ethical but also aesthetic

tension: ethical because few readers expect autobiographers to write unsavory things about their children, aesthetic because interesting memoirs, texts that make a difference, imply a form of indecency. As noted by Claudia Mills, "[i]f we don't write about the hurtful, harmful, dark, dangerous things, we won't write anything anybody will want to read. And we won't get published, either. This is the complementary source of the tension in a writer's life: we can't use our most interesting family stories as material, but we can't give them up, either" (101). Richard Freeman concurs as he writes that "however well intended, books about family are bound to involve some degree of compromise of the sensibilities of others, some measure of indecency" (128). Children as subjects in autobiographies are almost a lost cause, or at least a lost battle as they cannot possibly be "compromised" by being involved in some form of indecency, and yet one occasionally has to write about them beyond stereotypes.

I have chosen two extremely distinct memoirs—almost on opposite ends of the autobiographical spectrum on many aspects, as we will see—to launch an analysis of how you can *monitor* the representation of children in sophisticated and ambitious texts, either foregrounding them or backgrounding them, or both, but also of how you can lose control of this representation, how your children as subjects have the ability to "leave the textual home." Sally Mann, author of *Hold Still* (2015), and Maggie O'Farrell, author of *I Am, I Am, I Am* (2017) come from almost radically distinct backgrounds; the former is American, born and raised in Lexington, Virginia and most of her work as a photographer is bound to this region: she received a liberal education by atheist parents who did not feel the urge to supervise her in a strict manner and she describes her young self as quite a "wild" one: "I had been a near-feral child, raised not by wolves but by the twelve boxer dogs my father kept around Boxerwood [...]. The story of my intractability has been told and retold to me all my life by my elder [...]" (17)—she even confesses to having spent the first five years of her life stark naked ("the now familiar tale of my refusal to wear a stitch of clothing until I was five" [17])—, this peculiar temperament having undoubtedly left an imprint on her psychological features as an adult ("I've been said to be temperamentally drawn to extremes, in good ways and bad [...]" [10]). She began to take photographs when she was a teenager and even though she did not study photography at university (but continued to practice throughout her studies), she became a professional photographer soon after graduating from Hollins College where she obtained an MA in creative writing. In spite of this MA, her work had been mostly visual when she published *Hold Still* in 2015. In her own words: "[...] I didn't think of myself as much of an intellectual, and I was certainly no academic. I wasn't even a writer" (xi). She is first and foremost a photographer, further emphasizing the autobiographical accomplishment that *Hold Still* represents.

Mann and O’Farrell are not only separated by a geographical ocean, but by a cultural one as well. O’Farrel, just like Mann, would not define herself primarily as an autobiographer, it actually is quite the opposite: “The novelist had not intended to write a memoir. She used to joke with her husband, the writer William Sutcliffe, that she was as likely to become a mathematician as to write about her private life” (Aitkenhead). She underlines her reluctance to move from fiction to autobiography, a mode of expression she seems to consider as fundamentally remote from her personal inclinations: “‘I never, ever thought I’d do it. It just felt to me it would put too much of a tax on friends and family’ she tells me when we meet in a London club. [...] and even after signing a contract with her publishers, [O’Farrell] still thought she might lose her nerve and want to pull out of the deal.” When asked if “she seriously considered cancelling,” the author again stresses her constant reluctance to write about herself: “‘Yes, constantly’, she laughs. ‘Several times a day. I wasn’t even really sure right up until a couple of months ago that I would publish it’” (Aitkenhead). We will see that the main reason she eventually decided to see the project through is directly related to the topic of this article.

As previously noted, O’Farrell comes from a different background, and yet, at first sight, her character as a child bears many similarities with Mann’s: “As a child, I was an escapologist, a bolter. I ran, scarpered, dashed off, legged it whenever I had the chance. I hated to be held by the hand, to be restrained, tethered, expected to walk in an orderly fashion. I used to squirm free, twist away” (39). But on other aspects, she was drastically different from the “child” Mann admits to having been, especially due to two contextual reasons: Northern Ireland in the 1970s (O’Farrell was born in Coleraine in 1972) was a very different place from Virginia in the 1950s (Mann was born in 1951); and when she was 8, she contracted encephalitis, was hospitalized over a long period of time and had to undergo months of rehabilitation: “The coming home from hospital, the weeks and months of being at home, in bed, drifting up and down on currents of sleep, listening on conversations, meals, emotions, arrivals and departures of family life below” (227). This experience turned her definitely into a different person: “Until that morning I woke up with a headache, I was one person, and after it, I was quite another. No more bolting along pavements for me [...]. I could never go back to the self I was before and I have no sense of who I might have been if I hadn’t contracted encephalitis as a young child” (226). It has had long-lasting effects on her cognitive and motor functions that even to this day continue to affect her life and her identity: “The illness comes in and out of focus for me, in adulthood. I can go for days without thinking about it; at other times it feels like a defining event. It means nothing, it means everything. [...] It means that my perception of the world is altered, unstable” (234). We are quite far from the physicality of the daily existence Mann often depicts in her memoir, even though O’Farrell is a passionate

traveler and has refused to let the "illness" obstruct her horizon of possibilities. But more than their cultural differences, it is their respective professions that set them apart: O'Farrell is a Cambridge-educated novelist, Mann is a renown American photographer who has throughout her work explored the landscapes of the wild and mythical American South.

On account of theses diverging professional backgrounds, the two memoirs under study stem from very distinct aesthetic traditions and were written by authors whose main "trade" is definitely not autobiography. As we have just seen, O'Farrell is a very reluctant autobiographer and so far, Mann has only produced one book-length text compared to a substantial visual work. She is first and foremost a visual artist and, as a consequence, even her memoir cannot be described as such. It is tagged on the hardback cover as "A Memoir with Photographs." This is a very fitting description of what the reader will find inside the book; as for the more general issue of the genre it belongs to, there are several approaches that need to be briefly considered as "[f]rom the early decades of the 20th century onwards, autobiographical texts, like biographies, have routinely included a set of photographic images, providing visual representations of the writing 'I' and a visual narrative of the life being recorded" (Marcus 97). Elisa Bricco defines five possible modes of interaction between text and photographs within a book, the fourth being autobiography supported by photographs ("[l]'autobiographie avec le support de la photographie" 7). Of course, in the case of *Hold Still*, this type of interaction does not adequately describe the text/image dynamics developed by Sally Mann. Being a photographer, her memoir is, in very literal terms of space, almost as much visual as textual, as opposed to predominantly textual memoirs including the occasional picture such as Roland Barthes's *La Chambre claire* or *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* or, more recently, David Lodge's autobiographical diptych (*Quite a Good Time to Be Born* and *Writer's Luck*). As for the direction of the interaction (text illustrating pictures or the other way around), it is a complex form of reciprocal action or influence rarely found in hybrid works. The photographs do not only trigger off the text or illustrate it, but have a deep influence on the nature of the text as Mann also thinks visually. If her "iconotext," her "bi-media" autobiography (Hertrampf), must be situated within a particular aesthetic tradition, it is certainly the few memoirs written by photographers, such as Nadar's *Quand j'étais photographe* or, to give a very different (much more visual, far less textual) example, Judy Dater's *Memoir*; the former, though quite unconventional, revolves around Nadar's creative process, whereas the latter is more personal but, contrary to Mann's autobiography, overwhelmingly iconographic as it often resembles a scrapbook.

Eventually, although displaying an unusual hybridity, *Hold Still* belongs to "the body of contemporary autobiographies that display a dialogue between 'family pictures' and the autobiographical textual 'self'" (Raynaud), except that in this particular case, the text is full of pictures, among them family pictures, which once again are not limited to an illustrating function, and the "dialogue" is constantly bi-directional, and much more complex than in most iconotexts (but only memoirs as visual as Mann's seem worthy of this name). However, notwithstanding the strong visual element, *Hold Still* fits within the framework of many memoirs that encompass the author's life, focusing on key events and periods, and one of these topics is Mann's children, and more precisely their representation.

Children are also the main topic of *I am, I am, I am*'s closing chapter, and more precisely O'Farrell's middle child and her dramatic health issues. Even though the memoir's visual content is limited to drawings at the beginning of each chapter, it also can be perceived as an unconventional take on the genre since, contrary to Mann's and a majority of autobiographers' approach, O'Farrell chooses a thematically very narrow re-entry into her life: as the subtitle of the book indicates, she focuses on her seventeen brushes with death, except that the last chapter (each chapter narrates one almost fatal accident or encounter) does not deal with her potential demise but her daughter's. Suddenly, the memoir which so far has focused almost exclusively on the author's unusual and sometimes frightening experiences—although by evoking the dangers (illnesses, accidents) she had to face as a child, she also draws a portrait of her relation with her mother and of her family history—suddenly homes in on a different predicament: indeed, "[s]ince birth, she [her daughter] has suffered extreme allergic reactions between 12 and 15 times a year, one or two of which will tip her into full-blown anaphylactic shock" (Aitkenhead). She describes her daily life as "a state of high alert" and, based on what is narrated in this last chapter, that appears as a serious understatement. O'Farrell epitextually informed her readers that the whole project actually hinges on the last chapter, which is the memoir's *raison d'être*: "The book exists, ultimately, for one reason only: O'Farrell wanted to help her children understand that her daughter's proximity to mortality is not their unique curse, but in fact surprisingly common" (Aitkenhead). O'Farrell is quite certainly a reluctant memoirist, if not a fatalist one: "'It does feel very different from publishing a novel,' she agrees, 'and I am quite nervous about it. It's funny. A friend said recently, 'You've basically revealed all the secrets you've spent your whole life hiding.' But I did it for my daughter. I was tired of the silence, I think'" (Aitkenhead).

But as seminal as her child's dire health issues are to the text, they remain from a strictly literal point of view not central. The overall organization of the book reveals a different

strategy and choosing to close her memoir with what represents, according to her, the core of her work, raises questions, questions that were inevitably put to her: "I'm curious to know why she didn't begin the book with the final chapter about her daughter's illness, to help the reader understand their context, but at this she looks surprised. Her sensibility is entirely literary, and so to her the answer is obvious: it is the dramatic reveal of a novel. 'I just approached it as a novelist, and the structure of it is how a novelist will write'" (Aitkenhead). We'll come back to this particular strategy, but as an introduction to the analysis of Mann's and O'Farrell's representation of their own children, the positionality of these specific passages should not be underestimated, quite the opposite actually. Peter J. Rabinowitz points out an obvious fact that we tend to forget in the cognitive whirlpool of our lives: "For among the rules that apply quite broadly among nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and American prose narratives are rules that privilege certain positions: titles, beginning and endings, [...], epigraphs, and descriptive subtitles" (58). This positional factor is not restricted to prose narratives, but is just a simple fact of the way our brain, and more precisely our memory works. For instance, we often remember the most salient or the last part of an experience. This is true for instance for extremely physical experiences such as pain: "When asked to recall what it was like to undergo a painful procedure we do not simply sum up the total amount of pain experienced. Rather our memory appears to be primarily shaped by how painful it was at its worst moment and how painful it was when it ended. This has been called the 'peak-end' effect'" (Hsu et al.). As noted by Rabinowitz, this also applies to what you remember of any type of cultural artefact and thus puts into perspective the journalist's surprise as to why Maggie O'Farrell would decide to place her key chapter in the last position; according to the peak-end rule, this might not be positionally central, but it cognitively is. To refer to the title of the present article, foregrounding and backgrounding, when it comes to the way we cognitively apprehend a text and its subject matter, should not be taken literally. By only tackling the issue of her daughter's health late in the text, O'Farrell actually foregrounded her plight and successfully applied her skills as a novelist to her first (and probably last) autobiographical text. To what extent this last chapter is actually about her daughter is another matter that will be developed in our final part.

Throughout her memoir, Mann brings up or even delves into her family life, but mostly to reflect upon her role as a mother or wife. However, not surprisingly, the seventh chapter deals with the most controversial aspect of her artistic life, the pictures she took of her children and published in various magazines and in her book entitled *Immediate Family*. To cut a long story short, these pictures are the result of a simple process: "[...] for years I shot the under-appreciated and extraordinary domestic scenes of any mother's life with the point-and-shoot" (105); except of course that Mann being an artist, some of these pictures are far

beyond the aesthetic standards of most family pictures—one should keep in mind that she used an 8 x 10 inch camera most of us would be unable to operate—and, above all, she decided to publish some of them. The fact that the children are naked in some of these pictures triggered off a national debate that can be very effectively summed up thus:

> While many of the images have a sensual quality, they did not cause the same outrage as her 1991 book *Immediate Family*, which depicted her own children in various stages of undress or totally nude. Charges of child pornography were leveled, protests were formed outside gallery showings, and many lingering questions swirled around the public dissemination of what appear to be very private moments. Supporters of Mann's work declared that any sexuality seen in the images were the result of less-than-innocent readings. Mann herself stated (perhaps naively), "I don't think of my children, and I don't think anyone else should think of them, with any sexual thoughts. I think childhood sexuality is an oxymoron" (cited in Woodward, 1992, p. 6). Her dual role of artist and mother of the subjects raises questions about advocacy for minor children (Zurbriggen et al., p. 313). Those who argue that Mann's images capture the pure but wild nature of childhood may be put off by knowing that these images are carefully constructed and, in many cases, reenacted multiple times for the proper light effects or cropped in a manner that plays on ambiguity (Art21, 2003). [...] Though they might not be considered child pornography, pictures of Mann's children are often found on computer hard drives of sex offenders (Carnes, 2003; Stanley, 1991). Zurbriggen et al. (2003) argue that Mann's images have the potential for making her young models vulnerable because viewers who experience an erotic connection may project their own sexual fantasies upon the children. (Savage 107)

Within the analytical framework of this article, and contrary to O'Farrell who did it in a more subtle manner described above, Mann literally foregrounded her children, she brought them visually to the fore of public attention. As Shari L. Savage explains, she did it for the sake of her art and because of this stand, she considers that she does not have to justify herself (though justify herself she did amply). In one of the fiercest debates that opposed her to Mary Gordon in the journal *Salmagundi*, Mann, responding to Gordon's compelling argument that "we must question the ethics of an art which allows the adult who has the most power over these children—a parent, in this case a mother— to place them in a situation where they become the imagined sexual partner of adults, adults they don't even know, and might be horrified by" (145), claimed that "[s]uch had been our confidence in the blamelessness of what we were doing, and my misreading (or disregard) of the political and cultural weather." She added: "But now that I am wiser on political and cultural matters, I still usually respond as I would have done ten years ago—that no artist is obliged to answer his critics, that to do so is beneath an artist's dignity" (228). It is a stance that cost her dearly as the issue that her role as a mother and as an artist constantly overlapped was never resolved. And in the chapter entitled "Hold Still," she makes a convincing case for the atmosphere of family mysticism mingled with artistic epiphany that made her so confident about her project: "And these pictures have come quickly, in a rush… like some urgent bodily demand. They have been obvious, they have been right there to be taken, almost like celestial gifts" (129). But in

the following chapter, "*Ubi Amor, Ibi Oculus Est*," she adopts a different attitude, a more argumentative but also less categorical one, retracing the history of the whole scandal and, to a certain extent, reassuming the mantle of the mother: "Even at the time, anguishing over these opinions and predictions, I knew that the crucial question for me as a mother was not whether the pictures were going to be respected in twenty years, but this all-important one: 'I wonder how those poor, art-abused kids turned out'" (139). And yet, she confesses that mostly, "[t]he two roles [mother, artist] were to a large extent kept separate" (139). After depicting some of the dismal harassment her family suffered because of these pictures, she finally concludes the chapter on a rather apologetic note, acknowledging that her position sometimes violently conflicted with the one of the world at large: "Unwittingly, ignorantly, I made pictures I thought I could control, pictures made within the prelapsarian protection of the farm, those cliffs, the impassable road, the embracing river" (161). Of course, when quite naturally for an artist she decided to publish these pictures, the wall fell down.

In the seventh chapter, the visual overcomes the textual, in the sense that the text mostly contextualizes and justifies the visual, but also because some of the pictures are either beautiful or disturbing, or simply beautiful and disturbing. One can argue that, whatever the subject of the pictures is, the visual, especially in a memoir where the reader will expect a mostly textual content, disrupts the reading flow, attracts the gaze of the readers and engages directly the most visceral parts of our brain.

What Mann does visually, representing the adamant beauty of her children, and more precisely of their childhood and its environment to the reader beyond any judgmental horizon, O'Farrell tries to do with the exclusively textual tools at her disposal; *I am, I am, I am*'s last chapter, simply entitled "Daughter," primarily aimed at "normalising the near-death experience" (Aitkenhead) for her children as already mentioned, but, since it is a published work creating an intersubjective line of communication with virtual readers, it quite certainly also aims at eliciting a strong sense of empathy for her daughter's predicament. In the opening lines, the author describes her daughter having an anaphylactic reaction in a car in Italy in the middle of what seemed at the time for the parents the middle of nowhere: "My daughter's breathing is shallow, labored, her lips distended, her skin patched and livid. The delicate features are sunken, swollen, distorted. Her hands clutch mine but her eyes are rolling back in her head. I touch her cheek, I say her name. I say, stay awake, stay with us" (251). Of course, this heart-breaking account will be revealed as one of the most dramatic moments in a life of constant crises and quite fortunately, O'Farrell's daughter will "stay with them." Had she not, it would have been a different book—a memoir of mourning like, to take one example among many, Joan Didion's *Blue Nights*—or maybe

there would have been no book at all. What is interesting in this passage is that, from a narratological point of view, it is a case of external focalization, told from an external point of view: the *mother as narrator* describes what the shock physically looked like. Of course, realistically, this is the only available perspective. This, in a way, connects with Mann's photographic, and occasionally textual (when she describes the scene that eventually generated the picture) representation of her own children: it is a *photographic moment*. As we have seen, O'Farrell admitted to having used her skills as a novelist to enhance the dramatic potential of her last chapter, to suddenly foreground her daughter's suffering, but she only applied these skills to the overall structure of her narrative, of macro-management in other words; for instance, she could also have switched perspectives and internally described what her daughter might have been experiencing. Is her reluctance to switch perspectives related to the fact that, because she was writing a memoir, she still wanted to remain within a realist framework—even though James Phelan has demonstrated that there are examples of unnatural narratology even in autobiographical writings (see Phelan 2010)—, or because, in a way, this would have been a case of invading her child's privacy, of going too far in the inclusion of her children within her own memoir? Similarly, as powerful and intimate Mann's pictures can be, the nakedness of her children never gives way to any concrete form of internal focalization, to her really imagining how they felt as subjects of these pictures or later indirectly involved in the whole episode, even if the eighth chapter would have been a perfect opportunity to do that. And there was, however, a different perspective within the family circle she could have given a voice to:

> Mann's daughter Jessie, now an adult photographer and painter, told *Aperture* magazine how the public dissemination of her image affected her: "Those images, our childhood stories, our very characters, were consumed by an outside meaning, which was in a way bigger than we were. As we grew up we didn't just grow into ourselves, we grew into the larger conception of our characters that others projected for us." (Savage 108)

Of course, this perspective was not available at the time as Jessie was maybe too young to have a particular opinion, but at the time of the publishing of *Hold Still*, it certainly was.

As different as *Hold Still* and *I Am, I Am, I Am* can be, they share one essential common feature: in at least one chapter, they describe what I would call *parenting in extreme conditions*; whether they are involved in a national scandal (and included in controversial pieces of art) or their health are seriously in danger (and their daily lives upended as a result), these children trigger off narratives of difficult and unusual parenting experiences. In other words, these two books are not memoirs about children, but about parenting (and parenting these children). This is in no way a qualitative appreciation, as both authors never claimed that their primary objective was to write about their children: Sally Mann writes

about different aspects of her life, and her children are just one aspect and they are mostly described as subjects in her art, whereas Maggie O'Farrell clearly stated that she primarily meant to write for her daughter, not about her. And because young children may find it hard to verbalize their feelings anyway and parenting is such a powerful experience, family memoirs are logically either about one's parents or about one's experience as parents. However, especially in ambitious works such as the two memoirs studied here, published by famous artists, devices to give voice to these children remained a possibility, including various examples such as novelistic focalization, journalistic techniques such as interview-based testimonies or embedded narratives.

But of course, the narrative would have taken a different course and, although their children (and other relatives) were part of the narrative perimeter both authors wanted to cover, they were never meant to be the main subject (as opposed to the main motivation in O'Farrell's case). But as original as these memoirs are, they face the same limits when it comes to writing about children. Indeed, as mentioned in the introduction, it is in the nature of any autobiographical act to involve, include or at the very least mention other people, whether they agree or not (and the legal system can help you become disentangled from somebody else's autobiographical narrative). But in all cases, a third subject's *participation* in a self-referential narrative falls into three different trends:

inclusive (this person was consulted about her version of particular facts and events, and this version was one way or another included in the memoir);

projective (by means of her imagination, the author projects likely but still virtual thoughts onto somebody else she writes about);

and *reactive* (the third person takes legal action against the author).

As far as children are concerned—and the younger they are, the more relevant this claim seems to be—the first kind of participation is inevitably limited as they often neither grasp the stakes of an autobiographical project and its potential repercussion, nor have the necessary rhetorical skills to play an active role in the construction of the narrative; the third type, for reasons similar to what I have just underlined, will have to wait until they reach a certain age. Only the second form of participation is possible, but there is undeniably a form of violence inherent in this option, not in the act of imagining what your children think, of representing their thoughts—as parents, we do it every day—but in the act of publicizing them, of using a form of inner focalization on your children in order to produce a literary text that, eventually, will be published. As intimate and to some extent extreme as the self-narratives of *Stand Still* and *I am, I am, I am* can be, they never venture out into this psychological territory. And even when Sally Mann's daughter, Jessie, emphasized the

adverse knock-on effect of the publication of *Immediate Family*, one must keep in mind that she and her siblings were never exposed as textual subjects, but as visual ones. It is not the impact of her mother's memoir that is called into question, but her book of photographs. By foregoing any form of inner focalization, are Mann and O'Farrell protective of their children? Is this the conscious or unconscious limit they set for themselves? Probably, and I think one would be hard-pressed to find examples of memoirs in which parents overstep this limit.

We are entangled in our children's lives, they are entangled in ours. According to Joan Menefee, "[i]t is little wonder that few people write their autobiographies of childhood given how painful the requisite honesty can be, both to self and to others" (53). But it might also be true that few people write their autobiographies of parenthood as the "requisite honesty" can be painful, or at least hurtful too. In fact, it seems that a majority of parenthood memoirs deal with narratives of children's illnesses, or other dire situations that drastically complicate parenting. And even then, as in the two memoirs I have decided to focus on, the author remains within the framework of an external perspective.

As a matter of fact, children in these two texts are reduced to their physicality, whether visual or pathological. This is their most, if not only expressive feature; children as ailing or aesthetic bodies (involved in scenes of family life) with almost no psychological dimension. Contrary to what *I am, I am, I am*' s closing lines ("She is, she is, she is" [285]) may suggest, we never go beyond the literalness of O'Farrell's daughter's existence: we know that she is (sick), but who she is is never really tackled. In a way, this makes perfect sense: as narrating subject of autobiographical texts, you unavoidably impose your own perspective on the world and others, with varying degrees of subtlety. But children are slippery subjects, difficult to communicate with, constantly changing, and their privacy must be protected. This is why parenting memoirs are so one-dimensional, and children in memoirs are almost opaque reflecting surfaces in which adults can see themselves as parents, in thrall to the never-ending anguish of having to protect someone.

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