

ANSEL ADAMS: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY
Ansel Adams, with Mary Street Alinder/Little, Brown/\$50.00

Vernon Young

We have become so accustomed to the character of a man's art being contradicted by his personal character, or at least existing in an oblique relationship to it, that we tend to read biographical literature in order to confirm our ready inferences. When no such contradiction is forthcoming, we are amazed. Ansel Adams, master photographer and conservationist, as revealed in the autobiography he completed a year before his death in 1984, is a source of such amazement. He lived a success story from his youth onward. After an initial procrastination in his choice of livelihood (oddly enough the choice was between *music* and photography; seldom is an *augenmensch* also a *hörenmensch*!), he pursued that livelihood with otherworldly dedication and increasing recognition and reward. His private life was without tragedy, frustration, or bitterness. He fell in love with the right girl at the right time, remained happily married for over fifty years, and until the end of his span enjoyed in the main good health.

Adams discovered "the impact of the Natural Scene" in early trips to the Yosemite and was thenceforth committed to the Western American setting as the great good place and as the principal subject of the magnificent photographic record he would eventually compile. The present volume is abundantly illustrated with pictures taken as early as 1930 and as late as 1983. What is perhaps most impressive about them, within the cohesive subject of wilderness, is their variety, their seemingly infinite balancing of the lyric and the majestic, the analytical and the visionary. The style of any single picture has been determined by the view he had chosen. There is not an overall mannerism that makes any two photographs resemble one another—except, naturally, as one mountain will resemble another. Shown these pictures without identification of their authors, you might find it difficult to believe that the sculptured lucidity of "Moon and Half Dome" (1960) was photographed by the same eye that perceived

the remarkable interplay of textures in the "Oyster Fence" photo of 1953, or the brooding epic vistas of "Mount McKinley and Wonder Lake" (1947).

Adams may be exaggerating a little when he claims to have decided on a career in photography rather than music as late as 1930, when he first saw the "glorious negatives" of the photographer Paul Strand in New Mexico. His understanding of photography must have already been considerably crystallized in 1926 when his pictures attracted the special attention of Albert Bender. Influential, wealthy, eccentric, and immensely generous, Bender became one of the most fateful patrons in Adams's career. He introduced the photographer not only to Carmel and Robinson Jeffers but also to Mabel Dodge Lujan and Taos. When Adams met Strand in 1930, as he says, he had surely by then fully prepared his *Taos Pueblo* volume. Adams had his first one-man show in New York City in 1933, when photography, either as a fine art or as current history in the work of photo-journalists, was just coming into its own. Howard Devrees, of the *Times*, expressed in a short favorable paragraph the appeal of Adams's art, soon to be shared by

thousands. Adams's photography, wrote Devrees, "strikingly captures a world of poetic form. His lens has caught snow-laden branches in their delicate tracery; shells embedded in sandstone; great trees and cumulus clouds. It is masterly stuff."

Adams was always wary, in his several statements of credo, about committing himself either to the force of inspiration or to the exclusive demands of method. In a textbook he once wrote he came closest to explaining the delicate balance. "Photographic images cannot avoid being accurate optically, as lenses are used. However, they depart from reality in direct relation to the placement of the camera before the subject, the lens chosen, the film and filters, the exposure indicated, the associated development and printing." For such explanations, other photographers frequently thought of him as primarily a technician. Brett Weston, son of Edward and himself a productive photographer, lived in an intuitive world, distrusting technique and preaching "the triumph of instinct." "I am a primitive," he declared. "Ansel is a scientist." To which Adams protested that he used techniques in order to free his vision: "The physics of the situation are fearfully complex but the miracle of the image is a triumph of the imagination."

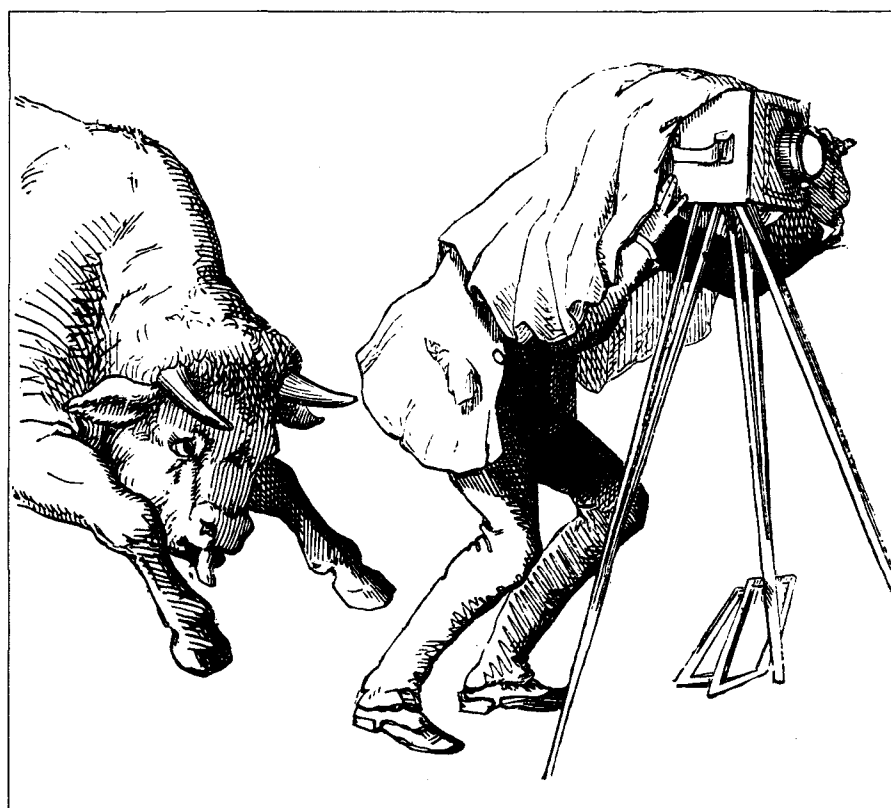
Inevitably, it seems now, Adams's preoccupation with nature in the wild led to his active cooperation with conservationists who, despite the establishment long ago of National Parks, have had to fight tooth-and-nail against encroachments on virgin land by corporate investors. "The miracle of the image" in his photographs, combined

with his championing of projects on behalf of endangered areas (such as Big Sur), has increasingly secured his dual prestige as an artist and as an activist. Yet he has kept the pictures separate from the function they have helped to activate. "People are surprised when I say that I never intentionally made a creative photograph related directly to an environmental issue. I cannot summon the creative impulse on demand. I never know in advance precisely what I will photograph. I go out into the world and hope I will come across something that imperatively interests me. I am addicted to the found object."

From the seventies on, the attention paid him, the exhibits provided and the awards bestowed, mushroomed at what was no doubt a gratifying pace. Europe was discovering him; he was given showings at Arles in 1974 and in 1976, and in London the Victoria and Albert Museum mounted (1976) what he has described as "one of the best installations of my work I have seen." A traveling exhibit was initiated by MOMA (1979) which coincided with the publication of his book, *Yosemite and the Range of Light*. (By 1982 this collection had sold, in hard and soft-cover combined, 200,000 copies!) and in 1981 he was awarded the Hasselblad Gold Medal. To the chagrin of professional portrait photographers, we suppose, Adams was chosen in 1979 to take the official portraits of President Carter and Vice President Mondale (wildlife on the Potomac?); the following year Carter presented him with the country's highest civilian honor, the Medal of Freedom.

Adams's encounters with Presidents predates (and postdates) the meeting with Carter and he gives his frank opinions of these men, insofar as they were concerned with the issue of conservation. He has high praise for Lyndon Johnson, for Gerald Ford, and of course for Carter, none for Nixon, and none for the present incumbent. Invited to the White House, presumably to exchange ideas on the state of public lands, he was "negatively impressed" by the President's failure to discuss or challenge his opinions. He tried to remind Mr. Reagan that the burning of fossil fuels pollutes water and air, reducing the ozone layer of the atmosphere and bringing acid rain. Reagan's "curt reply was that there is considerable disagreement about the causes of acid rain." Yes, well—we've been *there* before, haven't we?

My sole adverse criticism of this volume: the many stunning photographs (largely chosen by Mary Street Alinder) created for the publishers a problem of format they ill resolved. The book is unfittable to any shelf and it weighs a ton! □



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SOUND-SHADOWS OF THE NEW WORLD

Ved Mehta/W. W. Norton/\$17.95

Jacob Weisberg

Ved Mehta thinks he has led a pretty interesting life. So fascinating has it been, in fact, that Mehta, who is now 52, has dedicated the years remaining him to exhuming his past and describing it in excruciating, microscopic detail. *Sound-Shadows of the New World*, which was previously published in the *New Yorker*, is his sixth volume of autobiography to date, but it only manages to bring us up to Mehta's somewhat tardy puberty at age 18. At this rate of reminiscence, there isn't much danger that art will overtake life. But we can probably look forward to at least a few books from Ved about his years writing about himself.

In this latest work, Mehta tells of his arrival in the United States and the three years he spent as a student at the Arkansas School for the Blind, a state institution which was the only American academy that would admit him. The odds against young Ved in this strange new land are overwhelming: he arrives in New York so green that he doesn't know how to eat with a fork, and is shocked by the notion of couples kissing in public. When he finally reaches Little Rock, he has to ask the rubes what words like "divorce" mean. "I don't think we have it in India," he says.

But because he is so diligent and so eager to become an American, parochial Arkansas rewards Ved with its attention and esteem. Mehta remembers that some of his blind classmates were bigots and even thought that he was black, despite the fact that the school was segregated and didn't admit Negroes. But he doesn't presume to pass judgment on the racism of his teachers and classmates; Mehta's attitude in retrospect seems to be that the people who readily accepted him couldn't have been all that bad. Is a society of blind people less prone to bigotry because of the way it has been stigmatized and patronized by the rest of the world? It's a fascinating question. But Mehta hardly seems to have considered it.

What he offers instead is a story of

Jacob Weisberg, a reporter/researcher at the New Republic, doesn't read braille but he speaks it.

conformity and instantaneous assimilation. Presented with a dinner of spaghetti and meatballs upon arrival in New York, he shudders briefly at violating the Hindu taboo against eating beef. "The mere thought of it was revolting," he writes. But he quickly remembers the when-in-Rome adage, and digs in. Mehta quotes endless passages from the mundane diary he kept at the time, telling of similar qualms about casual dating, which the Arkansas school encouraged to help its blind students prepare for finding sighted spouses. Although the American custom is foreign to him, he doesn't question its obvious superiority. Instead of depicting a clash between Eastern and Western values, Mehta writes about putting his antiquated beliefs aside.

Listen to him as he parrots the answers to an American History exam in a braille correspondence course he took one summer to graduate early: "Democracy is a marvelous thing. I cannot imagine what our modern democracy would be like without our newspapers. . . . [America's] mineral wealth, its forest wealth, its invigorating climate are unprecedented. Its people have descended from the most energetic European stock. All of these factors have made America prosperous and a model for other countries. . . ." It's great that Ved was such an impressionable young man. But if he has since developed any insights into this proclivity for patriotic platitude, Mehta doesn't share them with us.

Only at the attempt by his piano teacher, Miss Holt, to save his soul does Ved draw the line. He stalls by telling her that although he's not a practicing Hindu, he can't accept the idea that the rest of his family is destined for hell because they don't worship Jesus. He denies that Jesus was the son of God. "Then go and burn in Hell," Miss Holt hollers. "I don't mind being damned," Mehta barks back (partly in the hope of being excused from church services). Here, as in all of the arguments in the book, Ved has the last word. Much of it seems to be nothing more than a belated response to teachers who gave him B's and C's. Miss Holt tells her students that only God deserves the

grade of A+. Mehta objects that God isn't a student at the Arkansas School for the Blind. If he were, I suppose, His name would be Ved.

Mehta's self-righteousness reaches its height as graduation approaches, when both Harvard and Columbia reject him because of his low SAT scores. He says that the Educational Testing Service ruined his chances by supplying a culturally biased test that wasn't in braille despite the service's promise to provide one. No doubt he did get a raw deal from ETS. But the point Mehta makes isn't about cultural bias, or even discrimination against the handicapped. It's that *he* succeeded despite the obstacles placed in his way, and despite the enormous odds against him. He trumpets his own achievements and then steps back, as if waiting for our applause.

The subtitle of *Sound-Shadows of the New World* ought to be "Blind Ambition." Normans Mailer and Podhoretz have written directly about the topic, but because of their respective humor and honesty their descriptions of lusting after success were excusable. Mehta, however, seems to think that his handicap excuses his writing an entire book about self-absorption. His writing is so humorless and superficial that he manages to transform the topic of ambition into something more tedious than hideous:

Then there is writing. I love to read and write. I love good literature. I love to criticize books. I have the imagination and possess the talent to write, I think. I would also like my views to be known widely—all over the world. I think I could succeed in this profession, in spite of the great competition. . . .

As a matter of fact, he writes about his ambitions in pretty much the same way he writes about the weather:

For the last couple of weeks it has been awfully springlike. I have been as much time as I possibly can outside, admiring and enjoying the flowers. They've already started blossoming. But Arkansas has really startling reverses in weather, and everyone is predicting a bitter cold wave. That'll put an end to the flowers.

Stop this autobiography, I want to get off.

Mehta's next volume is expected to treat his years at Pomona College, in Pomona, California, where the weather is also supposed to be lovely. One can only hope someone will knock some sense into him and persuade him to abandon what is surely one of the most overblown literary endeavors of all time. Early in his book Mehta bemoans the fact that, until quite recently, the only careers for blind people in Arkan-

sas were piano tuning and broom making. That was desperately unfair. But is it a measure of their progress that the blind now have equal opportunity to write for the *New Yorker* and bore innocent people to death? □

BETHELL

(continued from page 13)

housing?

They had poor housing in San Francisco, too.

"Lady, they strip-searched you for bringing in a computer. Doesn't that tell you something?"

He was "brainwashed by anti-Soviet propaganda," she said.

He said she was "the victim of a self-induced blindness."

"And with that," Larry recalled, "we reached a stony impasse."

Driving away from the Moscow Airport, our Intourist guide Olga (who was with us for the entire trip) allowed two more guides onto the bus for the ride into Moscow. One young woman sat next to Beichman. She might quite reasonably have assumed that we were one more peace group.

"Why can't we live in peace?" she pertly asked him.

"Because the Red Army is in places where it isn't wanted."

"Like where?"

"Hungary."

We drove through muddy miles of socialist realism—dreary blocks of flats, Lenin in repose, Lenin making a point to the masses, Lenin in profile, Lenin Triumphant. Buses packed with strap-hanging proles made their way out to communal apartments. Everything was dirty, dun-colored, unpainted, grimy, poor, crumbling, trodden down. Old ladies with black shawls and shopping bags plodded along minding their own business. Long live the Communist Party of the Soviet Union! Not a leaf in sight.

Quite abruptly we were in the center, with silvery church domes and freshly gilded onions glinting through bare birch branches. The Kremlin! A high wall and a Red Star, a river embankment and here was our hotel, the Rossiya, only two or three hundred yards from St. Basil's Cathedral. It looked, as Christopher Booker has written, "like nothing so much as a cluster of tethered Montgolfier hot-air balloons." It was smaller than I had imagined, just as the Kremlin itself was somehow more impressive.

At supper live music was provided by a hefty, pink-gowned quartet—the Kremlinettes, as I thought of them—playing Moscow rock-cum-pasodoble. They seemed to displease Olga—