

Talk at Macquarie University English Department Seminars Series, 11
May 2009

Interpreting oneself: on memoirs, essays, fiction and travel writing

Abbas El-Zein, abbas.elzein@sydney.edu.au

Introduction

If autobiography is conceived of as a structured exploration of one's self and if the "self" is shaped in large parts by the bigger forces of culture and history, the "memoir" opens up onto other genres and the integrity of the form can become threatened. Drawing on passages from my recent book, *Leave to Remain* [1], and the experience of writing it, I reflect on the way the memoir took shape, with the writing skirting other genres in the process. Specifically, I explore three literary forms, "fictional-type dramatisation", "travel writing" and the "autobiographical essay", as I found myself "flirting" with these forms while writing *Leave to Remain*. What I hope to elicit is the way in which the book took shape as a memoir, with help from and in contradistinction to, these other forms.

Two cautionary notes are in order. First, this paper is not an accurate description of what went through my mind while I was writing *Leave to Remain*. It is rather a post-script to the act. Some of the concerns and reflections that surface in this paper were on my mind while writing *Leave to Remain*. However, many others I only thought about after the act of writing. Writing, although a reflective activity, is also, at some level, an intuitive one, much like cycling: if you think too much about the physics of riding a bicycle while cycling, you are likely to lose your balance quickly. In fact, the skill of riding a bicycle is in large part a confidence trick, which consists of believing that you can ride a bicycle without having to think much about it. Your body has to learn, more than your mind. It is likewise with writing.

Second, this paper reflects very much a practitioner's, rather than a theoretician's, perspective. Although I make some references to scholarly literature on autobiography in the paper, I am writing in almost

complete ignorance of literary theories about memoirs and autobiography. This is not a boast; it is an admission of limitation. I know that not being aware of theory does not mean that I am free of dominant ideologies, assumptions, prejudices and practices about writing. All it means is that I am their unwitting victim. My only claim to any wisdom comes from having practiced, having written a memoir.

Leave to Remain

I wrote *Leave to Remain* over a period of about seven years. The memoir is divided into two parts. "Origins and Departures" charts my childhood and teenage years in civil-war Lebanon, exploring along the way the world of my mother's childhood in south Lebanon, the changes in outlook and circumstances from World War I onwards of my ancestors, some of whom were religious scholars, the joys and sorrows of civil-war Beirut. The first part leads up to the moment in time when I left Lebanon for Europe and later Australia. The second part, "Unhappy Returns", moves to the present and tells stories of my return to the Middle-East on various occasions, amid new and old war-scapes, and reflects on the way I relate today to my geographical origins.

Memoirs and Self-Dramatisation

Leigh Gilmore, author of 'The Limits of Autobiography-Trauma and Testimony', wrote:

"What if trauma memoirists are viewed not so much as asking to be believed [but rather] as asserting their speech, as, that is, becoming lyrical subjects of trauma?" [2]

Although Gilmore was referring specifically to memoirs revolving around trauma, there is a broader truth to memoirs as lyrical assertion of speech. Every memoir is an act of self-dramatisation, and *Leave to Remain* is of course no exception. The writer must begin by making the imaginative leap of seeing oneself as a subject at the centre of a dramatic line of events, i.e. a character in an eventful book. Frank Conroy in his memoir *Stop Time* uses this urge to self-dramatise to great comical effect:

"I waited, more than anything else, waited for something momentous to happen. Keeping a firm grip on reality was of immense importance. My vision had to be clear so that when 'it' happened I would know. The momentous event would clear away the trivia and throw my life into proper perspective. As soon as it happened I would understand what was going on, and until then it was useless to try. (A spectacularly unsuccessful philosophy since nothing ever happened)." [3]

This act of self-dramatisation is both easy and hard. It is easy because we all see ourselves as the centres of the dramas of our own lives. In the 20th and 21st centuries, we are constantly urged by the mass media to see ourselves in this way. So where is the hard part? Moving from this casual or instinctive self-dramatisation, to a conscious, reflective, literary self-dramatisation, is the hard part. In so much as writing is an act of externalising what has been hitherto an internal dialogue, everything must now be supplied and explained: background, plot, protagonists, characters, events and so on. This is a far more radical move than casual, internal self-dramatisation. And it is in this act of literary construction that memoir writing comes close to fiction as a genre, fiction, not in the sense of "untrue" but in the sense of telling a story through characters and events. Here's an example from *Leave to Remain*:

"One day, our maid put me to sleep on a grown-up's bed - I was six or seven months old - walked out of the room and, when she returned to check on me, discovered that I had rolled over to the edge, had fallen off and was lying motionless on the floor. Believing that I had died and that she was to blame, she ran away, never to return. I, on the other hand, must have been asleep all along, because when my mother walked into the bedroom and picked me up, my eyes opened and a big yawn scrunched up my tiny face.

With a first name colonised so firmly by the first two letters of the alphabet, I was destined to be on top of the class list. Whenever the last name was used for sorting, I found myself sliding all the way down the register because my family name was spelt Zein - the pretentious El usually deemed a cumbersome accessory by school administrators. Swaying between the beginning and the end of the student roll, I would develop a predilection for the middle position, a chronic dislike for the edge. Yet I would find myself pulled towards extremes, as if by a natural law of physics that was as entrenched in my persona as my first and last names. All too often, I would live above my emotional means and my life would prove to be unsuitable for my constitution." [4]

The construction part lies in what I made of two events, my falling off the bed and the order of my name on the student roll. I have turned these into a metaphor for an emotional malaise, in order to provide an insight into my psyche. This act of construction is reminiscent of fiction because it is not a description of how the child has seen himself, rather how the adult writer sees the child, constructs the child. It is in this re-arrangement of reality, its reconstruction, that memoir writing comes closest to using fictional devices, what Vladimir Nabokov possibly had in mind when he wrote in his memoir *Speak Memory* that

"[t]here is, it would seem, in the dimensional scale of the world a kind of delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge, a point, arrived at by diminishing large things and enlarging small ones that is intrinsically artistic." [5]

Memoirs and Travel Writing

The second part of *Leave to Remain*, "Unhappy Returns", includes a number of "travel" chapters: I describe my return to Beirut on a number of occasions, some of which were overshadowed by war—the Iraq war of 2002, the July 2006 bombardments of Lebanon. Another trip explored in the book is one I made to Iraq in 1998, before the fall of Saddam Hussein, especially to Shia shrines of Najaf and Karbala. Here is an observation from the Karbala shrine of Al Abbas about a man I saw:

"He sobbed, his hands hooked onto the knobs of the silver-coloured lattice. His head was twisted to one side and his temple grazed the cold metal. He bent over a little, his eyes on the floor, his shaven skull now against the shrine. Tears emerged from the inner corners of his eyes, streamed down his cheeks and disappeared into his curled moustache. His eyes closed, his chin dropped and his lips trembled, childlike, before he went into a new convulsion.

'Ya Abbaas. *Dakheelak, ya Abbaas,*' he pleaded in a plodding Iraqi accent, with long guttural a's and harsh consonants. The old man could have just escaped from Rodin's gates of hell and, in an incomplete reversal of fortune, could have found himself standing at the gates of heaven, kept out of it by a shiny cage. Close as he was to this sacred presence, his face was just as tortured as those of the French figurines fleeing infernal flames.

The old man may have been performing a *duaa*, seeking divine help in dealing with a personal calamity - the

illness of a daughter, the exile of a son or some intractable material difficulty. There is no better way of invoking God's benevolence than through the good will of his beloved Imams and their kin. Among the latter, Al Abbas, known for his courage and self-sacrifice, is cherished by believers.

The old man may have been remembering the 1400-year-old martyr, displaying an excess of impersonal grief. Formal *duaa* can be either intercession or remembrance, or both. It often starts with praise for Al Abbas and closes with personal requests addressed to God. Perhaps the old man's empathy with the martyr was so powerful that he could grieve for Al Abbas and seek his intercession in one and the same act. Perhaps his sense of himself was steeped in Al Abbas history and, in his more extreme moments of anguish, the distinction between Al Abbas' sufferings and his own became blurred.

Other questions raced through my mind. How long had he been standing there? Did he come here every day or was he just a passing pilgrim? Was he self-conscious in any way? I do not know the answers. I watched him for a brief period of time then moved on. There were pilgrims behind me, waiting for their turn to get to the shrine. Some of them must have travelled from far afield and were unlikely to have time for philosophical meditations, let alone my own. In this place, only worship mattered. The pilgrim must never stand in the way of pilgrimage." [6]

This extract would not be out of place in a piece of travel writing. It contains, to my mind, all the essential elements of a travel piece:

- a) a foreigner visits a place for the first time;
- b) the place is special, even iconic, a shrine in this case;
- c) there is a fluctuating sense of identification between the writer's self and the place he is visiting.

And yet, in this case, I wasn't entirely a foreigner. The Lebanese and the Iraqis speak the same language, albeit different dialects. More importantly, the stories behind the shrine are ones I had grown up with. There was a shared frame of reference that I was familiar with, well before visiting the place. In fact, curiosity about this frame of reference was one of the reasons for my trip to Iraq. The nearest analogy would be an unbelieving Australian visiting Bethlehem for the first time (assuming Bethlehem is an English-speaking town).

However, this "insider-outsider" perspective is perhaps essential to all travel writing. We often expect from a

good piece of travel writing to tell us about what impact the visited place has had on the writer's sense of self. What's interesting is that this "insider-outsider" perspective resonates with an attribute of memoirs in so far as a memoir is an exploration of self with hindsight. That is, the writer places herself on the outside of something she knows quite intimately from the inside, her own self. The writer is both an insider and an outsider. This, I believe, is the source of a subtle affinity between travel writing and memoirs.

Memoirs and Autobiographical Essays

The difference between an autobiographical essay and a memoir may not be easy to define from a stylistic point of view. It is certainly harder to pinpoint than the difference, say between fiction and memoir. It is even possible, for the more cynical amongst us, to claim that a "memoir" is a more marketable form of the "autobiographical essay" that publishers prefer because it is easier to sell. That, in other words, there is no real difference between the two. I do not subscribe to this view. In fact, from a practitioner's perspective, there is a marked, both intuitive and practical, difference between an autobiographical essay and a memoir. It lies in the degree to which the writer allows him or herself to deviate from a character-centred narrative, that is a narrative structured around elements of the author's life, events, chronology, emotional development etc.

The essay part of "autobiographical essay" grants the author a conditional freedom to "meander", i.e. to let her train of thought follow its own path, leading hopefully to interesting places and surprising conclusions. Although this train of thought is rooted in personal experience (hence the "autobiographical" part of "autobiographical essay"), it is not bound by any commitment to remain so, as it "meanders".

Writing *Leave to Remain* was in a way a process of expanding two autobiographical essays into a memoir. Indeed, the seed for *Leave to Remain* were two essays I had published in HEAT magazine. The first was about a Shia religious ritual that had been part of the cultural landscape of my childhood. The second essay, *Time's*

Arrow, started with a description/reflection on the world of my great-grandfather in south Lebanon, charting through careers of my grandfather and my father, as well as my own, the way religion, science and politics vied for influence in the Middle East. This led me to reflect on the way our view of the past and the future has changed, on my engineering profession, on the violent death of my grandmother, on the responsibility of weapon manufacturers for the effects of their weapons, on the Tintin and Asterix of my youth. This in other words, was an unashamedly "meandering" essay, personal but strongly thematic as well.

Now, the challenge I set myself while writing *Leave to Remain* was to come up with an accomplished memoir which nevertheless kept more than a trace of the thematic structure that I have inherited from the autobiographical essays. I attempted this in two ways. First, I rewrote the essays (and wrote new chapters) foregrounding the personal, event-centred narrative at the expense of the more "meditative" parts. Second, I introduced an overarching, loosely chronological narrative into the collection. The "looseness" took the form of a non-linear narrative, with flashbacks and movements back and forth in time, although in a more restrained fashion than in the original essays. This narrative structure was crucial in maintaining the thematic flavour of the original essays. The "meditative" parts became more embedded in the (non-linear) narrative structure. This has allowed me to create resonances of ideas not just within chapters, but between chapters, *intra* as well as *inter*. It has also made it possible for me to write a meditative memoir, without perpetrating, I believe, any major aesthetic crime.

Conclusion

In classical Arabic language, to write an autobiography is referred to literally as "to interpret oneself". Hence, one would say "X tarjama nafasahu"—X has interpreted himself— or "Y katabat linafsiha turjumaanan"—Y has written an interpretation of herself.

One of the questions at the back of my mind while writing *Leave to Remain* was the extent to which my life had been shaped by bigger forces of history and culture or, in

other words, what had been the limits of my personal freedom, as in freedom to shape my own person and destiny. I sometimes viewed my own self as a small imprint in the moving canvas of history and culture. What writing a memoir allows you to do, among other things, is to step out of yourself a little in order to see the canvas, or at least part of it. Writing a memoir becomes, hopefully, not just an act of interpreting oneself, but an act of interpreting the world through oneself. This is the most radical sense I like to give to this quote by a scholar of autobiography, Jerome Hamilton Buckley, who wrote:

"At its most vital, the literature of the self, I should think, must be more than self-reflexive." [7]

And it is this perspective that has made me want to create, through *Leave to Remain*, a "memoir of ideas", in the same way good fiction can give us a "novel of ideas".

References

1. Abbas El-Zein. *Leave to Remain*. University of Queensland press, 2009, 293 pages
2. Leigh Gilmore. *The Limits of Autobiography-Trauma and Testimony*. Cornell University Press, 2001. Quote from p. 37.
3. Frank Conroy. *Stop Time: A Memoir*. Penguin, 1977. Quote from p. xx.
4. *Leave to Remain*. Quote from pp. 4-5.
5. Vladimir Nabokov. *Speak Memory*. Weindfield and Nicholson, 1967. Quote from pp. 166-167.
6. *Leave to Remain*. Quote from pp. 164-166.
7. Jerome Hamilton Buckley. . Harvard University Press, 1984. Quote from pp. xx.