

Reflections on re/membering childhood in the making of an autobiographical text

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Abstract: This paper considers three components of the writing of auto/biography - personal experience, memory, and genre - in order to raise issues around each of these in relation to the use of auto/biography in and as research. Having done so, it offers auto/biographical 'fragments' of several childhoods - written at different times, in different contexts, in different genres and for different purposes - as a way of bringing the issues raised into dialogue with questions about what status these fragments might be accorded as 'data' to be used in interpretations of childhood.

Theorising Personal Experience

In 'Temporalities, autobiography and everyday life' Campbell and Harbord (2002) review attempts made by *ethnography* to respond to criticisms of the alleged reification of personal experience. They suggest that the crisis of representation led to the turning of the analytic gaze upon the self in an act of critical reflexivity – as illustrated by such texts as Walkerdine's (1990) autobiographical *Video Replay*.

In what Yates (2010) calls an 'ethnography of the unconscious', Walkerdine combines psychoanalytic, social and cultural theory to explore the contradictory psychosocial processes that shape subjectivities, including the unconscious desires and defences that mediate the experience of everyday life. Campbell and Harbord (*ibid*) refer to these as the 'fictions' on which identity rests, and suggest that such fictions, culled from popular cultural forms, are the ways in which we come to know ourselves and negotiate the various demands made upon us: 'Fantasy is not separable from reality' they say 'and as with a palimpsest, past inscriptions surface in the present' (Campbell & Harbord, 2002, p. 7).

Steedman (1992) makes the same point in her description of combining the chronological framework of history with a psychoanalytic 'mode of storytelling' that 'allows the dream, the wish, the fantasy, to be presented

as evidence' (p.49) - and also in her exploration of the idea that, fundamentally, writing history is an interpersonal process of interaction with the 'spirits' or 'ghostly presences' of historical subjects from the past (p. 71). Past inscriptions, dreams, wishes and fantasies certainly surface in her (1982) book *The Tidy House*, where she shows the identificatory /resistant work little girls are doing through their creative writing at school to 'story themselves' as gendered and classed subjects, by drawing on the discourses of the subjectivities/'destinies' with which they are surrounded in their families and wider neighbourhood settings. The paradox here for Campbell and Harbord (2002) is that in their recourse to 'fantasy' these authors are attempting both to unseat the role of the intellectual/theorist *and* to claim its authority.

Gannon (2006) highlights criticisms from the opposite direction - that is, by identifying an alleged *abandonment* of theory. She cites Probyn (1993), for example, who suggests that what we see are texts in which 'the force of the ontological is impoverished . . . through an insistence on the researcher's self' (p. 5). Later, however, Probyn (2003) appears to reconcile this alleged impoverishment, via the notion of theory itself as an embodied practice. She says, the body is 'a site for the production of knowledge, feelings, emotions and history, all of which are central to subjectivity' (p. 290), and bodies themselves engage in theory making. Probyn cites Zita (1998) in support of this: 'the body is always in theory and is always already deferred to ... Theory-making is a labor of the body' (p. 204). And Probyn elaborates further when she observes that bodies are connected to other bodies in that they exist and acquire meaning in social spaces: 'the body cannot be thought of as a contained entity' she says, 'it is in constant contact with others . . . subjectivity [is] a relational matter' (Probyn, 2003, p. 290).

Others also approach experience in this relational way - like Skeggs (2011), who calls attention to the way in which what she calls 'person-value' is unevenly attributed; and Loveday (2016), who focusses on the ways in which experience is 'socially produced': [I]t provides a way of placing experience at the centre of social analysis without attributing to it some kind of apodictic or essential status' (p. 187). Rather, it allows us to see the ways in which social structures and power relations manifest:

The essence of social being is not encompassed in experience itself but it does only begin to reveal itself through experience which must then be situated in a broader context ... By analysing emotions as a form of social interaction it is possible to see how they are both shaped by latent social structures and also the vehicle through which invisible power dynamics are made present within immediate everyday experience (Loveday, 2016, p. 187).

If certain types of social experience possess an unfinished or open-ended quality, she continues, it is because they may be historically emergent (or residual) or pertain to the experiences of socially ‘muted’ groups. In this analysis then, personal experience (including the affective) is admissible as evidence of the workings of social structures and relations of power. But how do we access it?

Theorising Memory

Any retrospective account of a life relies on memory. After telling a story of his schooldays, Bruner (1994) observed that ‘my account is couched in terms that I could not possibly have known at the time of the encounter, so as doubtless to obscure the preconceptual innocence of the 12-year-old protagonist’ (p. 44).

The point he is making is that the ‘I’ who speaks or writes cannot be assumed to be one and the same as the ‘I’ who is spoken of. As King (2000) observes, texts like Steedman’s (1986) autobiographical *Landscape for a Good Woman* demonstrate what Benjamin describes as ‘the present imperfect translation’ which is ‘ceaselessly pushing for renewed translation’. But the ‘dynamic of self-presencing’ is ‘always and of necessity incomplete’ (Benjamin, 1992, p.146). It is, King continues, ‘Memory as anamnesis, as a continuous process of re-remembering’, so that such narratives reconstruct the events of a life in the light of ‘what wasn’t known then’, highlighting the events which are now, with hindsight, seen to be significant’ (King, 2000, pp. 21-22).

Further, this continuous process of remembering is a *re-remembering* - a creative and imaginative act that brings cross-temporal elements into relationship with each other. Keighley and Pickering (2012) refer to this as the mnemonic *imagination* which is often brought into play in relation to others’ lives as well as one’s own, when constructing a life story; and what Rosenzweig and Tahlen (1998) have called the mnemonic ‘quest for identity’ in which we look to the pasts of others, particularly family members, to explain how we have come to be who we are. In short, remembering is a creative and imaginative act rather than simply a technical activity involving straightforward recall or retrieval.

Theorising Writing/Genre

The final element under consideration in relation to auto/biography is the account as a text – an artefact which is made, which has a particular form. If we theorise the writing of an autobiographical text in the context of the ‘practice turn’, the author is engaged simultaneously in two kinds of making - the making of an artefact and the making of a self.

I have previously used the term ‘poiesis’ in this respect (Goode, 2018). Heidegger referred to poiesis as a kind of ‘bringing forth’, a revealing or

an ‘unconcealment’, thus aligning philosophical truth with the evocative capacity of the poetic voice. He saw poetry as a kind of building, ‘insofar as it opens a relation between language and thinking that lets us “dwell”’ (2017, p. 7). Brown and Milat (2017) also highlight the materialist aspects of such making – poiesis as a form of fabrication which places the process of production on a continuum with such fields as architecture, engineering, materials science etc. Situated within this expanded field of material production, they suggest, poiesis traverses any particular art form, ‘drawing the methods and materials of discrepant productive practices into relation, articulating their common conceptual, formal, and ideological problems across boundaries between specific media, institutional contexts, and disciplinary protocols’ (p. 8).

What I was making (the ‘product’) as I engaged in poiesis in writing about my late father - intersubjectively using the ‘materials’ of time, place, memory, affect, imagination, words, laptop, editors, reviewers etc. - was not only a single text (an artefact called a journal article), or even several texts (poems assembled within the prose of that text), but a self – a ‘made up’ self. Poiesis then is a kind of skilled craft work, similar to what Stanley et al. (2013) call ‘cultural assemblage’. They referred to ‘bringing-into-being’ or ‘cultural assemblage’ in relation to the archival work in which they were engaged on the Olive Schreiner letters. For them, cultural sociology has greatest import not as the development of a particular area called culture but as a means of focusing reflexive analytical attention on ‘the making of the cultural’. And cultural practices involve their own often implicit knowledge-claims, with cultural production encompassing what Mukerji (2007, p. 50) calls the ‘time-making activities’ through which cultural forms eventuate. Further, they suggest that Bennett’s (2007, p. 33) ideas about ‘the *work* of making it’ - that is, the material practices that eventuate cultural production, *and* the work it then does, organized by cultural knowledges and competencies – are both constituents of cultural assemblage. Finally, Stanley and her colleagues make a plea for ‘showing your workings’: ‘Detailed reflexive discussion of how knowledge is produced makes material the activities which constitute the mode of bringing-into-being of both cultural sociology and the cultural assemblages of its concern’ (Stanley et al, 2013, p. 289).

It is in these theoretical contexts, then, that I offer my own assemblage.

A 1920s childhood

A little girl is growing up in a village, in a ‘two-up, two-down’ in the middle of a row of terraced houses down the road from a farm. Every year she goes to the party held for local children by the village teacher – the unmarried daughter of the local land-owning family who lives in the ‘Big House’ further down the street

For some reason, the girl's eldest brother is the frequent object of their father's ill-temper. One day, when he is 14, he discovers what he thinks is the explanation – he is not his father's son and was born illegitimately. He runs away, broadcasting the news to the village at large as an act of revenge on his 'bogus' father. He doesn't anticipate the repercussions for his sister. The teacher tells her in front of the rest of the class that she will never amount to anything. She tells her that she will doubtless end up in the gutter, coming from 'stock like that'. The little girl never attends the annual party again.

Two 1940s childhoods

A young married woman dresses up her two daughters in white satin hand-smocked dresses of the kind worn by the 'little princesses' Elizabeth and Margaret. [Kuhn suggests that for a mother, 'dressing up' a daughter is 'a socially sanctioned opportunity for a woman, in caring for the little girl in herself, to love herself; while at the same time providing her with the opportunity to display, for the public gaze, the praiseworthy qualities of an adult who puts the needs of others above her own: a good mother, in other words - and therefore a good woman' (1995:50-51)]. With her daughters and her husband in tow, the woman walks across the fields to the Big House in a nearby village and bangs on the door. She reminds the woman who opens it of a long-ago conversation. She holds out her hand to show her wedding ring. She presents her beautifully dressed daughters. Fiercely, she invites the woman to 'look at her now'. [She is using what Childers' (2002) refers to as the 'pit bull voice'. It is a voice developed in opposition, as resistance to the look, the words, the tone of voice used by one class with the power to pass judgement publicly on another, to signify their respective places in the 'proper' order of things and to keep the subjugated subject in theirs].

A 1950s childhood

'Is it *today* I start school? ... 'Is it *today*?'

I have come with my mum down the stairs from the two-bedroomed council flat into which my parents, my two sisters and I have recently moved, into my father's newly-opened butcher's shop. On the recommendation of my big sisters' Headmistress where they used to go to school, my aspiring mum chooses to send me not to the nearest school but to a newly-built one a bus-ride, plus a walk, away. Ironically, the area in which the school has just been built is bang in the middle of a deprived, run-down, high crime area. When I am in the juniors, we get a second-hand car. At home, it is a source of great delight. At school it is a source of torment - visible evidence to my classmates that we are 'rich' and that I am a 'posh snob' - thereby setting me permanently apart.

Beaufort Street School

It was so new that the road hadn't been made up.
Coming from where I lived, the bus only took you so far
so you got off and walked a mile or so
then picked your way across pot-holes and cinders
and under the road through a tunnel
whose walls soon bore testimony
to the efforts of teachers still weary since demob
and their bright-eyed fresh young colleagues.
You could check the time as you emerged into the light
by the art deco numberless clock
on the sand-coloured square chimney tower
then run the last stretch up the slope
if you were late
to burst through
the reinforced glass
double doors.

Living furthest away didn't help.
No-one to call for after school
to ask or be asked:
"You playing out?"
Talking posh compounded it
although I hadn't noticed the difference and
having a shop definitely meant you were rich.
I knew that wasn't true
but no point protesting
that the shop was just
'council' like the flat above,
that you shared a bed with your sister
just like them and jumped
just like them
at a knock at the door
in case it was the rent man
who could come in any time
and inspect if he wanted.

It wouldn't have washed in the face of
all the other evidence.
No good waving a rent book
as a membership card
even if I'd known to try it.
The kids who lived nearby

were off-limits too
They were 'Customers' Children'
and we didn't want them
Knowing our Business.

Getting a car finally clinched it.
Not that I boasted but
it was there for all to see
the times I got picked up from school
("Your mam's waiting for you."
"Thanks!") Oblivious
to the nuances in that message.
Still thinking I had friends despite the signs
I'd joyfully set off at a run
and leave them behind
alienating them with each step.
As I clambered in to be carried away
did I even wave to them like the Queen?

Perhaps by then the damage had already been done.
In place of the cold sores and warts and
gentian violet marking the impetigo,
I sported shining eyes shining face shining
hair in bunches and bows or
plaited into door-knockers.
Sensible shoes polished every morning before breakfast,
white socks making daisy petals in summer sandals.
Younger sister to the Little Princesses.

Opportunities to belong were few and far between.
Those woollen hats with plastic alice-band stitched in,
a pom-pom dangling down the back,
the wanting filling you to bursting...?
Too common! How I envied them.

The very morning I was told Your Grandad's Died,
a funeral cortege drove slowly past the window
of the Assembly Hall during prayers
so I *knew* it was him in the coffin.
This was the stuff of life they recognized.
Bliss on both sides to share the drama and the sorrow.

But in general I offered too little

of the kind of adversity that could have united us.
Once I remember the tables half-turned:
No new clothes for Whitsun?
Poor cow!
A ritual dependent I guess now
on local firms' annual two-week break.
For that short period of time they could see
their treats as my deprivation.

It seemed strange to me
only to get new clothes once a year
but it gave no cause to crow.
I did not think myself better after all.

They were superior in so many ways.
Not bad at two-ball up against the wall and
strong enough at turning the skipping rope,
agile too at jumping in when my turn came
to join the line and keep in sync,
competent enough to do
the smart one-two at hop-scotch -
but on the playing field in summer
when they did hand-stands up the bank,
tipped over to arch their bellies
and walk like a crab,
I was too afraid.
Could only get half way up.
Too stiff to bend.
Not reckless enough
to turn the world upside down.

In those years before only
me and the caretaker's daughter
passed the eleven-plus
I was such a slow learner.
Still joining in all the games of kiss-chase across the playground,
only just noticing that I never got caught,
that they had all disappeared to play something else
while I was still bent over hands on knees behind the line,
laughing and out of breath with the excitement of it all...
when there was Roy
talking to me in the playground
three days on the trot.

Blond-haired Roy, skin brown with muck and sun,
muscly already and mouthy with it,
Cock-of-the-walk Roy, a fast runner
began to chase.
But I didn't get chance
to slow down.

On the way home without warning
(although from the shouts of support it was clear
that plans had been hatched)
the Poor Cow got jumped in the tunnel.
Dark-haired Elaine who
knew a thing or two I didn't
Big-for-her-age Elaine who wore a bra,
publicly staking her claim
the way she knew best,
("Get her on the ground!")
bringing me down,
taking fistfuls of hair as a trophy
"That'll teach you to steal my boyfriend!"

Incapacitated by shock and inexperience
and the idea barely-articulated
even to myself that
there had been some mistake.
No chance to explain my innocence,
to say it was only a game
whose rules I didn't know anyway.
Maybe I was coming round to fighting back
when the cry went up?
("Er mam's comin'!")
Someone had been the bearer of bad tidings.
Someone had had that thrill.
Had seen the car and 'told'.

As they legged it smartish it was my turn
to be left behind
relieved and humiliated by rescue.
No bones broken but
my dislocation written in stone
in the tunnel under the road.

The 1950s child didn't develop a pit bull voice but rather an ear attuned

to nuance, complexity, uncertainty. And a voice with no simple answers.

A 1980s childhood

‘Mum’

‘Mm?’

‘I’m bored. Could we play a game together?’

Her instinctive reaction is to make an excuse, to try to get out of it. It isn’t that she dislikes playing with her five year old son. Rather that the short hour she has in which his one-year old brother sleeps has so many conflicting demands upon it. Where does the five-year old come in all these? That depends on whether or not he can be persuaded to do something independently alongside her, rather than something which requires her complete participation.

‘Could we play a game, mum?’

‘You’ve been playing at Alistair’s all morning. Don’t you feel like doing something on your own for a while? How about Spirograph? Or lego?’

‘Well, I will. But couldn’t we just play a short game first?’

She agrees, partly because she feels guilty at fobbing him off so frequently, and partly because she’s impressed by his negotiating skills.

‘OK then, just a short game’

‘Great!’

He races off as she hisses at him to go quietly. If he wakes the baby, there’ll be no game. He slows down and tiptoes up the stairs to his bedroom quiet as a mouse. By the return journey, excitement has overcome caution and he thunders down shouting ‘I’ve got it, Mum!’

‘I hope it’s a short game. I have some other things I need to do before Joe wakes.’

‘Oh yes, it is!’

He comes into the room carrying the game. It’s Monopoly.

‘Oh Alex!’

His face drops. He has just discovered the game at the house of a school friend who has an older brother, and he is hooked. He had pestered to borrow the game from his older cousin and is desperate to play it at every opportunity. She should have guessed.

‘OK. We’ll make a start, but we won’t be able to play a whole game.’
He doesn’t care.

‘*You can be the banker Mum*’ he says with characteristic generosity. Not yet realising that he doesn’t possess the required level of numeracy to be the banker himself, he is being genuinely gracious. The game gets under way. He is excited, totally involved and happy. In the face of this, she gradually let’s go of any vestiges of intention to get other things done, makes the decision to play with him till the baby wakes, and relaxes. She begins to watch him. She looks in turn at his eyes, his ears, his nose, his mouth, his hands, his body. She watches him move and talk. It’s like being in love. With impeccable timing, he picks up a Community Chest card and slowly reads:

‘You-have-won-first-prize-in-a-beauty-competition. Collect ten pounds’

‘Quite right too. You are beautiful’

She has told him so before and he has always accepted her words with a smile. Now he corrects her:

‘Handsome. Boys can’t be beautiful’

She is shocked. And saddened.

‘Can’t they? Why not?’

‘Well, only to their mums,’ he says matter-of-factly, ‘or p’raps to their girlfriends.’

My God, she thinks, when did this happen? She resumes the light chat: ‘Did you have a nice time at Alistair’s this morning then?’

She had been putting Joe down when he returned and had not got round to asking before.

‘Yes! Great!’

People often commented on his sunny nature and enthusiasm. Precious

gifts she could already see being eroded. Perhaps she should be grateful that he had lasted until getting to school before using the word ‘boring’ for the first time ever.

‘What did you do?’

He is momentarily diverted from Monopoly.

‘Well, we played in the garden. And Alistair’s dad let us go in the shed. And we carried lots of things out and made a den for them. And we did some hammering. With a real hammer and real nails’. He watches to see whether she is going to be impressed or disapproving.

‘And did Alistair’s dad help you with that?’

‘Yes,’ he reassures.

‘That sounds great’

He beams gratefully and returns to the game, then continues:

‘Mum?’ A frown on his face.

‘Yes?’

‘Are we God’s men?’

‘Are we what?’

‘God’s men. Alistair asked me if I’m one of God’s men. Am I?’

‘Well, I don’t know. What does it mean to be one of God’s men?’

‘Well, Alistair and his family are. They go to church.’

‘Oh, I see. Well, I guess we aren’t then, ‘cos we don’t go to church do we?’

‘No. Can I, Mum? Can I go to church?’

‘Well, it’s a bit difficult, isn’t it? Daddy and I don’t go. And you’re too young to go on your own. So perhaps you could go when you’re a bit older if you wanted to.’

This sounds pretty unsatisfactory to her, but he accepts it - for the moment. Then:

‘Alistair’s family *pray* to God too. They say thank you to God for their food, ‘cos God gives them their food. Why don’t we, Mum?’

She relegates musings on why God doesn’t give the Ethiopians some food to the adolescent recesses of her mind, and wonders how they got from sex-stereotyping to God in the short space between Park Lane and the Old Kent Road, before addressing this tricky question. Alistair has a lot to answer for.

‘Well, I suppose Alistair’s family say grace and go to Church because they believe in God. Some people do and some people don’t. Daddy and I don’t. That’s why we don’t do those things’

‘Well, I do!’ he says fiercely, ‘I believe in God!’

She heeds the warning and backs off.

‘Do you love? Well, that’s OK.’

The world and the devil take over once more, and he erects several houses, with a little financial advice from the bank. She has the grace to land on one of these properties before curtailing the game at Joe’s urgent bidding.

She knows she deals with these questions of his very uncertainly, but perhaps that is right after all. But then, children can only take so much uncertainty, she debates with herself, as she tries to deter Joe from shoving a stickle brick into her mouth. They need to feel safe too.

It is some days later when the question re-surfaces. They are on a family outing to a local pageant. There is Morris dancing, a pig roast and an appearance by Robin Hood. Alex is very keen on Robin Hood. He has been watching a serialization on TV and has not been slow to draw analogies between the injustices Robin seeks to remedy and the current political climate. The cause of right, and the fighting, appeal in equal measure. As they park the car, Alex begins to give an account of the conversation with Alistair to his father.

‘So you see, I’m not one of God’s men, am I Dad?’

‘Nah,’ says his father, without hesitation or uncertainty, ‘you’re one of Robin Hood’s men.’

Conclusions

The auto/biographical texts assembled here are fragments of three generations of childhoods: the first two comprise a story containing a family secret of illegitimacy, shame and stigma, told by a mother to a daughter who recorded it, initially in a private notebook; the third, a poem about a re/membered episode, written by the daughter – the carrier of the earlier family story - years after an event in her own childhood that crystallised a child's sense of shame and confusion over fitting or not fitting in; and the fourth, a faithful record by a mother of a scene from her son's childhood, written as a short story, shortly after the event, following an evening class on creative writing - illustrating her own fumbling attempts to answer her child's questions about how *he* fitted into the different social worlds he occupied at the time, and through which he was negotiating *his* way. My aim in selecting them was to open a window onto the links between complex processes which constitute the production of subjectivity – formations of a classed and gendered subjectivity, in the first three examples; and in the fourth, issues of ontological security and 'everyday' but hugely significant auto/biographical events that might disrupt, disturb or de-stabilise subject-formation.

What status might we accord each of them? We might consider to begin with whether the fragments possess 'narratability'. Fludernik (2003) says: 'For the narrator, the experientiality of the story resides not merely in the events themselves but in their emotional significance and exemplary nature. The events become tellable precisely because they have started to mean something to the narrator on an emotional level. It is this conjunction of experience reviewed, reorganized, and evaluated that constitutes narrativity' (p. 245). Each certainly has emotional meaning for *me* in autobiographical terms. But what about their status as research 'data'? What might one claim in that sense to reveal, through these texts, about aspects of childhood?

Chapman (2014) cites Gadamer's description of the interface between a life-story teller and an audience as a 'fusion of horizons' (Gadamer, 2004, p. 26). The experience of the narrator and the expectations of the audience, she suggests, merge the interpretation of personal identity being revealed by the story. In other words, there is an interactive co-construction of meaning. And Galloway (2009), author of an autobiographical novel provocatively titled *This Is Not About Me*, seems to echo this when she suggests that if you write a book about someone who had/has a 'real life', the assumption is that verbatim, camera-roll 'truth' is somehow what one ought to expect, whereas a reader from a previous generation would probably be clearer on the idea of a 'version' of something that happened. She accepts that none of us sees neutrally but the important thing for her is to let readers feel what it was like to be there, to allow direct sensation,

an entering into the book's reality. This is not 'fictionalising' but 'methodology' she claims: 'To say, this is in fact what I saw and it's as truthful and down to the wire as I can get it through the skin' (2009, online). These then are suggested ways to assess the claims being made by an *artistic* text: 'veracity' is rendered through *feeling*, texture, detail; it is a 'version' of reality that is being offered; and it is not a life that is seen (and re/membered) *neutrally* but one that is as 'truthful' as it can be made to be.

Should we see an autobiography of childhood as an artistic recreation, then? And if so, what are its tools and techniques? King (2009) talks about the use of 'hindsight' in the representation of childhood in autobiography. In Motion's (2006) *In the blood: A memoir of my childhood*, for example, he recounts a riding accident his mother had which later proved fatal. King shows how, through the use of the present tense, he creates the effect of how he saw the world as a child. The philosopher Wollheim (2005) does the same thing in his *Germans: A memoir of childhood*, which begins with an account of his earliest memory: 'It is early. The hall is dark. Light rims the front door. The panes of violet glass sparkle. The front door has been left open. Now I am standing outside in the sun. I can smell the flowers and the warmed air' (p. 9). The use of the present tense, short sentences and simple, direct language of the senses create the impression of an experience unaltered by time, King observes. Of this opening, Wollheim himself says 'For many years [...] I loved to trace back to this isolated event [...] [my] earliest identifiable self [...] [which] was the real thing, tap it and it rang true' (cited in King, 2009).

Social scientists who use different kinds of narrative writing – autobiography, autoethnography – are certainly familiar with techniques like this. But the idea of the 'real thing'? Which is located in a moment of childhood innocence? As King (2009) reiterates, that moment cannot be reconstructed *in* innocence. The publisher's blurb describes Motion's memoir as having been written 'without the benefit of adult hindsight', but as King observes, his account of his upper-middle class upbringing in rural Essex and experience of prep and boarding schools is inevitably inflected by the understanding of the adult narrator and the sense of loss which his mother's death inaugurated. As Motion's brother himself pointed out, when the text returns to the days immediately following his mother's accident, 'Whatever happens next will interfere with it [...] you'll want to understand it. That'll change it all' (cited in King, 2009).

I was struck, re-reading the autobiographical fragments/cultural artefacts I've assembled here, in the light of King's article, by a kind of prelapsarian impulse in relation to autobiographies of childhood. A desire to re-capture an authentic self before the world and the devil intervened to create what are thus constructed as 'spoiled' adult identities. Not an original thought, perhaps, in relation to constructions of childhood – a very popular

fantasy, in fact. Maybe it's going down the wrong track after all, then, to problematise autobiographical texts in the way I began to do here. Perhaps, like any other qualitative data, they should be read not for what they can tell us about things that happened exactly in the way portrayed or even about the past life of a particular individual, but as Stanley suggests, we should read an auto/biographical text as an example of 'the making of the cultural' - and for its performative qualities – what it *does*.

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