

AUTOGRAPHOLOGIES: REFLECTIONS ON WRITING A MEMOIR¹

A few years ago a TV company approached me to see if I would be interviewed for a programme they wanted to make about the Street Commune squat at 144 Piccadilly. It was to be broadcast as part of a series entitled 'The Way We Were Then' in which people who had been directly involved in recent historical events were asked to talk about their experiences, the interviews being intercut with archive film footage of the scenes being described. It was a neat, if somewhat simplistic formula, based on the notion that the testimony of direct participants or eye witnesses would provide a 'human angle' or 'inside story' otherwise missing from the public record.

At first, I was reluctant to take part. I was somewhat dubious about the programme's premise and did not know if they could treat the subject in a non-sensational way. I was also not entirely sure I wanted to revisit such a chaotic period in my life. All the same there might be something to be gained. The accounts of 1960s radicalism that were beginning to appear focussed almost exclusively on what was happening in the universities, largely because the people writing them were left-wing academics who had been active in the student movement and inevitably privileged their own involvements. Even if the squatting movement was only a footnote to that history, I felt it was still a distinct and unique moment, and deserved to be remembered as such. It also occurred to me that making the programme might be a way of contacting some ex-street communards, and doing some interviews with them, so that the event would be properly documented. I was also interested in what had happened to them since, how that experience had affected their subsequent lives. So I agreed. The programme was duly made and screened on a community channel; a few people I knew saw it, including some academic colleagues who were somewhat bemused to see me in my pre-academic guise but that was the end of the story. I never heard back from any old communards and so the research project never got off the ground.

The experience left me with some nagging questions. Did I want to be remembered as 'Dr John', a character who was, essentially, a figment of the media's imagination? Did I really want my life history to be reduced to that single moment of public fame, or rather infamy, in which I had briefly become a national figure, a folk devil conjured up by the gutter press through its carefully scripted moral panic about 'hippy squatters'? Clearly not! And yet I had to accept that this might well happen unless I could find another way of making sense of the event as other than a sign of those crazy times; I had to integrate it into a larger account of my life, in a way that would mean something to the people who knew me best now, my family and friends.

In lieu of this, the whole episode had become split off from the rest of my life story. I never talked about it to colleagues, and apart from a few who knew me from the '60s and had made similar transitions back into academia, no one knew of the connection with 'Dr John'. It was not that I was ashamed of my earlier political activities; indeed these experiences were instrumental in formulating the research questions addressed in my early academic work. But while a background in counter-culture and community activism might be good in promoting street cred, it does not do much for the

¹ Note a shortened version of this text appeared in History Workshop Journal 74 2012 under the title 'Recognising in the Inferno that which is Not'. This text can be downloaded by going to the journal website : www.historyworkshop.org. This website also contains a version of the memoir 'Reading Room Only' which is to be published in a longer and revised version by Five Leaves Press, Nottingham in April 2013.

official CV! I was now surrounded by contemporaries, who had pronounced left-wing or otherwise radical sympathies, but most of whom had nevertheless gone from school to university and stayed there, working away in their chosen subject area, whilst steadily progressing up the academic career ladder, in some cases sublimating their wilder political ambitions into professional ones en route. In contrast I had learnt the tools of my intellectual trade by undertaking an eccentric course of independent study in the BM Reading Room – a formation more like that of the old-fashioned autodidact or amateur scholar than a modern middle-class professional. The fact that I had followed such a different trajectory reinforced the feeling that I was still not quite a bona fide member of the Academy, at best a maverick, at worst a misfit. So I wanted to write something that would explain where I was coming from in terms that would be appreciated by my professional colleagues as well as being of interest to those of my contemporaries who had been active in building the 1960s' 'alternative society'.

These then were the tasks I set myself in writing *Reading Room Only*. In approaching them I decided to deal only very briefly with the squat at 144 Piccadilly, and for number of reasons. I had given an account elsewhere of the street commune movement and I wanted to situate these events within a broader chronology, tracing the evolution of a particular political counter-culture over more than a decade. More importantly, the significance of '144' for me lay in its 'other scene'. It was the moment that revealed the true importance of the Reading Room, as both a real and imagined space in my life, providing a home for a way of thinking that was not part of Calvino's inferno; it is that 'conceit' which holds the narrative together and gives it whatever thematic coherence it has. Calvino's principle also had particular relevance to the circumstances under which the work was written. On the brink of retirement I was diagnosed with a serious medical condition, and this double whammy precipitated an acute depression. Writing the memoir has thus been very much an exercise in keeping the inferno at bay.

At the same time, as I struggled to shape the story, as it evolved through countless iterations from being a simple account of working in the BM into a fully-fledged memoir, I found myself having to deal practically with many of the issues previously only considered from a purely theoretical point of view. This experience in turn led me to reconsider the academic literature dealing with the subject and raised some further questions.

The Autobiographical Pact

How we learn to read our own lives and how we read other people's are intimately connected, and both inevitably influence the way autobiographies get written. A useful starting point in considering this interplay between reading and writing is Philippe Lejeune's concept of the 'autobiographical pact'. (30). Lejeune argues that the defining feature of autobiography is the way it proposes itself to the reader as an authentic discourse of the self. Through its specific mode of address, the reader is invited to enter into a compact to interpret the text in this way, rather than, say, as a work of fiction. A second aspect of the pact is the way it establishes a fictive concordance between the author of the text and its narrative protagonist, a retrospective illusion that may start from the fact of sharing the same name and date of birth, but which embraces a whole gamut of games that can be played with the reader around different notions of biographical identity, from the essentialised to the postmodern.

There are, nevertheless, two basic organising principles which underwrite the autobiographical enterprise, corresponding to the way narrative memory works: the chronological ordering of experience into a succession of actions or events and the thematic structuring of the account around certain recurrent, self-referential motifs. The way these two principles are articulated varies greatly. At one end of the spectrum there are memoirs that read like diaries, and indeed are often based on them, giving a dramatic day by day or month by month account of the author's involvement in, say, an unfolding political crisis ; at the other end there is the Proustean stream of consciousness narrative, in which the flow of memories completely ignores chronology and follows a chain of associations anchored to certain key signifiers which represent the author in the text, a device sometimes found in fictional memoirs, or in novels where one of the characters reminisces. Normally, though, these extremes are avoided. For where life history has become just 'one damn thing after another', or the discourse of the self turns endlessly around its own introspections, the result can be extremely monotonous for the reader. Most efforts seek some kind of balance, and as I pondered Lejeune's argument, I came to the view that the memoir and the autobiography are essentially different projects in this respect, one privileging thematics, the other chronology.

The memoir is not just a truncated autobiography, nor is autobiography simply a fuller version of memoir; each has its own specific discipline rather like the short story and the novel. The memoir is a narrative essay, focussed around a single theme, topic or situation which uses selected aspects or episodes from the life history, sometimes combined with other material, to explore it in depth. This may compress or foreshorten the time span of the narrative, but that is a secondary and by no means inevitable effect. In fact the memoir can have a wider scope than the autobiography. For although it is always based on personal recollection, its focus can be on something other than the author's own life – a portrait of a parent or mentor, or a particular milieu, for example. It is much more difficult for autobiographies to avoid being self-centred, precisely because they have a more totalising ambition: to unfold the whole life-story-so-far, with the aim of achieving a provisional summing up, some evaluation of its personal meaning and/or social significance.

In the case of *Reading Room Only*, I never thought of it as anything else but a memoir and left out everything that did not fit with its central theme; that meant excluding many people, places and events that were otherwise significant in my childhood and adolescence, not to mention my adult life. For example, I originally wrote an extended section detailing my adventures hitchhiking around Europe in the six months between leaving school and starting university. But important though these experiences were for me as a rite of passage, they were marginal to my theme, and so I cut almost all of them out. The form of the memoir determined its content, not the other way round, as would be the case with an autobiography.

Lejeune's work is highly theoretical but it did have one practical effect – it alerted me to the dangers of eliding the positions of author and narrator. Since some of my research has dealt with issues of memory, narrative, and life story telling, there was always the risk of describing my early life only in the light of these later ideas, forcing experience into the procrustean bed of Theory. I tried to guard against placing this old head on those young shoulders by carefully distinguishing what I remembered thinking or feeling at the time, from how I would now understand what was happening. Yet there is also a sense in which writing the memoir could not but be a dialogue between the eight-year-old whom his father referred to sardonically as 'the professor' and the sixty-eight-year-old retired academic who actually became one. At the same time I have tried not to

overegg the pudding but to let the stories do most of the talking, confining 'the professor' as far as possible to the footnotes where he properly belongs, or to a few interpolations that are clearly signalled as such.

In any case why not turn the point round and seek the origin of the later ideas in the earlier life? This runs the risk of resorting to what is known in the trade as an 'ad hominem' argument, and is generally regarded as in very bad taste. If it means not taking someone's ideas seriously because of who they are, or where they come from, then it most certainly is. But if it means denying that the theoretical constructs, research methods, and topics we choose to work with in the human sciences are intimately influenced by our own biographies, or suggesting that such influences necessarily invalidate the reliability of the evidence we collect by such means, then it is just plain daft. For example my background in community activism certainly led me to look for research practices that shifted evidential weight away from panoptic discourses and social statistics and towards the lived experience of ordinary people. But the decision to experiment with certain arts and media based forms of participatory ethnography was entirely pragmatic – it came from realising that this approach helped my informants, especially children and young people, to articulate feelings, values, attitudes and beliefs about difficult issues in a way that more formal interview methods do not.

By the same token, to use aspects of one's own life history to develop and test a theory about how such histories are constructed seems like a good experimental procedure, for if these notions do not work in your own case they are not likely to be of much use in understanding anyone else's. The point, surely, is to try the model out on a range of examples, to see how much it makes sense of them, and where its limits lie. For example, I do not think it invalidates Erik Erikson's famous model of life stages to realise that it glosses his own experience as an immigrant to the USA. We just need to be aware that it may not fit all cases. So if I have dared to introduce a few interpretive devices – like the notion of life scripts – into the narrative, it is precisely because these ideas have arisen from reflecting on certain formative experiences as well as in dialogue with various theoretical traditions.

Chronotopes

Memoirs are navigational devices, a way of helping the writer, and hopefully the reader, to find their way through the complexities of a life, following a particular route map. The spatial metaphor is used advisedly because life histories are never not geographical – where you were born and grew up, went to school, etc, being just as important for the outcome as when. Often this aspect is taken for granted, it is treated as a backdrop against which the drama of the life is staged. Sometimes, though, it is less a question of painting the 'scenery' than of constructing the *mise en scène*, making the emplacements and displacements of a life into a major agent of its narration. This is certainly the case with *Reading Room Only* which is as much, if not more, about attachment to place, as to people. Spatial coordinates are thus as important as time in unfolding the story and Bakhtin's concept of the 'chronotope' provided a useful resource in thinking retrospectively about this issue.

For Bakhtin narrative genres can be characterised by the way space and time are worked together into a distinctive configuration. The classic adolescent 'rites of passage' novel, for example, has a simple tripartite structure. It opens with the hero in a familiar setting, then whether through choice or force of circumstance, s/he is transported into an unfamiliar and often alien world where ordeals are undergone, calling for the display of various virtues (courage, intelligence, endurance, etc) before returning home to assume his or her rightful place in adult society. Memoirs can also have

this structure and there is more than a trace of it in Reading Room Only, although that is not the whole story, as will be seen from the brief analysis which follows.

The opening section maps out some of the key instances of my memoryscape. They are scenes from a missing childhood in a double sense: they represent fragments of an autobiography I could never write and they point to what was emotionally absent from my early life and how I tried to fill that gap. Their space is at once acutely material and symbolic, and their temporality varies, from singular events or conjunctures to recurrent patterns or chronic situations. The series begins with my earliest impressions and memories and the latest experience can be dated age eleven, but the progression is best elliptical, and includes recapitulations, as in the mini-history of family pets.

Having introduced the reader to the character whose remembrances they are being asked to take on trust, the focus then widens and moves outwards into more familiar territory as I set about exploring what it meant to be growing up in Bloomsbury in terms of the social geography of the neighbourhood. This is followed by an account of how I furnished my first reading room, the books which transported me to other places and times, and populated my inner world, taking the story on from childhood into adolescence and a more sophisticated appreciation of what Bloomsbury was all about. This section ends poised somewhat precariously on the cusp of my leaving home and going to college. Counterpoints starts from here and then abruptly goes into reverse, retracing my steps as I first learn to read and then embark on a school career which takes me eventually, and briefly, to Cambridge. The account that follows of my experiences working on a deep sea trawler recapitulates my sentimental education over the previous six years. So although there is always some movement forward in time both within and across successive episodes, they are connected to a meta-narrative which is recursive, going over the same ground several times in order to explore different aspects of the life history linked to the central theme.

En route, I found myself falling back on some familiar storytelling devices of which I would normally disapprove. For example as a reader I don't much like 'flash forwards', they strike me as a bit of a tease, but as a writer I found I couldn't resist going proleptic once in a while, just to whet the reader's appetite. Similarly with the 'historicist' practice of explaining a situation solely in terms of its back story: 'do you want to know how I got nearly expelled from school, well, it came about like this....' Cultural diversions is deliberately a digression, interrupting the momentum of the story and briefly suspending its denouement. But it also illustrates the point that narrative necessarily imposes a sequential order on events that may in fact be going on at the same time and in the process may imply an entirely fictional link between them. The section details a succession of 'crazes' for the arts, and does indeed trace a trajectory of adolescent enthusiasms, but in fact one interest did not simply prompt another nor was it just a fad that, like Mr Toad, I dropped as soon as something more exciting came along; rather it was all part of a general opening out to aesthetic experience, in which growing appreciation of painting enriched enjoyment of cinema and vice versa, these cultural interests staying with me throughout my life.

So also in the sections dealing with 1960s counter-culture. Many of the projects described were concurrent and this enabled the material to be organised thematically, for example grouping together accounts of my different activities involving books. Again this implies a link, and perhaps in this case it is there, in my ambivalence towards book culture. Yet the actual relationship between these different activities was purely contingent. The narrative still moves forward, as it traces

successive iterations of the 'underground' in the period from 1965 to 1978, and this development is once again strongly indexed to the changing character of specific places: Covent Garden, Soho, Bethnal Green, Kings Cross.

The British Museum and its Reading Room is, of course, a recurrent motif but the sections dealing with its culture synchronise observations made over a period of twenty years, whilst also trying to trace patterns of continuity and change. The final section of the memoir takes the reader back to the future, as I re-invent myself as child growing up in Bloomsbury today and take the reader on an imaginary walk down memory lane, ending the story almost where it began, with the BM lions in Montagu Place. The epilogue moves even further into the future, in considering how my grandsons might read and understand the text when they are grown up.

The memoir as a form thus offers scope to experiment with different chronotopes, so that the narrative does not have to always follow a straight line, but can circle around its object, its 'topos' being not merely topical, or topographic but, as in topology, mapping what remains constant under conditions of transformation and stress: in this case the desire to seek within the inferno that which is not....

Models and Motivations

It is one of the most cherished illusions of autobiographers that the account they are writing is uniquely their own. But even if this is true of the content – no two lives, even those of identical twins, are the same – it is never true of the form. Even the most innovatory literary experimentalist owes a debt of influence to the work of other writers. So what kind of memoir was I trying to write? It was not a question I asked myself at the time, although it has much preoccupied me since. All I was dimly aware of, as I worked, was that different motivations were tugging at my sleeve, and that this held implications for how I approached the material. But as for actual models, even though I had read a good many memoirs of various kinds, one thing I had learnt from my creative writing course, was that once you started work the best thing to do was leave them on the shelves!

When the thing was finished, and wearing my reader's not my writer's hat, I became curious to see if I could map the field and establish, if not a fully-fledged typology, then at least an inventory of current variations within the genre, to get a better sense of where my text belonged. Given the rapid development of what Lejeune calls the 'autobiographical space' and the proliferation of approaches, it was initially hard to get my bearings. Take, for example, the distinction between the amateur and professional.

Today the vast majority of memoirs are written by older people who are self-publishing, either on line or through the so-called vanity press, and going into print for the first time. They often belong to reminiscence groups, or have done a writing course and want to try their hand. They may have led eventful lives and feel they have a story to tell; their offerings may be of great empirical interest to historians as well as of sentimental value to immediate family and friends, but they are not seeking to become professional authors, and their work does not aspire to be judged by literary standards, only by moral ones. This is one thing they have in common with commercially published memoirs written by the more or less famous, or infamous; for these works too are not judged primarily on literary merit, but by what they reveal about the subject's private and public life.

It is only when we come to memoirs written by the literati, the professional wordsmiths and those working in the arts, humanities and sciences, that questions of style, of form rather than content, take precedence. We expect novelists to use their skills as storytellers to bring scenes of childhood vividly to life on the page, through dialogue, description and various literary devices. We want poets to exploit their special way with words to render the inarticulate longings of adolescence into passionate prose. Or even to write their life stories in verse. From philosophers we demand reflections on the vicissitudes of human existence as exemplified by their own, from historians how their own pasts inspired them to follow Clio's muse, and from scientists some account of how their disciplined curiosity about the world took shape. The literati thus feel called upon to demonstrate their special gifts through the manner in which they account for them, showing how the seeds of their professional creativity were planted in their early lives. The autobiography or memoir may go on to flesh out details of the later career, but it is the process of cultural, intellectual or aesthetic formation, the terms in which the vocation is first recognised, that is the main focus of the work.

Reading Room Only does not fit neatly within either category. It is not the work of a first-time writer, although it was the first time I had attempted this kind of writing. It is not being commercially published, although the History Workshop Journal has published a version on line. It is written by someone who once upon a time 'enjoyed' a brief moment of public notoriety, but who has long since retired from the limelight and has no intention of making a comeback bid. It does set out to explain why certain social questions became matters of professional as well as personal and political concern and in some of its more academic moments applies this way of thinking to interpreting the material to hand. Yet knowing my stylistic limitations, I could never hope for the work to be judged in purely literary terms.

There are, I suspect, many memoirs where the distinction between amateur and professional becomes blurred. And in any case even the most spontaneous or naive form of life story telling observes certain implicit rules of construction, and these protocols turn out, on closer inspection, to be of much the same order of complexity as the meta-narratives that underwrite the most sophisticated and reflexive examples of the genre. Both draw on social scripts which indicate a preferred reading of life history, providing a template for the stories we tell ourselves, and others, about the course of our lives, whether looking forward or looking back.

Adolescence is the time when most of us first become conscious of these normative story lines, as relayed to us through the medium of family expectations, pedagogic inculcation, or peer group pressure; and even if we resist or reject these models as part of our vocabulary of motivation, we nevertheless often find they continue to operate behind our backs, at the level of a deeper, more hidden curriculum vitae.

The way memoirs and autobiographies are written is thus always shaped by broader cultural and ideological trends. Take, for example, the currently fashionable discourse of 'aspirationalism', so vigorously promoted in educational and training policies, and supported by a whole apparatus of personal counselling and self-improvement. Under its aegis everyone becomes the author of their own lives, and people are supposed to go on 'reinventing themselves' almost from cradle to grave. It is a turbo-charged, postmodernised version of our old friend, the Whig interpretation of life history, but now ambition for bettering self and society has been cut loose from institutional supports (especially those provided by the State), whilst being endowed with almost mystical powers of

overcoming structural constraint. This is linked to changes that have been engineered in occupational cultures. The idea of a 'career for life' has been retained for a professional elite but everyone else is now exhorted to acquire a portfolio of 'transferable skills' that will enable them to move seamlessly across occupational platforms as new opportunities arise. This more flexible model of career hints at one of the term's original meanings, viz. 'careering about', but in a way that has nothing to do with sowing wild oats, and everything to do with planting the seeds of future success.

Thanks to this shift, 'careers' can be stitched together through a patchwork of transitory jobs, and everybody, even shelf fillers at Tesco's, can, in principle, aspire to have one. At the same time whole areas of social and personal life that used to be put down as 'hobbies and interests' in the traditional CV, have now become grist to the mill of career development. Nothing is ever extra-curricular to the dedicated careerist – from social networking at parties, to the choice of leisure activities, friends and sexual partners. Meanwhile young people are educated in 'social and life skills', employees are sent on courses for 'assertiveness training' and affluent retirees pay lifestyle counsellors to advise how best to reinvent themselves as active participants in the 'third age'.

It is still too soon to be sure what impact any of this will have on the next generation of life story tellers. But we can note that 'career' in this extended and diluted form has only become the authorised grammar of life history by actively incorporating and reworking other scripts. Under this imprimatur, vocation has become thoroughly 'vocationised'. The quest for some occupation or activity that would represent a special mission in life has been converted into a drive to social adaptability; in place of authenticity, the now diversified self seeks niche marketing opportunities for its skills of impression management. Apprenticeship, within this frame, is telescoped into a moment of identification with an inspirational role model, in contrast to its historical form as a more or less lengthy transmission of specific skills within a shared community of practice; meanwhile inheritance is reduced to a set of personality traits to be exploited or overcome as the case may be, rather than a nexus of material, social and cultural assets or liabilities transmitted from one generation to the next.

Contemporary self-improvement literature is full of examples of this shift, but for those who live the aspirational dream, there may be no easy translation of these motivational models into a convincing life story. And this for the simple reason that most will sooner or later find their heads bumping up against all too familiar glass ceilings and brick walls, especially now that opportunity structures are narrowing, and life chances for disadvantaged communities look so grim. At this point aspirational discourse seeks to close the reality gap by offering an alternative definition of success; once someone's worth is measured by the extent to which they become authors of their own lives, then the quality of identity work performed in that process becomes much more important as a marker of merit than any increments of income or status associated with social mobility.

The current predominance of the can-do narrative (Can we do it? Yes we can!) and the 'triumph over adversity' life story reflects their role in defining and promoting this do-it-yourself version of meritocracy. Their emphasis may be different, but the message is the same: constraints of circumstance are to be welcomed, even regarded as providential, in so far as they offer a personal challenge, a spur to ambition and the will to win; or to put it more proverbially, harsh necessity is the mother of self-invention.

The plot centres on the heroic struggles of the author to overcome obstacles and setbacks, demonstrating qualities of ingenuity, resourcefulness, persistence, resilience or fortitude, as s/he wins through in the end, with or without a little help from friends. There is obviously some kinship with the traditional rags to riches story of the self-made entrepreneur, but poverty may be only one of the obstacles to be overcome. Moreover the theme of life as a struggle for competitive advantage is largely missing, being either sublimated, or entirely displaced, by the focus on the mission itself, and the difficulties that have to be dealt with in accomplishing it. The rhetorics of identity politics may give a strongly redemptive flavour to the tale, where the focus is on overcoming the effects of social discrimination or disadvantage. In other cases there may be a self-dramatising aspect to the portrayal of adversity, especially where it is largely self-inflicted, as for example when inner demons such as addiction have to be wrestled with, or the author deliberately courts danger by engaging in hazardous pursuits.

The current popularity of the genre derives partly from the fact that it captures the zeitgeist. These are feel-good stories written in and for feel-bad times. But the versatility of the plot has also got a lot to do with it. It can be adapted to tell survivor stories and 'comeback' or 'loser wins' tales, as well as openly triumphalist accounts of overcoming hardships, handicaps and misfortunes of every kind. As such it is relatable by people from all walks of life – from the media or sporting personality to the war veteran or polio victim. The tone is often inspirational, the message being 'if I can do it, so can you'. But although it often appeals explicitly to an imagined community of readers sharing similar predicaments, the account itself remains highly individualised.

Read from an aspirationalist standpoint, my memoir could be interpreted as a cautionary tale about what happens to someone when they fail to make the most of their opportunities, adopt a 'can't do won't do' attitude and drop out – a kind of rake's progress, only reversed at the last moment. Or perhaps, seeing a niche in the market, I reinvented myself as Dr John and then, when times changed, decided to rebrand myself as Prof. Cohen? There is clearly a danger in using the preferred idiom of one generation's life history to interpret and judge another's! In any case my life story world was formed under a different sign. The deepest aspiration of the postwar decade was to rebuild lives and communities and move on as fast as possible from austerity to affluence whilst ensuring that greater social justice prevailed. Careers were still the preserve of a small university educated elite; growing up working class, at least for members of the labour aristocracy, meant being apprenticed to a special patrimony of manual or technical skills, and vocations were followed by priests, intellectuals, artists, writers and all those engaged in 'feminine' or bohemian pursuits.

Against this background it is certainly true that in dropping out of university I was consciously rejecting a straight and narrow, onwards and upwards path. Instead, influenced by the existentialist concept of a life project, and inspired more by the example of Danilo Dolci, than the hippy creed of Timothy 'tune in, turn on, drop out' Leary, I set off in search of a more authentically radical mode of existence. It never occurred to me to see my life unfolding as a search for my Jewish, or any other, roots, my paternal grandfather notwithstanding. I had no intention of being a chip off the old family block, though I might proudly wear one of my own devising on my shoulder. Yet underneath the surface bravado of my bolshiness, I still had a strong 'Whiggish' ambition to make myself and the world into a better place, and take a step forward in the onward march of social progress, even if the drive took what many would regard as a perverse form. Moreover it is a well known characteristic of 'black sheep' that they secretly want to be let back into the fold, albeit on their own terms, and I was

no exception to the rule. It is no coincidence that the strictly autobiographical element of the story stops abruptly at the point where I resume an academic career.

Looking back I think this premature ending creates a misleading impression or at least begs a number of questions. My story reads as if a lonely childhood and unfortunate experiences at school led to an extended period of adolescent storm and stress, or 'careering about', ending when I settled down to live happily ever after in the groves of Academe. Such an interpretation belongs to a script that I consciously rejected, but which nevertheless continued to shape some of my actions, and the account I gave of them. For example there was always a sense, at the back of my mind, that through my adventures in the alternative society I was accumulating intellectual capital – experiences that could one day be used as material for a book, or a research project of some kind. Yet this only tells half the story.

For, in fact, the research career I was to pursue continued to be driven by 'alternative values' derived from my original vocational project and the resulting tensions between the two scripts ensured that I did not have an easy ride. In purely autobiographical terms, though, this was a different chapter in the life story, and one that was superfluous to the thematic development of the narrative. At least that is how I rationalised it. Perhaps I was also reluctant to explore difficult territory, moving closer to home. Whatever the reason, this foreclosure meant the memoir missed an opportunity to connect my experience more directly to that of other 1960s' radicals who followed a similar trajectory. But at least it illustrates just what a tricky business memoir writing is, and how complicated and 'overdetermined' decisions about what to put in or leave out can become.

This point is crucial to memoirs that set out with the explicit aim of revealing what has been hitherto hidden or repressed by the official biography. In the confessional memoir, the 'tell all' tale in which public people reveal intimate, and sometimes transgressive aspects of their private lives, the reader becomes the author's confidant as skeletons are taken out of cupboards and given an airing, peccadilloes paraded and 'official secrets' told. Sometimes the aim is explicitly to titillate or shock, more often to engage the reader's sympathetic understanding and seek forgiveness. The authors of such memoirs often portray themselves as victims of circumstance, or 'anti-heroes', rarely as villains of the piece. They may suffer for their sins, some bear their crosses proudly or defiantly, others proclaim their innocence; most, having confessed, seek absolution, the writing itself serving as a sufficient act of contrition. In some cases it is also intended as an act of exorcism – although getting the demons out of one's head and on to the page is more often than not a way of ensuring they continue to lead a vigorous afterlife.

This caveat also applies to the memoir that takes the form of a do-it-yourself psychoanalysis. Here the life story is laid out on an imaginary 'couch' and 'interpreted' with the author playing 'analyst' to the narrator's 'patient'. Even where the worst excesses of psycho-babble are avoided, the project cannot but be a travesty, a pseudo-analysis. For in the absence of any real space of transference, the void is inevitably filled by a more or less narcissistic licking of psychic wounds in a way that does nothing to heal them.

In its manner of 'coming clean', the confessional memoir, like the warts-and-all autobiography perpetuates a myth of writing as a medium of transparent communication between author and reader, even as it engages the reader in colluding with its subterfuge. It is a popular form of literary

exhibitionism that caters to a voyeuristic readership, but actually inhibits any real engagement with the underlying moral issue of what it means to lead a good or bad life.

Reading Room Only was never going to be a 'Dr John Tells All' tale on this model. I was not going to write the 'inside story' of 144 Piccadilly, or a blow by blow account of what really happened in the other squats. Equally it was not going to be a revelation of family secrets or private infelicities. It will not, however, have escaped the reader's notice that my account of adolescence and early adulthood does not deal much with my personal and emotional life; there is no mention, for instance, of my brief and disastrous first marriage to someone who, unfortunately for both of us, fell briefly in love with 'Dr John'. This omission is partly due to the parsimony imposed by the chosen theme, but also because, had I done otherwise, it could have only been to conduct the reader into an infernal space, in which Hell was as much myself as other people.

I had in any case already experienced how easy it was to become unwittingly trapped in such a space through the act of writing. In the preface to one of my academic books, I had referred to my mother's difficulty in mothering, because she had not herself been properly mothered. It was not meant badly but my father read it as an act of gross disloyalty to her memory – she was not long dead – and was so angry that he promptly disinherited me and refused to speak to me for the next two years. Happily we were eventually reconciled and in writing the memoir I was very conscious that he is now 96 and not in good health; I did not want to write anything that would upset him. This did not, in the event, mean that I had to censor anything I really wanted to say, only allow kinder impulses to hold sway in writing about my family life.

Identity Politics

Identity politics has had a lot to do with popularising the idea of people authoring their own lives. Yet the project of self-authorship is ambiguous. It could imply a desire to return to a strong 'inner-directed' narrative in which the voice of conscience or duty drives forward the accomplishment of chosen life tasks. Or alternatively a surrender to a phantasy of omnipotent self-invention in keeping with some of the more regressive tendencies promoted by consumerist lifestyles. There are some kinds of identity politics that nod in these directions. But most see identity struggles as aspirational and identity itself as a form of self-regenerating cultural capital to be realised through the effort involved in affirming positive social worth.

Campaigns to redress the impact of negative life histories are an integral part of the project and have encouraged another major genre of memoir writing: the victimology. The aim here is to seek recognition, reparation and, sometimes, revenge, for wrongs, past and present, suffered by individuals or whole communities, and to challenge or correct the official public record where these are ignored. But however legitimate the grievance, and worthy the cause, these texts, in their mode of address to the reader, are not without their problems.

There are many works of literature, some of them autobiographical, which bear eloquent witness to the human suffering caused by various forms of oppression, and testify to the courage of those who take a stand against injustices, great and small. What distinguishes these accounts is the way they seek and find within the inferno that which is not inferno, and through the manner of the writing make it endure. In contrast the memoirs produced by the contemporary culture of complaint tend to remain mired in the inferno, and are often both tedious and tendentious in their accusatory

stance. Self-righteous indignation, the preferred idiom of victimhood, may be balm for fellow sufferers but it gives other readers a very hard time. This is especially true of an extreme version of the genre which centres on the telling of an atrocity story. This allows the author/victim to inflict his or her suffering on the reader by providing a harrowing blow by blow account of some act of violence, or cruelty, often accompanied by graphic descriptions of the injuries involved. Although the ostensible purpose of such memoirs is to mobilise public anger and seek legal redress, their immediate impact is to induce a sense of revulsion or numbness in the reader, if not more perverse forms of identification.

For these reasons I was determined to avoid slipping into an accusatory mode. Yet at times I found it hard not to feel indignant or aggrieved on my own behalf. The account of my school days is hardly a flattering portrait of the alma mater, and in writing it, I experienced some of the anger and perplexity I felt at the time. Yet if I wanted to make a case for abolishing public schools it would still have to be on other grounds than the emotional damage they may do to some of their old boys and girls.

There is a more passive form of complaint, the life-as-a-vale-of-tears lament, a story of everyday regrets written by people who, for whatever reason, have been more than usually disappointed and look back, more in sorrow than anger, at what might have been. As a reader, such accounts often make me feel decidedly squeamish, especially when they descend into self-pity, but as a writer, it was again tempting at moments to fall back into a counterfactual mode: what if my parents had waited and I had been born as one of the baby boomers in 1945? What if I had been sent to a progressive school, where some of my special problems and needs might have been recognised and addressed? What if I had not dropped out but stayed at Cambridge and got my degree? Such exercises in wishful thinking are as self-indulgent and futile as trying to conduct a retrospective cost benefit analysis of a research project that never happened. Surely, I told myself, I was made of sterner stuff! If only I had been able to join the 'hard knocks, grin and bear it, stiff upper lip' school of life story telling....

Perhaps it is a sign of the times that 'grin and bear it' seems to be the up-and-coming style, while the 'feel bad' memoir, whether in its confessional or accusatory modes, is going out of fashion. There are, of course, still plenty of 'feel good' memoirs being written, in which celebrities set out to communicate how exceptionally lucky, beautiful or talented they are, although these kitsch apologetics for fame usually make for exceptionally boring reading. I need hardly add that this was not a model that entered much into my consideration!

More interesting and relevant for my purposes were those memoirs that explore the downside of the aspirationalist dream: the fear of failure that can haunt the official success story, and the sense of dislocation that can arise when someone moves more or less abruptly from a familiar life world into a completely different one, usually as a result of social and/or geographical mobility. The accounts of working-class 'scholarship' boys and girls, who in the 1950s and '60s became the first members of their family to go to grammar school and university and thence embark on professional careers, set the narrative benchmark for the genre. Subsequently it was adapted to tell the diasporic stories of refugees and economic migrants as they struggled to make their way in the 'foreign' country that had become, whether temporarily or permanently, their home. The thematic focus may variously be on the 'rites of passage' entailed in making the transition, on what is 'lost in translation',

in Eva Hoffman's memorable phrase, or on what is rejected from the host culture. But whether it is the niceties of class distinction or the crudities of ethnic prejudice that have to be negotiated, in every case the central issue around which the life story revolves – and which it attempts to resolve – is that of alienation, the sense of not quite belonging wherever you are, because of how you are 'othered'. For some this opens up a deep wound that no amount of identity work can heal, but for those for whom writing is in itself a form of homecoming, the distance gained from cultural norms is often welcomed as providing a critical and imaginative vantage point from which to relate the tale.

The downwardly mobile also experience the pain of dislocation, albeit of a very different order. When what you have grown up to expect from life fails to materialise and you find yourself having to cope with difficult circumstances for which you are ill-equipped and whose remedy lies beyond your control, it is hard not to feel resentful or cheated. Some people react by looking for scapegoats, but those who have internalised the aspirational dream will blame themselves. As a result, however aggrieved they feel, they are usually too ashamed at what they regard as personal failure or disgrace to commit the experience to writing. This especially applies when social descent is to some extent self-willed. Few rakes keep a diary of their 'progress'.

The vacuum has been filled by documentary accounts usually written by journalists or social investigators, who for a time experience vicariously what life is like on the other side of the tracks. The hero of these little social adventures acts as a kind of undercover agent, assuming the alien lifestyle, and passing for 'one of them', before returning with the comforting news that they are just like us, or the even more reassuring conclusion that they are in indeed a 'race apart'. Such memoirs are essentially exercises in social transvestism, at best addressing public concern about the condition of marginalised communities, at worst catering for a popular voyeurism about social outcasts; as such they speak to widespread social anxieties about life prospects in times of economic instability, when the great fear of poverty, the sense that 'there but for the grace of God, or my bank balance, go I' becomes a sotto voce refrain in even the most secure of middle-class lives.

Finally there is the memoir that positively celebrates dislocation, as symptomatic of the postmodern condition. Often influenced by contemporary literary theory, and in particular post-structuralism, the mode of address to the reader is by turns playful and ironic, inviting us to suspend belief in the autobiographical pact and teasing us with our credulity in supporting the author/narrator double act. Instead we get a fragmentary conversation between a number of different, but equally decentred selves, or a meditation on a life story whose authenticity can no longer be guaranteed.

It is certainly possible to read my memoir as a variation on the theme of the dislocated subject, the story of someone who did not feel at home in his social skin, and tried to slough it off, adopting, for a time, another kind of life. This could perhaps have provided an opportunity for a more experimental approach. For example, I could have constructed a parallel text, with an autobiographical account on one side of the page, and an academic commentary on the other, or written a series of conversations or debates between the two professors, or even 'interviewed' Dr John. Yet I felt I was already a sufficiently unreliable narrator without having to institutionalise the principle in the text. And I was sufficiently old fashioned to see dislocation as being part of the problem of 'postmodernity', rather than the solution. Even and especially where a life is disjointed, its relating should become a means of fitting the pieces together into a more coherent and meaningful statement, not an occasion for its further dismantlement.

As for the social aspect, within the frame of counter-cultural values, 'dropping out' was not experienced as a form of downward mobility, despite the image it conjures up; rather it signified a great leap sideways, into a freer and more authentic lifestyle, an escape from the treadmill of the 9-to-5 job and the attendant 'rat race'. The privations that often resulted, and they were real enough, were a small price to pay, as well as a test of one's commitment to the 'alternative society'. In my own case the underground scene provided a milieu in which I could pursue my cultural and even academic interests, not to mention political aims, somewhere I felt more at home, at least for a time, than I had at school or university, amongst people whose uncompromising rejection of the values of 'straight' bourgeois society I shared.

Settling Accounts

There are many other, more generic strategies for writing – and reading – memoirs and autobiographies, some quite straightforward and honourable, others more tricky. Readers may simply be curious to find out about other people's lives, but increasingly there is a more instrumental aspect to the quest: to discover the secret of what makes for success or failure, personal fulfilment, or its lack, and for a happy or a sad ending. Especially for those who do not have religious precepts to guide them, and the consolations of believing in another life to come, first personal singular accounts of its present trials and tribulations can provide an important source of moral philosophy, even a kind of personal counselling. But it is not only readers who are searching for principles of hope in these difficult times.

For authors, there is the need to impose some kind of narrative and thematic order on what might otherwise be an incoherent series of discrete and inconsequential experiences. And the desire to ensure that one's life amounts to more, and other, than its compilation in various official records or reports; more, too, than the daily iteration of humdrum routines, a life reduced, as T.S. Eliot put it to being 'measured out in coffee spoons'. In the case of the memoir this is connected to the drive to settle accounts with a specific moment or aspect of the past; in autobiography, it takes the form of an 'apologia pro sua vita'. At its best this can involve a rueful recognition that this is the way things turned out in life's journey, not quite how we intended; mistakes were made, but lessons also learnt along the way. The act of writing can thus be a way of letting bygones be bygones, forgiving oneself as well as others, for life not having gone quite according to plan. If I were ever to write an autobiography I would hope that it would be able to take this form.

Settling accounts can also lead to the telling of various kinds of 'teleological tale', all of which start from the premise that people are not the authors of their own lives and end by inscribing them in some more or less rigid principle of hidden determinism. So life scripts are no longer subject to negotiation and change in the course of their unfolding, they are felt to be immutable, directed by the hand of fate or destiny, guided by some overriding providential purpose, or governed by structures, laws or circumstances well beyond the individual's understanding and control. Like all true apologetics, this one ensures that there is no need to apologise – the life could not have turned out otherwise, whether for better or worse.

It was tempting to read or write my life after this fashion, to see it as being entirely overshadowed by the fact of being born to flying bombs, and then abandoned to the cold comfort of my grandmother in Wales. Yet however deeply embedded in the psyche, the afterblows of such events do not strike according to a pre-ordained plan, following some iron law of life history. They are not

time bombs set to be triggered by a certain date, but more likely to be set off by quite unrelated crises, in a process that leads to a sudden regression and recapitulation of the original trauma – a process that Freud termed 'nachträglichkeit'.

There are many kinds of traumatic, life-changing events that prompt people to write memoirs in an attempt to understand or come to terms with what has happened to them. In most accounts of personal tragedy, the moment of crisis itself takes centre stage, dividing the narrative and the life into a game of two halves. It is a kind of biographical impact study, that tends to treat the situation before the event in somewhat idealised pre-lapsarian terms and regards the present and future as a struggle to restore, if not the status quo, then at least some version of normality. But one thing I did not want to do was write a memoir subtitled 'My Life Before and After 144'.

One of the most destructive ways of settling accounts is to use the memoir to re-fight old battles, and settle old scores. This offers the author the consolation of being wise after the event, or proving that s/he was right all along; but rather than laying ghosts to rest, publication only serves to give them new life, fanning the flames of old enmities, perpetuating feuds and provoking counter-attack. The memoirs of politicians seem to be especially prone to this kind of thing, perhaps because they inhabit a world in which such practices are the norm. Then there is the memoir of political recantation, traditionally written by ex-communists, or disillusioned left-wing dissidents, who repudiate the radicalism of their youth, sometimes by throwing a lot of dirt at their erstwhile comrades, and usually in order to embrace more conservative ideologies, thus giving credence to the popular if simplistic view that people become more reactionary with age. In contrast, and, on the whole, more honourably, there are accounts by activists and campaigners that detail the persistence of a political vision sustained over a life time of commitment to a cause, celebrating a heroic and principled refusal to compromise. Unfortunately such memoirs also have a tendency to sermonise, preaching to the already converted who read them to have their own political faith confirmed. Meanwhile, to the jaundiced reader, who does not share the author's values or views, the story may just as well tell a tale of stubborn adherence to dogmatic ideas well past their sell by date! As might be expected, memoirs by 1960s' radicals have included both recantations and unreconstructed testaments, as well as more nuanced accounts of the legacy. I leave it to the reader to decide where my memoir fits in this spectrum but suffice to say the intention was neither to romanticise or recant, but nor did I have the ambition or the will to write a political testament.

Finally there is the memoir that is explicitly written for posterity. This may take the form of a do-it-yourself obituary, that follows the time-honoured precept of 'nil nisi bonum' (nothing unless good) and says to the reader in effect: this self-portrait may only show my good side but this is how I want to be remembered after I am gone. The same principle applies to the memoir that is written in response to another's death, drawing a generous portrait of a parent, partner or friend, as a way of celebrating their life, mourning their loss and keeping their memory alive. The valedictory memoir is always in danger of turning into a hagiography, but at its best, it remains a moving tribute faithful to the spirit, if not always the letter, of the life, and in so far as it does so reveals at once the limitations of the genre and its redeeming possibilities.

Instead of a Conclusion

No one who writes a memoir today can avoid being influenced by one or more of the models and motivations I have described. Many memoirs are hybrids, drawing on a range of different elements

and, in the best cases, weaving them together into a unique creative synthesis. Sometimes, of course, the storyline gets pulled in contradictory directions, and, as I discovered, it is all too easy to start out with one kind of intention and find you have ended up writing an entirely different kind of piece. It is for the reader to judge how far my effort has avoided being pulled too far off its chosen course, or fallen into the various pitfalls discussed. As it was, the project stirred up many memories, some of them very painful, about things I would sometimes have preferred to forget. I still cannot read parts of it without wincing.

Writing Reading Room Only forced me to revise my views about how far it is possible to change aspects of personality or behaviour that become embedded in our psyche at an early stage of the game. I always used to subscribe to the Sartrean maxim that people are what they make out of what they are made of, or as the popular saying goes: it's not the cards you are dealt but how you play them that counts'. But this is to forget that that some people's hands contain no trumps, or all jokers, some are taught the wrong rules and others have never learnt how to play cards in the first place.

In my case, writing the memoir meant breaking a lifetime ban on using the first person singular, but the more I did so, the more aware I became of just how far my prose style had been shaped – distorted – by this early interdict, and how difficult it was to break free from the 'mandarin English' I had learnt at school, with its penchant for Latinisms and abstract nouns. I found that it was no more possible to change this habit of mind than to alter my handwriting. A recent experiment in writing a fictional memoir revealed that even if the exercise freed up my imagination, it did nothing to uncramp the style.

Writing for me, as for many social researchers, has largely been about trying to put things right, a means of correcting wrong impressions, by saying as precisely as possible what is the actual state of affairs, and what needs to be done to achieve a better outcome next time round. That was the point of doing the work in the first place. But writing a memoir, I discovered, is not quite like that. Biographers may rewrite other people's lives but when it comes to writing your own you have to recognise that it is profoundly beyond amendment, however much you personally may want to make amends. There is no next time round unless you happen to believe in reincarnation. But the realisation that what is done is done, is 'out there', part of the 'en soi' as Sartre would once have put it, and you are where you are, can be the starting point for a memoir, even if it is often the conclusion of an autobiography.

Yet, of course, we continually re-interpret our life histories in the light of changing circumstances and there is a sense in which a memoir cannot help but be a revisionary project, one that gives you lots of second chances, if you only know how to take them. It is an opportunity to change your mind about many things. If you are so inclined, you can conduct a survey of personal assets and liabilities, and re-evaluate how much is owed to whom. If your own past has become a foreign country, you can spend time re-learning its peculiar language and customs. More interestingly, it is a chance to make the familiar strange, to explore some of life history's 'other scenes': those moments or situations that appear insignificant at the time, yet somehow burrow their way into the subconscious, where they form a primordial memoryscape and remain to haunt your dreams. Equally many apparently important aspects of your life may fade into the background as you come to write it.

Because you have to stay so sharply focussed on your chosen theme, I found writing a memoir was a good discipline. All those memories that crowd in, like importunate children, shouting 'what about me? Wait for me!' have to be told politely but firmly to come back another day. In fact as a form of memory work, it is less about retrieving what has been long forgotten, than letting go large chunks of the past. Nevertheless, there is always a certain return of the repressed, with unpredictable consequences for the storyline. This happened to me at quite a late stage when I was revising the text for publication. I suddenly remembered an incident in which my parents had found me with an 'adult' magazine and this made me realise that I had left out a whole dimension of my reading history, to do with comics, newspapers and magazines.

Some people use the memoir as a framework for carrying out a specific project of research. They want to find out more about the circumstances that shaped their lives, the histories of their families, workplaces or communities, to set their own experiences in a broader social context. I am not convinced that this always enriches the texture of the memoir itself, although it may serve to make the narrative less self-centred and increase its value as a social document. It is, of course, important to check the basic facts, and it is salutary to discover just how fallible one's long term memory can be. For example, I was sure, because of certain experiences, that I had visited Greece under the Colonels as part of my gap year hike around Europe, and was chastened to discover that the military junta did not take over until 1967, four years after I was there.

Chronology can serve as a useful memory checker but it need not, in the case of memoirs, determine the plot. This caveat especially applies when it comes to the denouement. Autobiographies just stop when they arrive at the present, there is literally nothing more to tell, and you end with a short, evaluative summing up. But memoirs demand a different strategy of closure. As with an essay, you stop when the theme has been exhausted, and anything you add either distorts the shape of the narrative or is redundant to the argument. Now I have reached that point, there is only one thing left to add: writing this memoir, at a very difficult time in my life, has both required and made possible a mental breathing space, marked 'Reading Room Only'. If a text can be allowed its own epigraph this one would have to read: if the circumstances of my birth had been otherwise, I would not have been worthy of my name.