

Introduction

There are at least two good ways to know that one is getting old. The first was pointed out to me by a friend who observed that he was becoming quite irrationally annoyed by the habit of some young people of carrying bottles of designer water to drink as they walked along. The only reason for being annoyed at this harmless and probably quite healthy phenomenon was that it altered the patterns of the past in a way that was unfathomable to those who are growing old. Is it a sign of drinking to satisfy a drug-induced thirst? Is it a sign of environmental awareness or protest about water-quality standards? Is it a sign that the young have too much money? Who cares. The point is not whether or not there is any reason for the habit of carrying water but that annoyance with it is a small puff of wind announcing the inevitable fact that the world in which one lives is slowly moving outside one's comprehension, and that one is edging towards the onset of *sunyasin*, the Hindu phase of life when, after discharging mature adult responsibilities, a man divests himself of all possessions save for a loin-cloth and a begging bowl and wanders free in the world relying only on charity to survive. Today's equivalent is, presumably, the point at which one accepts whatever pension has been provided by virtue or chance and ungrudgingly retires to obscurity in modest comfort or uncomplaining poverty.

The second of these puffs of wind is the point at which one discovers that memory has become a more important, a more *interesting* arena of contemplation than hope or ambition, that the future loses out in one's mind to the past. It may be that this is a genuinely physiological change, a signal that the mind's vast but necessarily finite resources of memory are approaching their limit. Or maybe it is some kind of socio-psychological, signal similar to the above, that one's period as a useful member of society is almost up. It really doesn't matter, at least not here. What does matter is that if one is a member of the small group of people whose life has been if not dominated then certainly preoccupied by writing then inevitably one becomes pulled towards the project of writing one's memoirs.

It is in the nature of writing, at least for me, that sometimes one writes things which come as something of a surprise, occasionally a revelation, and a description of myself as someone preoccupied with writing is just such a surprise. It was not intended as such but there it is and, on reflection, it is pretty much an accurate summary. Of course, all such things are relative. In the grand British Library catalogue, a search on "Michael Prior" reveals an author of a large number of Christian texts _ a man who tangentially would cross my life quite unexpectedly _ another who writes on rugby league and, one, the genuine article, who is the author of five catalogued books; two on politics, one on the theatre and two on aspects of coal and energy policy. That covers the field quite well, some politics, a bit of culture and pages and pages on obscure and technical matters of no real interest to anyone at all. But it omits a lot of the ephemeral matter which leaves barely a trace even in the box-files and cardboard boxes which sit on various shelves in the places I call home. Since the

1950s and the magazine of the youth CND, I have been involved with setting up two university magazines, a community newspaper, an underground journal of the Communist Party in a kind of English *samizdat* format and (this the last) a series of book-length reviews charting the intellectual death-throes of Marxism as a coherent force. Plus the articles, pamphlets, reviews and leaflets which will defy recovery by even the keenest searcher for socialist trivia. In addition, most of my working life has been spent as a consultant and in this capacity I must have presented millions of words in reports whose fate is unknown though certainly inglorious. No fiction, though a certain amount of fantasy, and very little that might be called personal.

Thus the business of setting out words in paragraph after paragraph is familiar enough. But memoirs pose several novel problems. It almost goes without saying that the least of these is whether or not anyone might actually be interested in reading them. The sum total of my past readership has never been measured but clearly it is not great and that has never acted as any deterrent to my ploughing on doggedly. The problems are more to do with just how one goes about this task of constructing a written version of what exists for the most part in my memory, something whose precise nature defies any scientific explanation and whose actual content is unknown even to me.

About fifteen years ago, I visited a large open-air industrial museum at Beamish in County Durham, one of whose features was a Co-op grocery shop moved from its original site in some Durham town and set up with a full pre-war stock just as it might have appeared in the early part of the twentieth century. After walking round the counters, we arrived the till and without warning I said "924786", the number I realised of my parent's old Co-op number which members would tell the cashier in order to add to the six-monthly 'divi' payout. As a child, I would, in those few years before adolescence when such things seem incredibly adult, insist on the privilege of saying the number when I went to the grocers with my mother. I had probably not used this number for almost forty years yet by constant repetition it had been lodged unchanged in some chemical or physical formation of neurones for all those years. I have no idea whether this was a residual freak, whether, to use the inevitable computer analogy, such memories continue to exist just as remnants of deleted files can remain intact on a hard-disk saved from magnetic re-orientation for no reason save simple chance. Or whether I have layers of such precise memories, all preserved waiting for the appropriate cue to be pushed up the ladder of consciousness and emerge as accurately as '924786', a number whose historical accuracy could, presumably, be checked in some dusty archive of the London Cooperative Society.

I have thus the initial problem that I have no real idea what the content of these memoirs is going to be; whether or not the process of writing this kind of subject is likely to be the appropriate cue for memories which now lie beyond reach. I know, of course, the broad map of it all but I also know of the huge white areas which lie on the map. I walk past my old junior school perhaps once a month and one might suppose that any memory I have of life there will have been stimulated as far as is possible. But maybe not. Maybe if I really focus on my part in a

(presumably much adapted) play by Maeterlink, *The Blue Bird*, which was performed there around 1951, much else will come flooding back. Or would I remain fixed in my current memory that I played someone called Tytyl (oh yes) who was a boy.¹ That, currently, is it and not really worth the re-telling. It is, I suppose, possible that this experience was seminal in creating a fascination with the theatre which has always been part of my life. But there is absolutely no way of knowing

The second problem and one which probably comes closer to the heart of things is just what status these memories have even if they do emerge at the top level of my mind. '924786' is, after all, something which, in principle, I can check just as I can rediscover the physical form of my junior school or research the name of its head when I was there to check that it really was someone called Miss Cockhill. In fact I can even now see her signature at the bottom of a couple of school reports carefully preserved by my mother. But what of all the things that it is impossible to check, those areas which can loosely be described as what it 'felt like' to give one's divi number to the cashier or act the part of Tytyl or be a patient in a T.B. sanatorium or fall in love, matters which in time I will have to come to? It is an old problem of course and one to which I have no new answer; the exact status of personal consciousness with respect to the outside, objective world. For what it is worth, I tend to believe that whilst one obviously can remember objective and verifiable facts, images if you like of the external world, it is much more difficult to remember feelings, the subjective products of one's own consciousness. We *think* we can but mostly such memories are false or rather are non-existent in any way which is similar to our memories of the external world. We believe that at such and such a moment we were happy or sad or angry because our memory of the way the world was at that particular moment directs us towards that conclusion. And because we have a good idea of what the general state of happiness or sadness or anger feels like we believe we remember being in such a state at that particular moment. But I doubt the truth of such memories. Or rather I doubt the actual existence of such memory in the same form as '924786' exists somewhere inside my head.

In the research laboratory of British Telecommunication at Martlesham there is, or at least was, a grand project aimed at finding a way to download memory from a human brain into some kind of external storage device. I suspect that some time fairly soon this research or something like it will succeed and it will be possible to discover all the numbers and images and sounds which are in my head or yours. But I do not think that in all this mass of information called memory there will be anything much relating to what it *felt* like. Perhaps that is why such a prospect is not quite the nightmare it may seem to be. Not quite.

The point of this pseudo-philosophical rambling is to define just what I mean by a

¹ Primary research shows that this play indeed exists in five acts; that Tytyl is the main character dressed in scarlet knickerbockers, pale-blue jacket, white stockings and tan shoes; and that other characters include, apart from numerous relatives, some dead, Time, Light, Bread, Fire, Milk, a forest of different trees, "*stars, sicknesses, shades etc.*" and a plot of metaphysical complexity. None of this stimulates the slightest echo of memory. It does suggest that my junior school had depths which I have also forgotten.

'memoir'. It happens that, by chance, I have around me three models for what it might mean, two of which are written by women whose lives intersected with mine in brief and inconsequential ways. One is by a recently-deceased woman called Lorna Sage who I knew moderately well for one year at university and never met again. The second is a memoir of the 1960s by Sheila Rowbotham with whom I had maybe half-a-dozen conversations in that decade. The third is the work of the German author, Sebald.

Sage's memoir is of childhood and before. It is deeply embedded in feelings which, so she implicitly claims, remain clear to her even those from when she was a small child. It is also concerned with the lives and, by inference, the feelings of her relatives even before she was born. It is always well written, often haunting and, I suspect, as speculative as an autobiographical novel. By this I do not mean it is in any sense a lie. I am sure that insofar as it contains verifiable fact then such facts would be verified and that insofar it contains memories of feeling then the author believed that she presented these in a form of truth. It is just that I doubt the possibility of such memories actually existing though I think it is possible that they are appropriate renditions of what such memories might be. *David Copperfield* is a novel and *Bad Blood* is a memoir but I would guess that as recollections of childhood they probably have much in common. Of course I don't know that any more than I know anything about the consciousness of any other person. It is just the way that I see the world and a guess that other people see it in much the same kind of way.

Sheila's work is in a way at the other end of a spectrum to Lorna Sage. She provides an account of a period of time and her life, almost week by week, within that period using a personal diary as a primary source. Feelings exist within this kind of work almost with the same status as verifiable fact. In this particular month of this year, she lived in this place, did this job, took part in this political engagement, loved this person because that is, verifiably, what she did. In that sense it is the work of the historian just as *Bad Blood* is the work of a literary critic; memoir as history rather than as literature.

This is a process which I understand and appreciate. History is by far the biggest category of books on my shelves. But if memoir as history is the kind of approach to which I am most drawn then I also need to push it further and inquire about history as memoir, the extent to which our memory includes not just those matters in which we had direct physical involvement but also any part of history which has in some way become part of one's consciousness indirectly. I should warn you that what follows may become a bit odd as I am not entirely sure where it is all leading; a kind of mental health warning. To start by a concrete example. Any memoir written by a socialist born in 1942 has to take account of the impact of the Vietnam War some twenty-five years later. Similarly the activities of the Irish Republican movement or the American Black Panthers. At some point I would have to write of these as part of my own memories and these memories have to include images of Khe Sanh or Free Derry or Tommy Smith and John Carlos at the Mexican Olympics. These are as real to me as the Grosvenor Square demonstration in early 1968 (which I missed because of a rail strike) or

the student march on the L.S.E. later in that year (in which I did participate). Real because the ubiquity of the second-hand image has penetrated all our consciousness to the point where it is quite difficult to sort out the different categories of fiction, reported factual event and involved factual event. The final scenes of *Casablanca* are fiction; what I know of Khe Sanh is reported fact; the burial of the last Portuguese soldier killed in Angola is something I actually saw. How do I know the last? Well, I have a black-and-white photograph of it, don't I.

Yet, in my consciousness, these 'events' all have much the same kind of presence. It is only a kind of mental filing cabinet which keeps them firmly separate backed by a grid of associated reference points which give _ or could give _ some verifiable backing to the classification. I can buy a video of *Casablanca*; I was not in Vietnam in 1968; an old passport shows that I was in Angola in 1974. On the other hand, I could very easily slip into the belief that I actually was in Grosvenor Square; I know the place, I know the pattern of events; I know what it is like to be in a raging crowd harassed by mounted police. Quite possibly in twenty or so years time I will slip into a hazy belief that I really was there or, if I lose the photograph, forget that I saw a final coffin carried into the military cemetery in Luanda. But I will probably always remember Smith and Carlos on the podium in Mexico. I have a large black-and-white photograph of it on my wall.

If one wants to carry forward these speculations into the future then I suggest that you follow the work of David Deutsch, for example in *The Fabric of Reality*, which I am seventy per cent or so sure is right. But these are memoirs and I am more concerned with what this line of thought also suggests about history.

I should make it clear that I was not at the battles on the Gallipoli peninsula in 1915 nor at the relief of the second siege of Hull in 1643, to take examples whose relevance will become clear. But I do know what The Nec looks like now and I have seen meticulous reconstructions of the fighting in it albeit with the overly-athletic insertion of a young Mel Gibson. In a sense, I 'know' about Gallipoli like I know about Khe Sanh or Grosvenor Square. I 'know' less about sixteenth century Hull than any of these, still less about what happened when one Thomas Rainsborough led a charge out of the city to break up the besiegers' lines. But I still know something, enough to incorporate it into the very, very general set of actual memories and ideas transformed into memory and hopes and fears turned into memory which make me what I am. And I think that this is true of all of us, though for some *Casablanca* is more important than Thomas Rainsborough. History in this way becomes part of a memoir, a part which may in some cases be more important than the things which I actually did.

This may be more true of those born in the twentieth century than any before simply because of the inundation we have undergone of such images and reconstructions. We are in fact probably standing on the very cusp of the moment when real and virtual reality begin to merge into the kind of seamless whole that Deutsch envisages and, because we are uneasily aware of the process, it is disturbing. I would guess that the difference between us and the inhabitants of, say, Athens in 480 B.C. is that they were happier with a seamless transition

between the 'real' world and the world of gods and mythical heroes in the sense that they 'knew' about both and did not see the contradiction between these forms of knowledge that we see. But, whatever. All I really want to flag is that these memoirs often stray off into areas which, strictly speaking, are not part of my real memories at all but only my memory of someone else's memory which in turn may only be their memory of someone else filtered back through as many generations as you will. I believe, if you will, in Greil Marcus' 'lipstick traces'; the part of history which however many times it goes through the washer still stays on the glass.

Finally, there is the possibility that memories are simply fiction, inventions to tide one over lacunae or to spice up an otherwise dreary time of life. Sebald in *Vertigo* offers an example of this from the memoirs of Stendhal in which the author describes how he retained a vivid memory of an Italian town he visited in his youth. Or he did until one day he came across a coloured print of the same town and realised that what he had taken for genuine memory was in fact the image of the print. He had visited the place, once, but his real memory had been submerged, probably erased, by the garish but vivid imagery of the print. Is this true? Well Sebald says that this is what Stendhal wrote but then the rest of his book is a lengthy travel memoir which, on reflection, I would guess is almost wholly fiction. Except that is that the text is decorated with black-and-white photographs purporting to concretise the text. The author describes his experiences in a Veronese pizzeria, there is a fuzzy picture of an Italian pizza restaurant; he annotates a newspaper, there is a newspaper cutting and so on. His publishers classify the book as "travel/fiction/history" which is probably about right. I would guess that Sebald's purpose is to write novels in the form of travel memoirs which involve some elements of genuine memory in the same way that, say, Le Carré's novels contain chunks of genuine travel documentary.

So all these pieces and whatever follows them should be seen as hopelessly lost between these three points; memoir as literary fiction, memoir as history and history as memoir. I think that at some point the technology of the Internet with its hyperlinks, both internal and external, and its merging together of print, sound and pictures may provide a way to bring these different devices together. But for the moment you just have to cope.