CHARTING THE NARRATIVE UNCONSCIOUS: CULTURAL MEMORY AND THE CHALLENGE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Mark Freeman
College of the Holy Cross

This essay explores the cultural dimension of autobiographical narrative, focusing especially on the way in which cultural texts and "textures" become woven into the fabric of memory. This process is one of which people are often unaware, resulting in regions of history that may be all but unknown. The "narrative unconscious," therefore, refers not so much to that which has been dynamically repressed as to that which has been lived but which remains unthought and hence unformed, i.e., to those culturally-rooted aspects of one's history that have not yet become part of one's story. An important challenge for those fashioning autobiographies is thus to move beyond personal life, into those largely uncharted regions of history that find their origins in the shared life of culture. From this perspective, autobiography is not only a matter of representing a life from sometime after birth until (sometime before) death, it is a matter of discerning the multiple sources, both proximate and distant, that give rise to the self.

In the present essay, I shall explore the process by which cultural texts and "textures" become woven, often unconsciously, into the fabric of memory. In speaking of the "narrative unconscious," however, I refer not so much to that more private, secretive dimension of the unconscious posited by psychoanalysis as to the cultural dimension itself - specifically, to those culturally-rooted aspects of one's history that remain uncharted and that, consequently, have yet to be incorporated into one's story. An important, if somewhat paradox-

Requests for further information should be directed to Mark Freeman, Psychology Department, College of the Holy Cross, 1 College Street, Worcester, MA 01610-2395. Telephone: (508) 793-3681. E-mail: mfreeman@holycross.edu
an imaged-filled collective consciousness that relieved individuals of their internal worlds" (p. 187).

Geoffrey Hartman (1994), drawing on Walter Benjamin's work, raises a similar issue. "The reproducibility of art -- and, by extension, of the newsworth-able event," he writes, "brings us closer to it yet also creates a further distance: a world in which presence is increasingly displaced by representa- tion" (p. 11), perhaps even leading to a kind of "anti-memory" (p. 4). Saul Friedlander (1994) states his own fear in this context quite plainly. "The Shoah carries an excess," as he puts it. "At the individual level," therefore, "a redemptive closure (comforting or healing in effect), desirable as it would be, seems largely impossible. On the collective level, however... there can hardly be any doubt that the passage of time will erase the 'excess'" (p. 262).

At issue, then, is what exactly is being done in this collective process of working-through: whether it is in the interest of remembering and somehow coming to terms with the past or whether it is something else altogether, something more "external." If Freud is right -- and, of course, if his ideas are applicable to this situation -- time will tell. Remembering, he says, will ultimately yield some measure of therapeutic gain. If, on the other hand, there remains significant resistance, we can expect repetition, the acting out of the same ritualized and collectivized processes. And, "The greater the resistance," Freud writes, "the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering" (1914/1958, p. 151). The long and short of this brief discussion, in any case, is that recollective processes of the sort most often tied to individuals, to selves, coming to terms with their personal histories, were also taking place on the plane of culture. Never before that visit to Berlin had I had such an acute sense of an entire social body, or at least a significant portion of it, being engaged in recollective -- and reconstructive -- work.

On one level, this idea of group reflection is a familiar one. As David Carr (1980) has put the matter, "the group achieves a kind of self-reflexive awareness as a 'subject' analogous to what is found in the individual (p. 156). Taking this idea one step further, he notes that "a community exists wherever a narrative account exists of a we which has continuous existence through its experiences and activities" (p. 163). Indeed, Carr goes on to suggest, communities, like individuals, are constantly in the process of composing and recomposing their own autobiographies. Michael Lantbek (1996) brings this issue closer to memory by noting...
The process of memory operates in similar ways to the individual and collective experiences of a city. It has representations by means of cultural icons, and 3.2.4. Memory, memory, memory, memory. Not only does the composition of the individual object, but the entire city. It is never a perfect picture, but a blend of the past and present experiences, and discourses of the self provides schemas for narrating collective experience and identity. (Pfaff, 1984, p. 240)

But what exactly are we to make of this blending between the individual and collective experience of a city? Can we, in fact, speak, cogently, about memory and representation? Can we speak of a process, in the city, of deep cultural memory? Can we speak of an amalgamation of that which is remembered and that which is present? In a broader sense, do we have the capability of healing itself, getting it together again, of being able to heal the city? What sort of memory is left in memory, the appropriate record here? I will not attempt to answer all of those questions in the present essay. Perhaps, taking them one at a time, we can begin to explore some of the means in which the city is at work.
my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral particularity* (p. 205). As MacIntyre goes on to suggest,

This thought is likely to upset alien and even surprising from the standpoint of modern individualism. From the standpoint of individualism I am what I myself choose to be. I am always, if I wish to, in question what are taken to be the power contingent social features of my existence. I may biologically be my father’s son; but I cannot be held responsible for what he did unless I choose implicitly or explicitly to assume such responsibility. I may legally be a citizen of a certain country; but I cannot be held responsible for what my country does or has done unless I choose implicitly or explicitly to assume such responsibility (p. 205).

We are here considering an attitude, MacIntyre explains, “according to which the self is detachable from its social and historical roles and statuses” (p. 205). But this attitude is cast radically into question by experiences of the sort recounted herein. To refer to MacIntyre once more:

[The story of my life is always embedded in those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualists make, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of a historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide . . . What I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognise it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition. (pp. 205-206)

It is the phrase “whether I recognise it or not” that is, again, of central importance. Many aspects of my historical inheritance are either conscious or unconscious, i.e., available to consciousness, able to be brought to mind given the right circumstances. But some, again, are unconscious, which is to say, they refer to those deep strata of history of which I am largely, if not entirely, unaware. We might therefore think of the narrative unconscious in reference to those culturally-rooted aspects of one’s history that have not yet become part of one’s story. They are hidden, not in the sense of that which has been buried through the forceful work of repression but which remains unthought and is thus not yet a part of my own story.

I would suggest further that this “hiddliness” is one of the legacies of modernity, or at least that aspect of it that, through the fashioning of the sovereign individual, ostensibly free to choose his or her own way, effectively erases from view those historical and cultural moorings that are the very ground of identity. Taking this idea one step farther, it might be said that the modern self, for all of its countless memoirs and autobiographies, is a self that is in large measure unconscious of its own historical formation. Indeed, it is perhaps the very widening and deepening of the narrative unconscious that is the pre-condition of the modern autobiographical project, predicated as it is on the presumption that it is the unique and unrepeatable characteristics of one’s life that are most worthy of being recounted.

As Edward Shils (1981) has written, “Every human action and belief has a career behind it; it is the momentary end-state of a sequence of transmissions and modifications and their adaptation to current circumstances. Although everyone bears a great deal of past achievement in his— or her— “belief and conduct, there are many persons who fail to see this” (p. 43). Putting a bit more of a positive spin on these issues than MacIntyre, Shils acknowledges that:

It was a great achievement of moral and political philosophy to postulate the existence of a self-contained human being as a self-determining moral entity free from original sin and from the entails of a dark inheritance. The ideal was to escape from human beings all that came from the past and hindered their complete self-regulation and expression . . . Much progress has been made in this regard. But it has its limits. There are undoubtedly many persons who regard their past as beginning only with their own birth. They believe that it lies within their powers to order entirely their own existence by their own decisions and those of their contemporaries (pp. 43-44).

These are individuals “whose ‘organ’ or sense of the past is wholly empty,” Shils argues, “and they are wrong as well” (p. 44). If Shils is right, the modern autobiographical subject, whose past appears limited to his or her own life, is something of a misfit.

What is important to emphasize is that Shils (1981) actually seems to be talking about memory in this context. “The individual as he perceives himself includes things which are not bounded by his own experiences” (p. 50). The fabric of memory, he goes on to say, “is furnished not only from the recollections of events which the individual has himself experienced but from the memories of others. . . . From their accounts of their own experiences, which frequently anedote his own, and from written works at various removes, his image of his ‘larger self’ is brought to include events which occurred both recently and earlier outside his own experiences” (p. 51). Following Shils,
we might also speak of a larger past, a larger history, and, again, a larger region of memory.

But in what sense can we, in what sense should we, speak here of memory? In essence, what Shils seems to be suggesting is that history, in all of its variousness as it operates within the individual, is itself a part of memory. The notion that it must be confined to one's life-span is therefore being challenged, radically. One significant implication, then, is that perhaps we need to think about memory in a new way.

I do not wish to suggest that this is an entirely new idea. As Gadamer (1982), for instance, wrote some time ago, "It is time to rescue the phenomenon of memory from being regarded merely as a psychological faculty and to see it as an essential element of the finite historical being of man" (p. 16). Now, Gadamer - not unlike MacIntyre and Shils in some ways - is critical of both the modern autobiographical subject and the modern autobiographical enterprise. "Self-reflection and autobiography," he maintains, "are not primary and are not an adequate basis for the hermeneutical problem, because through them memory is made private once more. In fact," he continues, "history does not belong to us, but we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is already a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life." (p. 245). As Gadamer goes on to note, "Our historical consciousness is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard. It is present only in the multifariousness of such voices" (pp. 252-253). It therefore "always includes more than an acknowledge-edges of itself" (p. 255). There is a surplus, we might say, within historical consciousness. Memory exceeds what we can know of it.

The implication of this set of ideas is significant as well. Not only might we need to think of memory differently, but also we might need to think differently about autobiographical reflection and indeed the autobiographical project itself. To put this in the form of a set of questions: Is the narration of the self possible without the privatization of which Gadamer speaks? Are different forms of autobiographical reflection and autobiographical writing possible, ones that better accommodate those dimensions of the past that go beyond one's personal life? Is it possible to somehow explicate and express this surplus that exists within historical consciousness?

In order to address these questions, it may be useful to consider two autobiographical works that bring us in the direction being considered. The first is Jill Ker Conway's (1989) memoir The Road from Coorain, a story that recounts Conway growing up in the Australian bush, coming to terms with her own identity as a woman and an Australian, and, eventually, leaving her homeland, to carry forward her own projects and place. In large measure, Conway's narrative is a traditional one, in the sense of being about her own unique, personal circumstances. In addition, however, it is about her own formation as a social being and especially about her own process of coming-to-consciousness about certain elements of this formation that had remained occluded, hidden from view. Upon meeting a teacher who had been "impatient with Australian bourgeois culture," she eventually came to understand that she herself was being formed educationally in such a way as to minimize, even erase, the influences of her own country. We might have been in Sussex," she writes, "for all the attention we paid to Australian poetry and prose." Conway and her classmates would memorize Scott and Shelley, for instance, their vivid descriptions of nature, which had given them "the impression that great poetry and fiction were written by and about people and places far distant from Australia." (p. 99). What this had also done, Conway recognized, was give them the impression that their own natural world, which deviated greatly from these poetic descriptions, was somehow inferior, second-rate.

As for Australia itself, it had its own share of problems - some of which, Conway had discovered, lay beneath her very feet. Her family had owned a large expanse of land, and she had always taken it to be theirs alone. But "Who," she eventually had to ask, "were the rightful owners and users of the land I had always thought to belong to us?" (p. 170). Among other things, she remembers having stumbled across aboriginal ovens and strange stones, which she herself had "heedlessly trodden upon" throughout much of her life. She hadn't really given these things a thought, her assumption being that they had merely been abandoned, by choice. Her lack of awareness, which came into view as she gazed backward upon her past, proved to be extremely disturbing and humbling. It was as if she had been shaken awake from her slumber.
Later on, when she was rejected for a job for which she had been qualified because she was a woman, Conway had been shaken awake yet again, her past becoming transformed once more. "I could not credit that merit could not win me a place in an endeavor I wanted to undertake, that decisions about my eligibility were made on the mere fact of my being female instead of on my talents ... It was prejudice, blind prejudice" (p. 191). From this point, he writes, "I could never remember the image of my parents resting in the evening, sitting on the front veranda step at Courain, quite the same again" (p. 191). Conway's narrative had thus been immeasurably complicated by her discoveries. She had been an actor in a history she did not know that he knew only partially and incompletely. And when this history became part of her story, her life itself took on new and more complex dimensions. To put the matter somewhat differently, what Conway had come to articulate through these experiences, among others, was precisely a series of counter-narratives, which in turn required that she rewrite not only her past but her very self (Freeman, 1993). These counter-narratives, she realized, had to be integrated into her evolving sense of identity. Without them, there would only be a superficial and incomplete rendition of the past, one that mistook the manifest order of things for the whole story.

The second book I want to consider is Native Realm, by the poet Czeslaw Milosz (1981), which is subtitled A Search for Self-Definition. At the very outset of the book, Milosz writes: "I am beginning a quest, a voyage into the heart of my own, yet not only my own, past" (p. 3). The past he wishes to talk about, in other words, will not be strictly personal but will instead move beyond the boundaries of his own life and world. "The vision of a small patch on the globe to which I owe everything," he continues, "suggests where I should draw the line." A three-year-old's love for his aunt or jealousy toward his father take up too much room in autobiographical writings because everything else, for instance the history of a country or a national group, is regarded as something "normal" and, therefore, of little interest to the narrator.

But another method "is possible" (p. 5), Milosz suggests:

Instead of detaching the individual from the insideout, one can focus attention on the background, looking upon oneself as a sociological phenomenon, labor experience, as it preserved in the memory, will then be evaluated in the perspective of the change one's milieu and subculture undergo. The passing over of certain periods important for oneself, but requiring too personal an explanation, will be a token of respect for those undergounds that exist in all of us and are better left in peace." (pp. 5-6)

Milosz, therefore, will attend to different "undergrounds" in his search for self-definition, ones that will allow him to see some of the fundamental texts and textures that have become woven into the fabric of his memory and his life. I am not sure whether "looking upon oneself as a sociological phenomenon" is the most appropriate way to frame the methodological questions at hand. I am not sure it is what Milosz's own autobiographical project is about. His most basic challenge is rather to look at his own personal world in dialogue with the wider world in order to see how its broad currents had been operative. "The awareness of one's origins," he goes on to note, "is like an anchor plunged into the deep, keeping one within a certain range. Without it, historical intuition is virtually impossible" (p. 20).

As Milosz also notes, "Knowledge does not have to be conscious. It is incredible how much of the aura of a country can penetrate to a child. Stronger than thought is an image—of dry leaves on a path, of twilight, of a heavy sky. In the park, revolutionary patrols whistled back and forth to each other. The Volga was the color of black lead. I carried away forever the impression of concealed terror, of inexpressible dialogues confused in a whisper or a wink of the eye" (p. 45). Just as Milosz speaks about un-conscious knowledge, the images and stories of his childhood having become part of the very fabric of his life, so too does he speak about his self and its formation:

In a certain sense I consider myself a typical Eastern European. It seems to be true that his differentiation specificus can be boiled down to a lack of form—both inner and outer. His good qualities—innocent vitality, fervor in discussion, a sense of irony, freshness of feeling, special (or geographical) fancy—derive from a basic weakness: he always remains an adolescent, governed by a sudden ebb or flow of inner chaos. Form is achieved in stable societies. My own case is enough to verify how much of an effort it takes to absorb contradictory traditions, norms, and an overabundance of impressions, and to put them into some kind of order. The things that surprised us in childhood need no justification, they are self-evident. If, however, they shift about like particles in a kaleidoscope, ceaselessly changing position, it takes no small amount of energy simply to place one's feet on solid ground without falling. (p. 67)

It may be useful to briefly discuss a specific incident Milosz recounts that, in an important sense, is about the workings of the narrative unconscious. It also ties in well, albeit obliquely, with some of what was discussed earlier regarding my own strange encounter with Berlin. He writes as follows:

I have the sense before me now: spring sun shining into our classroom windows, sparrows chirping, the first of May. Our French teacher ... looks at me suspiciously.
He beckons me to him with his finger. I go up to his table, my hair is unkempt, I am twelve years old. "What do you have there?" Sticking out of my pocket are the forks of a slingshot. "What are you going to do with that?" I try to give my voice a hard, masculine ring. "Beat Jews." He narrows his eyes in a cold reflex as if he were looking at an animal. I feel hot, I feel as if I had turned best-red. He confiscates the weapon.

Had I really meant to use the slingshot against Sasha and Sonika (two Jewish children from his neighborhood)? No concrete man was my adversary. I carried within myself an abstraction, a creature without a face, a fusion of concepts bearing a minus sign. What is more, I was aware of it not as my own, not something tribun, but as alien. And I feel that this was made all the more painful by a sudden illumination that revealed the real instigator. It was one of my relatives, whom I despised. I suddenly saw the connection between my attitude and his political hangover as the dinner table, when I seemed not to be but was listening. From that moment on, every nationalist slogan was to remind me of his pitiful person. (p. 96)

Sweepingly though this story is, I must admit I am not entirely sure what to make of it. I certainly do not doubt the incident itself; it is of the sort that can get emblazoned in one’s memory, standing as a kind of mythical monument. But the interpretation Miloš goes on to offer—which is actually kind of quasi-causal explanation—is curious and worth questioning. It was ill his relative’s fault, he tells us; there was a concrete origin, an event, that armed him into a boy possessed of hurtful abstractions, which had happened in way as if by alien force. But here, it seems to me, Miloš may well be making a wrong territory to make sense of things. It is certainly possible that there was a concrete origin of the sort he posits; in this case, he will haveunctioned like a detective, who finally finds the missing piece to the puzzle and hand. I cannot help but wonder, however, whether the attitude with which he had carried his slingshot doesn’t go deeper, beyond events and incidents, to the very texture of things.

On some level, perhaps, it doesn’t matter. What is most important, one might argue, is the fact that the behavior has been identified, named. But whether or not the origins lies in his despised relative or in his polluted world matters a great deal to his own, and our own, understanding. The interpretation brings us an essentially psychological account of a bad bit of behavior. The other brings us into the heart of history. Given Miloš’s stated aim, the account he has given us is somewhat anomalous; he seems to have one what he told us he would try to refrain from doing. But this itself, I would suggest, bespeaks his own formation as a modern autobiographical subject, trying, against difficult odds, to move beyond the confines of the monadic self to tell a different kind of story.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND POESIS**

As Patricia Hampl (1999) has noted in an essay on Miloš’s work, Miloš has crafted a method “which allows the self to function not as a source or a subject” — or not only a source or subject — “but as an instrument for rendering the world” (p. 86) … We embody, if unwittingly and partially, our history, even our prehistory. The past courses through our veins. The self is the instrument which allows us not only to live this truth but to contemplate it” (p. 97).

As Hampl goes on to note, this form of remembering, of the sort exemplified in Miloš’s autobiography, is, perhaps, closer to poetry than to fiction, in spite of the apparent narrative affinity of the novel and autobiography, and in spite of the autobiographical nature of much modern fiction. In the lyric poem and the memoir, a self speaks, renders the world, or is recast in its image. In both lyric poetry and the memoir the real subject is consciousness in the light of history. The ability to transit the impulsion of the age, the immediacy of a human life moving through the changing world, is common to both genres. To be personal and impassioned all at once is the goal of both. (p. 100)

From the perspective outlined in this essay, autobiography is no longer a matter — or no longer exclusively a matter — of representing a life, from birth until death. Instead, it is a matter of discerning, as best one can, the multiple sources, both near and far, that give rise to the self. This does not eliminate the place of the “I” in telling the self’s story. The project at hand — whether it takes place intentionally, as in the writing of an autobiography, or unintentionally, as in the course of living — is one of poetics, of fashioning an identity in and through these multiple sources (see Freeman, 1999). But this very dimension of poetics is itself a part of history, as are the genres and storylines that are employed in the task.

In much of my recent work, I have tried to show that narrative, rather than being imposed on life from without, is woven into the very fabric of experience (e.g., Freeman, 1997a, 1997b). In line with this aim, part of what I have tried to show through the present essay is that there are narrative “reserves,” untold and unwritten stories, cultural as well as personal, that are important respects constitutive of experience. Narratives are with us
in ways we don’t quite know; they are part of our deep memory, which is
itself comprised, in part, of sedimented layers of history. By recognizing this,
we open ourselves to the possibility of exploring new and different forms of
making sense of personal life.

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