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Life Games

Memory and Postmodern Biography

The belief that she somehow stands behind it all and can be rescued by the historian or biographer may be a belief necessary to the task, but it is an illusion.¹

In June 1999 Kay Schaffer, Sidonie Smith, and I travelled to China with our partners – from our far-flung homes in South Australia, Michigan, and Western Australia, respectively – to attend the First International Auto/Biography Conference at Beijing University, where the convener Zhao Baisheng formed the International Auto/Biography Association (IABA). Almost exactly 20 years later, for a few days in May 2019, the three of us came together again in Fremantle, Western Australia, knowing it would be for the last time.

At the time of the foundational Beijing conference I was interested in apparent tensions and contradictions between late-20th-century theories of literary postmodernism, which were still influential at the time, and the practical demands of writing about a life – whether one's own or another's. Originally an academic interest, pursued through the works of Samuel Beckett, this became much more than that for me. In the late 1990s, as a lecturer at Murdoch University, I had worked for more than a decade in a thriving milieu of debate on topics in contemporary critical theory with colleagues who had contributed significantly to postmodern thinking, including John Frow, Rita Felski, Toby Miller, Horst Ruthrof, Bob Hodge, Vijay Mishra, and Niall Lucy, but at the same time I was speaking almost daily on the phone to my Ukrainian parents who lived in Adelaide, and intermittently gathering their memories, recounted in Ukrainian, as true stories of their lives. I felt as though I was caught between two belief systems, both of which I respected – one that critiqued the authority of conventional linear narrative and exposed its historical complicity with colonialism, racism, patriarchy, class inequality, and social injustice generally, and the other that celebrated individual story-telling that relied on traditional narrative as a means to capture and preserve memories and lives. And so, following the latter pattern, I listened and wrote down the words of my parents as quickly and faithfully as I could, in translation, in my notebooks – in a process that appeared to be anything but postmodern.

Put simply, the dilemma for me was that a chasm was opening up between the tenets of postmodern theory and the basic principles of biographical processes as I was experiencing them in my daily life. Adherence to one seemed to cancel out the possibility of the other – and yet both seemed necessary in order to present and honour real lives.

1 Kay Schaffer: *In the Wake of First Contact*, p. 14.

Around that time I wrote a paper with the title “Life Games: Memory and Postmodern Biography”, which I presented at a conference.² Reproduced here, it offers a pathway back in time to an era before the digital revolution flooded critical theory with new questions and new dilemmas and delivered a world of social media connectivity where contemporary lives exist in posthuman and posttruth global contexts. It appears to me that these 21st-century contexts represent extensions rather than negations of the late-20th-century postmodernist trajectory and so, although the paper is caught in a time warp, it delineates a set of opposing pulls and pressures that continue to be felt in our lives, perhaps even more strongly now – between the desire for certainty, solidity, and continuity of meaning and the ever-escalating sense of the ephemeral and ungraspable nature of the world – and ourselves.

Life Games: Memory and Postmodern Biography (1998)

The subject of this paper is the special position of auto/biography or life narrative in the context of postmodernist modes of artistic production. More specifically, I want to draw attention to the powerful and highly paradoxical position that life writing, and life narratives more generally, occupy at the close of the 20th century as postmodern practices. My argument is that the very old-fashioned and tame image that auto/biography has long had now urgently needs to be rethought. This is because in its various forms, both new and old, auto/biography is now a major player in every aspect of the game of postmodern cultural representation.

At the heart of the paradox is the fact that while there has been a massive increase in its popularity, auto/biography has remained largely outside of the range of vision of contemporary poststructuralist critical theory.³ This can be explained by the fact that it has been regarded in the past as a comparatively primitive and naive mode, not worthy of serious consideration. Further, since the term embraces a great variety of styles of recording and representation, it has also been seen as a messy genre, if a genre at all. Although obviously and closely related to history, auto/biography has never been recognised as important enough to warrant the kinds of critique that broader historical discourses have attracted. Nor has it enjoyed the respect given to narrative fiction as a *creative* art that can be used to serve postmodernist principles or poststructuralist approaches.

In the introduction to his book ‘The Art of Biography’, Paul Murray Kendall wrote, “For centuries, history has regarded biography as a sort of poor relation, a hanger-on”, and he refers to the example of an 18th-century historian who once confessed that he had “several times deviated and descended from the dignity of an historian, and voluntarily fallen into the lower class of biographers”.⁴

2 This paper was delivered at the Postmodernism in Practice Conference, Adelaide, February 1998.

3 The neglect is surprising in the context of the strong interest in subjectivity and authorship.

4 Paul Murray Kendall: *The Art of Biography*, p. 3.

But if biography has been considered a low form, autobiography has been even further down the scale, for similar reasons. As James Olney puts it, in his essay "Autobiography and the Cultural Moment":

Autobiography is both the simplest of literary enterprises and the commonest. Anybody who can write a sentence or even speak into a tape recorder or to a ghost writer can do it. [...] [T]here are no rules or formal requirements binding the autobiographer – no restraints, no necessary models, no obligatory observances. [...] In talking about autobiography, one always feels that there is a great and present danger that the subject will slip away all together, that it will vanish into thinnest air, leaving behind the perception that there is no such creature as autobiography and that there never has been – that there is no way to bring autobiography to heel as a literary genre.⁵

While there have been attempts from time to time to overcome this image of casual amateurishness, at least for biography, by generating prescriptive "rules",⁶ all forms of life writing have resisted them. But this is surely not a good enough explanation for why they have been pointedly left out in the cold, shunned until very recently by literary and cultural theory as an object of study in spite of the fact that life writing has steadily grown to be one of the publishing industry's hottest commodities? Nor does such an explanation make much sense in the light of postmodernism's successful deconstruction of the whole concept of genre,⁷ and the massive amount of attention given to products of popular culture without reference to genre. Yet it seems to me that genre is an issue. Specifically, the neglect of life narrative can be attributed at least partly to its failure to properly belong either to a traditional genre⁸ on the one hand or to popular culture on the other. At the same time it is lumbered with the "poor relation" stigma in the context of the respectable genre of history. Life writing has therefore found itself betwixt and between, appended incongruously to a "grand narrative" genre and otherwise left without a niche in the academy.⁹

Another reason for life writing's exclusion is undoubtedly its traditional commitment to "reality" combined with its faith in the communicability of that reality. In other words, the unquestioning acceptance by most life narratives of the reasonableness of their enterprise (e.g., James Knowlson's biography of Beckett and Deirdre Bair's before it) and the lack of self-consciousness about¹⁰ their own problematic position in relation to the "evidence" has marked them as representatives of an essentialist branch of textual activity, one that is highly resistant or impervious to poststructuralist theory and therefore an embarrassment.

That is not to say, of course, that writers, especially of autobiography, have all neglected theory. Nabokov's 'Speak Memory', Barthes' 'Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes', and almost all of Samuel Beckett's work, to name several obvious

5 James Olney (ed.): *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, pp. 3 f.

6 See Allport's list of rules for writing biography in John A. Garraty: *The Nature of Biography*, p. 254.

7 See Jacques Derrida: *The Law of Genre*, in *Acts of Literature*, p. 6.

8 Pilling comments in the introduction to 'Autobiography and the Imagination' that autobiography is "a much more lawless and various [genre] than those with which we customarily have to deal" (John Pilling: *Autobiography and Imagination*, p. 1).

9 It is worth pointing out in this context that biography has no place of its own in library catalogues. It is a subset of history, and autobiography is a subset of biography.

10 See Meaghan Morris in Susan Magarey (ed.): *Writing Lives*, p. 22.

examples, variously explore and play with the process of representing a life, one they loosely refer to as their “own”. These are not autobiographies in the traditional sense but rather in the sense that Frederic Jameson brilliantly captures in his reference to Picasso’s use of pastiche as a means of creating “*master forgeries of ‘Picasso’ himself*”.¹¹

But this is to jump ahead. At this stage I want to focus on the point that auto/biography was largely neglected by theory because it was a hopeless case. Its fundamentalism left no room for debate while its naiveté rendered it anachronistic and weak. It was merely a familiar weed spreading benignly in the formal garden of theory.

How then has life narrative transformed itself from the inconsequential outsider to a key player in the postmodern scene? I believe that the very qualities that were perceived as impediments and difficulties are those that are now enabling life texts to thrive and operate powerfully in a postmodern world. But in order to explain this I need first to briefly trace critical attitudes to auto/biography in recent decades in Western theory.

Writing in 1957 in his book ‘The Nature of Reality’, John A. Garraty defined biography as “the record of a life” or “the reconstruction of a human life”, and he referred to rules that had been developed for the writing of successful biography, notably that the biographer “should aim at maximum fidelity to the life”.¹² This book’s assumption that the life is readily available for faithful reconstruction is echoed in Leon Edell’s book ‘Literary Biography’, published in the same year, where the biographer is described as the one who “take[s] the base metals that are his disparate facts and turns them into the gold of the human personality. It is”, he adds, “a kind of alchemy of the human spirit”.¹³ In 1989 in Australia, John Colmer, in what is claimed to be the first full-length study of Australian autobiography, approaches the life text with a similar degree of faith. “In reading biography”, he writes, “we as readers actively participate in the long and often painful process of searching for the truth about the self and its relation to the ever changing social world”.¹⁴ Georges Gusdorf’s description of the biographical process, offered in his pioneering essay of 1957,¹⁵ focuses more on process than on faith and so provides an easier entry point for a consideration of autobiography in postmodernist terms – but against all postmodernist principles, it posits a direct recuperative and mimetic correlation between the text and the life. “Autobiography is not a simple recapitulation of the past”, Gusdorf writes; “it is also the attempt and the drama of a man [sic] struggling to reassemble himself in his own likeness at a certain moment of his history. This delivering up of earlier beings brings a new stake into the game”.¹⁶

The key words in these accounts, whether of biography or autobiography, are “truth”, “life”, “self”, “reality”, and “fidelity” – all easy targets, sitting ducks in fact, in a postmodern environment; and yet, as I try to show, these are the concepts

11 Frederic Jameson: *Signatures of the Visible*, p. 82.

12 John A. Garraty: *The Nature of Reality*, pp. 3; 28; 255.

13 Leon Edell: *Literary Biography*, p. 8.

14 John Colmer: *Australian Autobiography*, p. 15.

15 See Georges Gusdorf: *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography*, pp. 28-48.

16 James Olney: *Autobiography*, p. 43.

that are back with a vengeance, not only permeating the postmodern scene but epitomising it, via life texts in their new incarnations.

You could not discover the limits of the self – so deep a logos does it have (Heraclitus)¹⁷

I quote Heraclitus here as a reminder that it has long been understood, for at least 2,500 years anyway, that the self is undiscoverable and inexpressible. Virgil, St Augustine and, much later, Dante all wrote about the limitations of memory, comprehension, and expression. It is not a postmodernist discovery. In this century, Walter Benjamin writes of Proust,

he did not describe a life as it actually was, but a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it. [...] An experienced event is finite – at any rate confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only the key to everything that happened before it and after it.¹⁸

Memory then is both the key and the prison. It unlocks space after space, self after self, but it does so *endlessly*. Proust, drawn by the lure of the key, packed into the margins of his text more and more recollections, triggered by the reading of his own drafts, every time they came back from the publisher for proof correction. But Proust did not imagine that in this way he recorded his *life*; he *pointed* to things he remembered in his life and, as Benjamin reports, “Proust’s pointing finger is unequalled”.¹⁹ That finger nevertheless points towards the past in a gesture of longing and dedication. It signals a desire to delve deeply, one that is at home in romanticism and modernism but should not be possible within postmodernism, except as an irony, because of postmodernism’s leanings towards spectacle and surface. I suggest, however, that this desire is not only possible but becoming dominant in contemporary representation; and further, that it is not at odds with postmodernism but rather that it is a manifestation of a rising undercurrent in postmodernist thinking and practice. And this development can be described simply as the resurgence of the desire for stories, especially personal stories, stories of the *self*. Story is gaining ground, not over but within spectacle.

Although this is not the place to engage with debates about the nature of postmodernism, I briefly outline how I use the term for the purposes of this argument and whose work I am drawing upon. Beyond that, the distinctions I have already drawn between aspects of modernism and postmodernism will point to the position I take in relation to these debates. In the interest of brevity and simplicity, I highlight three overviews that capture relevant aspects of postmodernism in terms that are useful for temporarily anchoring my argument.²⁰ One is that of John Mepham, in his essay “Narratives of Postmodernism”, who

17 James Olney: *The Meaning of Autobiography*, p. 6.

18 Walter Benjamin: *Illuminations*, p. 204.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 214.

20 Postmodernism is understood broadly here as an “aesthetic and a body of thought” (Patricia Waugh: *Practising Postmodernism*, p. 3). See also Frederic Jameson’s essay “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” in *Postmodernism or the Logic of Late Capitalism*, pp. 1-54.

describes the postmodern, among other things, as “*undecidability of meaning arising from the fragmentation of pluralization of contexts*”.²¹ Key aspects are the “refusal of representation” and the repudiation of “omnitemporality” that results in the ironic use of old forms, of parody or pastiche.²² His essay is useful because of its emphasis on the continuities and discontinuities between literary modernism and postmodernism, especially in relation to memory and history. Another overview is offered by John Frow in his essay “What Was Postmodernism?” where he points to postmodernity’s relationship to a “set of local crises in the knowledge system”. Amongst those he identifies are “a crisis of representation in general, bound up with the commodification and the proliferation of information; and a crisis of the economy of cultural values, in particular of the relations between high and low cultures”.²³ A third overview, and the one that focuses most directly on aspects relevant to my topic, is that provided by Leigh Gilmore as a footnote to her essay “The Mark of Autobiography: Postmodernism, Autobiography and Genre”, where she writes:

The field designated by the name “postmodernism” is already far too large to map, but the following emphases are significant to this discussion. In literary studies postmodernism has a range of influential theorists, whose diversity is belied to some extent by a shared descriptive vocabulary. Jean-Francois Lyotard, for example, is illustrative of a postmodernism captivated by a language of surface and structural decompositions. His emphasis rests on dispersal; the fragment characterises postmodern narrative and marks the end of allegiance to all metanarratives. For Jean Baudrillard, the mass culture of television and advertising creates a hyperreal space. Surface compositions and decompositions define the hyperreal as a simulacrum. Simulation is all; the real does not exist.²⁴

Leigh Gilmore also refers to Marjorie Perloff’s edited collection ‘Postmodern Genres’ where, to her surprise, there is “a marked area of conceptual agreement” among the twelve otherwise “very diverse group of essays”. They “repeatedly use”, Perloff writes, “terms like *violation, disruption, dislocation, decentring, contradiction, confrontation, multiplicity and indeterminacy*”.²⁵

If these, broadly, are some of the key features of postmodernism, then clearly, in any move towards postmodernism life narrative would appear to risk much more than other genres. More, because it is more explicitly devoted to personal acts of remembering than is fiction or visual representation or architecture or even history. Whereas life narrative centres on acts of remembering, postmodernism is a culture of forgetting. This is the problem of biography that I want to try to unravel: that in entering postmodernism’s territory, as it is everywhere doing, biography risks its very life. There is a set of conflicting drives in auto/biographical representation, so seriously conflicting that they push biography to the edge of impossibility in the current Western cultural context. My argument is that life texts and postmodernism, though unlikely bedfellows, have become, almost unnoticeably, much more deeply and productively entangled

21 Mephram quoted in Edmund J. Smyth (ed.): *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*, p. 147 (original emphasis).

22 Edmund Smyth (ed.): *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction*, pp. 141; 143.

23 John Frow: *Time and Commodity Culture*, p. 63.

24 Kathleen Ashley et al.: *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, p. 7.

25 Marjorie Perloff: Introduction, in *Postmodern Genres*, pp. 7 f. (original emphasis).

and interdependent than surface appearances would suggest. Beckett's words – "I invented my memories, not knowing what I was doing, not one is of me" – capture this odd conjunction, of the compulsion to remember with the knowledge that the memories have no necessary connection with reality or the self.²⁶

Jean Baudrillard, in a similar vein, writes, "Memory is a dangerous function. It retrospectively gives meaning to that which did not have any".²⁷ But while this can be understood as a problem for memory, it can also, I believe, be read as memory's special advantage. My point is that memory in a postmodern world is released from any obligation to "give meaning" and this, in a peculiar double flip, gives to memory as much freedom to bestow meaning as fiction has always had, and, what's more, to do so *by any means it chooses*.

The I does not properly refer²⁸

In her introductory essay in the collection titled 'Autobiography and Postmodernism', Leigh Gilmore identifies a crisis in autobiography and puts forward the argument that this is the mark of a larger crisis: "What we can call autobiography's resistance to genre can now be taken as a crisis in genre itself". She points out that "constructing autobiography as a genre has depended, at least in part, on domesticating its specific weirdness".²⁹ Her essay makes an important contribution to life writing studies in that it confronts and theorises the traditional alliance between auto/biography and "dominant discourses of truth telling".³⁰ Gilmore investigates the disruption of this old alliance in the context of postmodernism and highlights particularly the refusal of life discourses to capitulate to rules of genre, to be domesticated. By this refusal, she argues, genre itself is exposed and weakened.

In my view, however, there is no crisis in life discourses themselves,³¹ on the contrary, I would suggest that the current explosion of production and interest in life discourses is evidence of the *liberating* effect of postmodernism in which, belatedly, these discourses have found an ally (whether they wanted to or not). In fact, I would argue that even the most naively "realist" of life discourses can now be understood as belonging to the current moment of postmodernism. The fact that life discourses were never really accepted within the "truth-telling" genres with which they tended to be lumped (such as history), nor within the so-called creative genres of fiction, now gives them a special advantage. They have almost total freedom to transform themselves at will, to adapt to and take advantage of every social and technological change, to play their hand as they like. They are not hampered by the habits of genre or discipline.

26 Samuel Beckett: *Molly*, p. 399.

27 Jean Baudrillard: *Fragments*, p. 30.

28 Leigh Gilmore: *The Mark of Autobiography*, p. 6.

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

31 See John Frow: *Time and Commodity Culture*, on the term 'crisis', p. 63.

Life discourses have always existed as hybrids, and it is precisely their status as beyond genre and discipline, as unruly and undefinable, that now makes them so irrepressible, ubiquitous, and powerful in a postmodernist context. One way or another, “lived experience” is being mimed and reproduced all around us, in forms too various to have special names as well as in the many new hyphenated or collapsed forms that still attract names, such as ficto-criticism, bio-criticism, ficto-biography, faction, historical fiction, ficto-psychology, ficto-medicine, etc. – in film, television interviews, radio talk-back shows, on the World Wide Web, in newspaper reports, magazines, and on Telstra specialty lines. And the trend in all of these is away from the monolithic form, away from genre as we knew it (genre is irrelevant), away even from the narrative sweep that “covers” a life, and instead towards the now overwhelmingly dominant discursive *biographical* form – that of the *fragment*. This is where biography and postmodernism meet and disappear into each other. After centuries of being hammered into some sort of shape, biography has at last splintered into smithereens and so exploded straight into postmodernity.

A promise of fragments is that they alone will survive the catastrophe³²

Postmodernism, it could be said, has finally released biographical modes from the necessity to fake reality, or more accurately, it has released them from the need to cover up the fact that they are faking it. It has given them new lease on life. But this is a mixed blessing. As Baudrillard puts it,

The revolution of “lived experience” is without doubt the worst, the revolution which has swept away the secrecy with which everyone surrounded their own life and has transformed that life into a huge “reality show” [...]. What has been liberated is [...] the theatre of banality [...] [with its] exponential stupidity.³³

This then is the price to be paid for the triumph of life discourses, for their democratisation. The utterly trivial coexists on equal terms with the “major”, and the terms are interchangeable. Every life, every idea, has the opportunity to publicise itself, to expose itself and to immortalise itself; but it can equally easily be trashed, turned off, scanned, cut, copied, manipulated, mutilated, or desecrated, to any audience, in any context without permission or knowledge. The bits of “life” that are sent out or seized are beyond anyone’s individual control – they can neither be retrieved nor annihilated. ‘They have lives of their own’. The “lives” of royals, film stars, presidents, and celebrities, traditionally the targets of biographers, are still the targets but of a different order of investigation and in different company. John Bobbit alongside Clinton or Kennedy (any Kennedy), Princess Diana with Madonna or Sister Teresa, George Solti with Oasis, and in a Who magazine, Gough Whitlam, looking rather startled, in the same “Star Tracks” line-up as Naomi Campbell, Demi Moore, Tony Curtis, Mickey Rooney, and Shaquille O’Neal (23 February 1998). Lives are played for whatever can be squeezed out

32 Jean Baudrillard: *Fragments*, p. 9.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 98; the television series ‘Sylvania Waters’ comes to mind.

for the instant gratification of a peep-show glimpse of a story, however fleeting or empty. Even the power of the US president or the British Royal family cannot offer protection against the public addiction to bits of lives, bits of bodies, scraps of text, the more secret the more exciting as they flash into the global space of the instant biographical hit, constantly creating the need for another shot. This is the frenzied postmodern space that biography has claimed.

Biography used to offer “a premonition of immortality”,³⁴ to use Bauman’s words, by bestowing fame. Ironically, in this incarnation, biography offers fame to everyone and so reduces it to nothing:

Fame [...] has been replaced by notoriety, that icon of contingency, infidelity and the capriciousness of fate. When everyone can have a share of the limelight, no one stays in the limelight forever; but no one is sunk forever in the darkness either. Death, the irrevocable and irreversible event, has been replaced by the disappearance act: the limelight moves elsewhere, but it may always turn, and does turn, the other way. The disappeared are *temporarily absent*; not totally absent, though – they are *technically present*, safely stored in the warehouse of artificial memory, always ready to be resuscitated without much ado and at any moment.³⁵

In this scenario there is no concern with “the real” anymore, nor with the special power of personal memory to reconstruct the real, but strangely, as both Bauman and Baudrillard observe, the idea of the real is not entirely abandoned. Instead, it appears to be reasserting itself in new ways. This is the point I now want to follow up in relation to life discourses and postmodernism by briefly sampling several recent hybrid texts that seem to me to various degrees and in different ways to deny the possibility of memory and reality while simultaneously seeking and invoking them. The reason that these texts are important is that they pitch themselves against the banality of the reality show, not by shutting it out or denying its existence, but rather by exploiting it. In doing so they acknowledge, against all “reason”, the undeniable power of the story, one’s own “true” story – emerging in fragments, drawn from one’s own memories, as they have been imprinted on *the body* as well as the page – in no particular order.

What is most true is naked life. [...] I apply myself to seeing the world nude³⁶

In the book called ‘Fragments: Cool Memories III, 1990-1995’, Baudrillard writes that he is at pains to abolish “every last desire to give [his book] a meaning”. He hopes, he says, that he has managed to do to his book what “the system has done to reality: turned it into something no one knows what to do with anymore. But”, as he goes on to explain, “something they don’t know how to get rid of either”.³⁷

His book attempts to be an empty postmodern auto/biography, playing what he calls the “Great Game” of “speak[ing] of what it is not”.³⁸ This is the reality game, in which he participates by virtue of the fact that he denies that he is

34 Zygmunt Bauman: Postmodernism and Its Discontents, p. 163.

35 Ibid., p. 163.

36 Helene Cixous, Mireille Calle-Gruber: Rootprints, p. 3.

37 Jean Baudrillard: Fragments, p. 140.

38 Ibid., p. 145.

a player. Constructed around tautologies and self-cancelling contradictions the book is nevertheless shot through with intensely personal moments (or, at least, that's how they hit you) of rumination or memory. "There is no corpse of the real, and with good reason", asserts Baudrillard, "The real is not dead, it has disappeared".³⁹

If anything, Baudrillard conceals himself even less than does Barthes in 'A Lover's Discourse' (1977),⁴⁰ which also carries the word "Fragments" in its title. Both texts play a devious game of revealing and concealing, of having it both ways - one with the experience of love and one with what Baudrillard calls the "obvious fact" of reality. Following a parallel logic, 'Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes' sets up an elaborate anti-autobiographical arsenal but then freely lets in thoughts, reminiscences, and photographs - of himself. He acknowledges a "desire in you to put yourself into it somewhere",⁴¹ and he does put himself in, barely disguised, everywhere.

Another text that expresses the same desire, for understanding and telling the life in some form, is Helene Cixous' 'Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing' (1994), written as a dialogue with Mireille Calle-Gruber. Like 'Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes', but less guardedly, this work is devoted to exploring the relationship between writing and the self. The central question is posed: "How far can I go with it still being I?" A range of possible answers is tested, each of them implying a desire to find a textual framework for letting the experience of "reality" back in. "I have never understood", writes Cixous, "people who pretend that writing is not absolutely indissoluble from a living and complete body. [...] The origin of the material in writing can only be myself". Even though she explains that "I is not I, of course", the tug of the I, as an experiencing body, is felt throughout these dialogues:

That is my material. Where do I find it? In me and around me [...] that lava that flesh, that blood, those tears.⁴²

I am not separate from my writing, I only began to become myself in writing.⁴³

The text does not signal a return to faith in realism ("banal realism" is Cixous' declared enemy) but rather a recognition that there has been a more brutal than necessary dismembering of the "I" in postmodernism, and that in spite of this it stubbornly refuses to die and, what's more, it will not stop telling stories.

Could this be an expression of the nostalgia that Jameson refers to in his essay "The Existence of Italy", a nostalgia that he links with a "return to storytelling"?⁴⁴

My final examples of postmodern hybrid narratives in which memory plays a major role are very different from each other. One is Victor Burgin's book 'Venise', and the other is 'No Road' by Australian writer and theorist Stephen Muecke. Both are collections of loosely connected fragments. 'No Road' is a disjointed, ruminative autobiographical record of a journey into the remote Kimberley region of Western Australia. It is also an exploration of the limitations of

39 Ibid., p. 141.

40 Roland Barthes: A Lover's Discourse.

41 Roland Barthes: Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, p. 143.

42 Helene Cixous, Mireille Calle-Gruber: Rootprints, p. 12.

43 Ibid., p. 93.

44 Frederic Jameson: Signatures of the Visible, p. 155.

language, and the gap that words cannot bridge between people, cultures and even one's own memories, "where the words you have brought with you are radically implausible".⁴⁵ The narrator's recollections of the Australian landscape and Indigenous people he meets emerge as a series of stories that occasionally touch on experiences that are beyond words. "We sometimes run out of words", writes Muecke, "there are no more words left in the place we find ourselves [...] There are also places in the heart where words are lost forever".⁴⁶

In 'Venise' fragmentariness is taken much further, with words playing as forms and shapes against and into the visual images that act as both stage set and story. Each text has its way of getting under your skin. In 'Venise' there is a page that says, "Memories are like dum dum bullets". And it also says,

Dum dum bullets are projectiles
with sawn-off points.
At the point of impact, they leave small,
insignificant, marks.
However, after entry,
they spin
and tear horrible holes in the flesh.⁴⁷

For 25 years I have been writing down my Ukrainian parents' stories in bits and pieces whenever I have had the chance to visit them in Adelaide. My father is so full of pain when he remembers his father's execution in the village of Rublivka when he was a young child that he breaks down every time and cannot speak, although he badly wants me to write his story. And so I ask, "Tato, tell me about the day your father died".

My notebook records his brief answer:

"Alexander Kerensky was the head of the Russian Provisional Government then. He was a socialist".

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