Recognizing in the Inferno That Which is Not: Reflections on Writing a Memoir

Author(s): Phil Cohen

Source: *History Workshop Journal*, AUTUMN 2012, No. 74 (AUTUMN 2012), pp. 173-191

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23278606

HISTORY AT LARGE

Recognizing in the Inferno That Which is Not: Reflections on Writing a Memoir

by Phil Cohen

> The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that *you* can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.
>
> Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (1972)

This essay reflects on the experience of writing a memoir, *Reading Room Only* (published on www.historyworkshop.org.uk, March 2011),[1] and is thus a retrospection on a text that is itself a retrospection. It is not though so much about having second thoughts as trying to understand more about the processes that are set in motion when we start to fashion, in however schematic a way, some public account of our past.

The idea for the memoir came from hearing about an oral-history project that had been organized in the aftermath of the closure of the British Museum Reading Room, requesting readers' memories of the place. As I had been a regular user of the 'BM' for over thirty years, I thought that perhaps I could contribute a short piece describing its peculiar etiquettes, some of the characters I had met there, and its changing culture of research. However I soon came to realize that my attachment to the BM and its Reading Room had deeper and far more personal roots. The place was a lot more to me than a beautiful environment in which to study, or a congenial social club. It had been a significant, if somewhat enigmatic, presence in my childhood landscape, growing up as I did in Bloomsbury during the late 1940s and '50s; later, in my mid twenties, after I dropped out of university, the reading room provided a continuing link with the academy as well as a safe haven from the storm in a political teacup created by the media around my activities with the London Street Commune squatters movement in 1968/9.

Emeritus Professor, Cultural Studies University of East London · *mnr.dns@verizon.net*

History Workshop Journal Issue 74 *Advance Access Publication 10 August 2012* doi:10.1093/hwj/dbr035

I had for some time been thinking about writing a memoir to settle accounts with this aspect of my past, prompted partly by renewed media interest in these events forty years on from 1969. I was approached in 2006 by a TV company hoping to interview me for a programme they wanted to make about the street commune squat at 144 Piccadilly in September 1969.[2] This 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 inter-cut 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 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 sixties radicalism that were beginning to appear focused 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.[3] 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 ex-street-communards, and doing some interviews with them so that the event would be properly documented. I was interested in what had happened to them since, how that experience had affected their subsequent lives. So I agreed to appear and discuss my role in 1969-70 as the pseudonymous 'Dr John'. The programme was screened on a community channel in 2007; a few people I knew saw it, including 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', the hippy leader 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'? And yet, I had to accept, this might well happen unless I could find a way of making sense of the event as other and more 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 that, the whole episode had become split off from the rest of my biography. I never talked about it to colleagues, and except for a few who

knew me from the sixties 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 official CV. I was now surrounded by contemporaries, most of whom had pronounced left-wing or otherwise radical sympathies, but who had nevertheless gone from school to university and stayed there, working away in their chosen subject area, while steadily progressing up the academic career ladder, in some cases sublimating their wilder political ambitions into professional ones on the way. In contrast I had learnt the tools of my intellectual trade by undertaking a somewhat 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 my 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 a memoir that would make sense of where I was coming from, in terms that my professional colleagues would appreciate as well as being of interest to those of my contemporaries who were involved in various forms of radicalism associated with the 'alternative society' of the 1960s and '70s.

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, for a number of reasons. I had given an account elsewhere of the squats.[4] I wanted to resituate these events within a broader chronology tracing the evolution of a particular political counter-culture over more than a decade. Most 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.[5] 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.

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 I had 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 a series of further questions. How did this memoir come to take the form it did? What models and motivations shape different approaches to life-story telling and how do these relate to wider social and

cultural trends? These reflections are contained in what follows in the hope that read in conjunction with the memoir itself they may help open up further debate about the limits and possibilities of the genre at a time when it is rapidly evolving.[6]

MODELS AND MOTIVATIONS

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'.[7] 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 narrator, shuttling between the two subject positions to create a retrospective illusion of their identity.

According to Lejeune, there are two basic organizing 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. How 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 Proustian 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, at least 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, organized around a single theme, topic or situation which uses selective aspects of the life history, often 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 be unself-centred precisely because they have a more totalizing 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*, it was a memoir and I 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. The form of the memoir determined its content, not the other way round, as would be the case with an autobiography.

But what kind of memoir was I trying to write? At the time this was not a question I asked. Now, in retrospect, I find it no easier to position my work, and anyway, pace Lejeune, it is up to readers not authors to undertake the task. Nevertheless, given the proliferation of different approaches I was curious to see if it was possible to map the field and establish if not a typology, then at least an inventory of current variations within the genre. How do they each stake their claim to authenticity and what pacts do they strike with the reader for this purpose?

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 creative 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 moral ones. Their claim to authenticity comes precisely from the lack of literary contrivance.

In contrast the 'authenticity' of memoirs written by the literati is predicated on their sophisticated artfulness. Here questions of style take precedence. We expect novelists to use their skills as storytellers to bring scenes of childhood vividly to life on the page. We want poets to exploit their special way with words to render the inarticulate longings of adolescence into passionate prose, or even 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, by showing how the seeds of 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 true vocation is first recognized, that is the main focus of the work.[8]

There are, I suspect, many memoirs, like mine, which do not fall neatly into either category and 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; 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. And in so far as material from such scripts is quoted as evidence of the text's credibility, they become part of its strategy of authentification.[9]

The way memoirs and autobiographies are written, their narrative grammar and syntax, is also 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, post-modernized 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, namely '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, a 'career' can be stitched together through a patchwork of transitory jobs, and everybody, even supermarket shelf-fillers, can in principle aspire to have one. At the same time whole areas of social and personal life that used to be classed 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 life-style 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 authorized grammar of life history by actively incorporating and reworking other scripts.[10] Under this imprimatur, *vocation* has become thoroughly 'vocationalized'. The quest for some occupation or activity that would represent a special sense of 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 traditional 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.

Contemporary self-improvement literature is full of examples of this shift, but even 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 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 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 set-backs, 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 notion 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 rhetoric of identity politics may give a strongly redemptive flavour to the tale, where the focus is on shared discrimination or disadvantage. In other cases there may be a self-dramatizing 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.

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 also has a lot to do with it. It can be adapted to tell survivor stories and 'come-back' or 'loser wins' stories, as well as openly triumphalist accounts of overcoming hardships, handicaps and misfortunes of every kind. As such it can be related 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 they often appeal explicitly to an imagined community of readers sharing similar predicaments, the account itself remains highly individualized.[11]

Read from an aspirationalist standpoint, my memoir, with its starting point in a highly privileged private education followed by rapid descent into street culture and homelessness, could be interpreted as a cautionary tale about what happens when someone fails to make the most of their opportunities, adopts a 'can't do won't do' attitude and drops out – a kind of rake's progress, only reversed at the last moment. Or maybe I just saw a niche in the market and 'reinvented' myself as Dr John, and then, as times changed, rebranded as Professor Cohen. The point though is to assess a life history in the context of its times. The world of my life story was formed under a different sign: the long and uneven postwar transition from austerity to relative affluence. 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 the case that in dropping out of university I consciously rejected a straight and narrow, onwards and upwards path. Instead, influenced by the existentialist concept of a life project, and inspired by the example of Danilo Dolci, who gave up his professional career as an architect to work with dispossessed communities in Sicily, rather than by 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.[12] 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 making 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, even if that drive took what many would regard as a perverse form. It is a well known characteristic of 'black sheep' that they secretly want to be let back in to the fold, albeit on their own terms, and I was no exception to the rule. It is no coincidence that the autobiographical element of the narrative 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 subsequent account I gave of them. For example there was always a sense, at the back of my mind, that through my adventures I was accumulating intellectual capital – experiences that could one day be used as material for a book, or a research project of some kind. But that is only 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.[13] In purely autobiographical terms, though, this was a different chapter in the life story, and one that was superfluous to the thematic development of my narrative. At least that is how I rationalized 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 sixties radicals who followed a similar trajectory. But at least it illustrates just what a tricky business memoir-writing is and how complicated and 'over-determined' decisions about what to put in or leave out can become.

This point is highlighted in memoirs where the explicit aim is to reveal what has been hitherto hidden or repressed in 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 it is to engage the reader's sympathetic understanding and 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 after-life.

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.[14]

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 a collusive relationship with its subterfuge. It is a popular form of literary exhibitionism that caters to a voyeuristic readership, but in my view 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 be a revelation of family secrets or private infelicities. 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.

IDENTITY POLITICS

Identity politics has had a lot to do with popularizing the idea of people authoring – and hence authenticating – 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 life styles. 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 realized 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 official histories in which these injustices 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 that 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 stay trapped in the inferno and are often both tedious and tendentious in their accusatory stance, however well justified the grievance. Self-righteous indignation, the preferred idiom of victimhood, is balm for fellow-sufferers perhaps but it gives other readers a very hard time. That 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 mobilize 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 in 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 in life 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 recognized 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 confessional

or accusatory mode, is going out of fashion. 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 bench-mark 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', on what is 'lost in translation' (in Eva Hoffman's memorable phrase), or on what is rejected from the host culture.[15] 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 those for whom writing is in itself a form of homecoming often welcome the distance gained from cultural norms 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 everything you have grown up to expect from life fails to materialize, 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 look around for scapegoats, but many more, who have internalized the aspirational discourse, blame themselves. As a result, however aggrieved they may 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 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 life-style 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 marginalized communities, at worst pandering to popular voyeurism about social outcasts. They do nevertheless fulfil an important function in addressing widespread anxieties about life prospects, especially in times of economic instability, when the

great fear of poverty, and the sense that 'there but for the grace of God or my bank balance, go I', becomes a murmured refrain in even the most secure of middle-class lives.

It is certainly possible to read my memoir as a variant 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, albeit unsuccessfully. 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 institutionalize the principle in the text. And I was sufficiently old-fashioned to see dislocation as being part of the problem of 'post modernity', 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, it is worth remembering that 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 life-style, an escape from the treadmill of the nine-to-five job and its 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 cultural and even academic interests as well as political aims, somewhere I felt more at home, at least for a time, than I had at school or university, among people whose uncompromising rejection of the values of 'straight' bourgeois society I shared.[16]

SETTLING ACCOUNTS

There are many other, more free-floating 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 an instrumental aspect to the quest too: to discover the secret of what makes for success or failure, for 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-person 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 too to ensure that one's life

amounts to more, and other, than its compilation in various official records or reports, and more than the daily iteration of humdrum routines, a life reduced, as T. S. Eliot once put it, to being 'measured out in coffee spoons'. In the case of the memoir this is connected with the drive to settle accounts with a specific moment or aspect of the past; in autobiography, it takes the form of an 'apologia per sua vita'. At its best that 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 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. Life scripts are no longer subject to negotiation or change in the course of their unfolding but are felt to be immutable, directed by the hand of fate or destiny, guided by some over-riding providential purpose or entirely governed by structures, laws or circumstances well beyond the individual's understanding. Like all true apologetics, this one ensures that there is no need to apologize – 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 my having been born to flying bombs and then abandoned to the cold comfort of my grandmother in Wales. Yet however deeply embedded in the psyche, the after-shocks of such events do not strike according to a preordained plan, dictated by some iron law of life history. They are not time-bombs set to be triggered by a certain date: they are 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 'nachtraglichkeit'.[17]

There are many kinds of traumatic, life-changing event that prompt people to write memoirs in an attempt to understand and 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 idealized prelapsarian 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 something 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 re-fight old battles, and to use the memoir to 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 enmity, perpetuating feuds and

provoking counter-attack. The memoirs of politicians are especially prone to this kind of thing, perhaps because in their world such practices are the norm. In contrast there is the memoir of political recantation, traditionally written by ex-communists or disillusioned left-wing dissidents, who eschew the radicalism of their youth and embrace more or less conservative ideologies, thus giving credence to the popular if simplistic view that people become more reactionary with age. Alternatively, 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 principled refusal to compromise. Some of these memoirs resist the temptation to sermonize but many end up preaching to the already converted who read them to have their own political faith confirmed. To the jaundiced reader who does not share the author's views and values the story may just as well tell a tale of stubborn adherence to dogmatic ideas long past their sell by date. As might be expected memoirs by sixties radicals have included both recantations and also political testaments that give a romantic gloss to their activities, as well as more nuanced accounts of their legacy.[18]

Finally there is the memoir that is explicitly written for posterity. This usually takes 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 it 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, colleague or friend, as a way of celebrating their life, mourning their loss and keeping their memory alive. The claim to authenticity of the valedictory memoir is that it promises to remain faithful to the spirit, if not the letter of a life.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

These then were some of the models and motivations that tugged at my sleeve as I was writing *Reading Room Only*. Some I was only dimly aware of, others were more insistent. No-one who writes a memoir today can avoid experiencing some 'anxiety of influence' given the pervasiveness of the genre from the 'tell-all' tales published by the tabloid press to the highly literary works produced by our poets and novelists. 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 story-line gets pulled in contradictory directions and, as I discovered, it is all too easy to start out with one intention and find you have ended up writing an entirely different kind of piece. It is for the reader to judge how far my narrative has managed to avoid being pulled too far off its stated course or fallen into some of the pitfalls described. 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 un-cramp 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 recognize 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 realization 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.

For, in another sense, a memoir cannot help but be a revisionary project, and 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 that appear insignificant at the time, yet somehow burrow their way into the subconscious, where they 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 focused 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 story-line. 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 realize 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. 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. I was sure 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 check 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*.

Phil Cohen is Emeritus Professor in Cultural Studies at the University of East London, where he directed the London East Research Institute and before that the Centre for New Ethnicities Research. His writing and research have focused on youth cultures, new ethnicities, and community politics in the East End of London. His most recent publication is an edited collection, *London's Turning: the Making of Thames Gateway* (Kogan Page, 2007).

NOTES AND REFERENCES

I would like to thank Toby Butler for his constant encouragement and support in writing the memoir, and also in preparing the present text for publication. Further information about this project can be obtained by contacting mnr.dns@verizon.net.

1 The memoir has now been published by AuthorHouse and is available from Amazon.

2 The large empty mansion at 144 Piccadilly faced Hyde Park Corner and was once lived in by the Queen Mother. It has since been demolished to make way for a hotel. For a newsreel report on 144 Piccadilly, and to consult the online version of the memoir, go to www.history workshop.org.uk/reading-room-only/. References to the memoir in this essay are cited as *Reading Room Only*.

3 The student movement in Britain in the late '60s was dominated by the hard Left, and took a dim view of 'flower power' and indeed of any movement that was not based on the working class or the student-worker alliance. I remember turning up with a group of street communards to a national conference of the Revolutionary Socialist Student Federation (RSSF) to ask for their support in a campaign we were launching against the obstruction laws, only to be rebuffed with shouts of 'what do you produce – syringes?' and hustled out. The street communards returned this disdain, referring to the students they met on the scene as 'weekend beatniks'. Some communards took part in the LSE occupation in 1969, but less out of solidarity with the student cause, than, as one of them put it, because 'it was somewhere cool to doss, score chicks, and smoke dope'.

4 See Phil Cohen, *Rethinking the Youth Question: Education, Labour and Cultural Studies*, London, 1997.

5 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (Le città invisibili, 1972) transl. William Weaver, London (1974), 1986.

6 The journal *auto/biography studies* provides a useful guide to current academic research in this field. A good introduction to the practical issues is Judith Barrington's *Writing the Memoir*, Portland, 1997. The general line of argument developed in this essay owes a lot to Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony*, Stanford, 2000 and also Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives become Stories: Making Selves*, Ithaca, 1999.

7 There is a useful selection of Lejeune's key texts in Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, transl. Katherine M. Leary, Minneapolis, 1989.See in particular his critical essay on Sartre's 1964 autobiography, *Words*.

8 See for example Shlomit C. Schuster, *The Philosopher's Autobiography: a Qualitative Study*, Westport, 2000; and for a scientific memoir Oliver Sacks, *Uncle Tungsten: Memoirs of a Chemical Boyhood*, New York, 2001.

9 Ethno-biography, the comparative study of the social scripts that articulate particular grammars of life-story telling, is still in its infancy but for an interesting example of this approach see Elizabeth Stone, *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How our Family Stories Shape Us*, New Brunswick, 2004 .For a psychodynamic approach to understanding life scripts see Claude Steiner, *Scripts People Live: Transactional Analysis of Life Scripts*, New York, 1971, 1990. My own approach is exemplified in what follows, and is also briefly spelt out in *Reading Room Only*, note 4. On the hidden curriculum vitae see *Reading Room Only*, note 6.

10 *Reading Room Only*, note 4.

11 It is interesting to compare these contemporary 'can-do' sagas with stories of adversity such as emerged during the Second World War and also from communities that have suffered some kind of natural disaster. Although these latter narratives often feature individual acts of heroism the qualities of resilience and fortitude that are celebrated are always socially embedded; the story is essentially about human solidarity, of people pulling through because they are pulling together. See Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, London, 1991; and Kai T. Erikson, *In the Wake of the Flood*, London, 1979.

12 *Reading Room Only*.

13 I spent ten precarious years at the Institute of Education, in a marginal position as a contract researcher, essentially a freelancer living from grant to grant. Some of the hustling and organizational techniques I had learnt during my 'underground' days now came in handy and were transferred to the official CV, described as 'project-management skills'. My research, into school counter-cultures, involved working closely with school drop-outs, early leavers and young people whose transition from school to work had been interrupted or permanently postponed by Mrs Thatcher's economic policies. No surprises there. And the projects, given the nature of the issues and sometimes because of the way I approached them, were not uncontroversial so there never was a period free from 'storm and stress'.

14 For this reason, few psychoanalysts have written personal memoirs, and even when they have, they tend to conform to the 'literati' model. See for example Joanna Field [Marion Milner], *A Life of One's Own* (1934), London, 1986; and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Love of Beginnings* (*L'Amour des commencements*, 1986), transl. James Greene and Marie Christine Régier, London, 1993. The latter is a literary and philosophical meditation on Lacanian

themes, interweaving childhood memories, dreams, aspects of his formation (he was a pupil of Sartre and a student of Lacan), as well as his practice as a psychoanalyst and man of letters. Analysands have written memoirs about their experience often as a way of continuing the analysis by other means see for example Nini Herman, *My Kleinian Home: a Journey through Four Psychotherapies*, London, 1985.

15 See Eva Hoffman *Lost in Translation: a Life in a New Language*, London, 1989.

16 Despite its egalitarian rhetoric, the 'alternative society was highly stratified, its hierarchies mirroring those of the 'straight' world. It had its aristocracy, the rich bohemians, hippy entrepreneurs, rock musicians and fashion-designers, who often bankrolled its projects; its middle-class professionals who ran organizations including the underground press; and finally its foot-soldiers, the young people who enlisted in its colours. In its higher echelons it was a hive of creative industry and pioneered the hedonistic pleasure principles and 'cool' life-style that consumer capitalism needed to expand its markets. On this point see Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of the Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, Chicago and London, 1997. Amongst the rank and file however, the counter culture subsisted on the economic margins. Most of the street communards, for example, either lived off state benefits, if they were lucky enough to have a fixed address, or took casual part-time jobs, or else practised a variety of street trades – as vendors, buskers, dope dealers etc; many relied on charities to provide social support. We were careful though to identify ourselves as 'beats' or 'hippies', and to distance ourselves from 'dossers' – the young vagrants and homeless who also congregated around Piccadilly Circus.

17 For further discussion of the Freudian concept and its bearing on the memory politics associated with trauma narratives see Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, Ithaca, 2001.For an application of the theory to war memories see Phil Cohen, 'Landscape after Ruins', in *Culture and the Unconscious*, ed. Caroline Bainbridge, Susannah Radstone, Michael Rustin and Paula Yates, Basingstoke, 2007.

18 Lynne Segal, *Making Trouble: Life and Politics*, London, 2007, is one of the few memoirs I know of that succeeds in neither repudiating the ideological legacy of sixties radicalism, nor romanticizing it, while demonstrating that, in the case of feminism at least, the legacy includes both persistence of vision and adaptability to changing circumstance. See also the contributions to *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, ed. Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield, New York, 2000.