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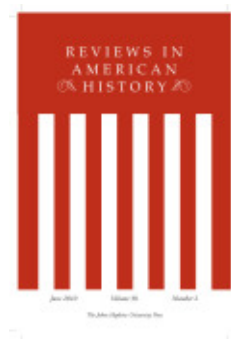
## The Memoir Problem

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## THE MEMOIR PROBLEM

Paula S. Fass

**André Aciman.** *Out of Egypt: A Memoir.* New York: Penguin Books, 1996. 352 pp. \$15.00.

**Carlos Eire.** *Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy.* New York: Free Press, 2003. 400 pp. \$14.00.

**Eva Hoffman.** *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language.* New York: Dutton, 1989. 288 pp. \$15.00.

**Sherwin B. Nuland.** *Lost in America: A Journey With My Father.* New York: Knopf, 2003. 224 pp. \$24.00.

**Richard Pipes.** *Vixi: Memoirs of a Non-Belonger.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. 290 pp. \$30.00 (cloth); \$19.00 (paper).

**Robert B. Stepto.** *Blue as the Lake: A Personal Geography.* New York: Beacon, 1998. 224 pp. \$14.00.

There is a popular old song that includes the line, "Everyone's doing it," which could be applied to the publication boom in memoirs today. From Paris Hilton to the Clintons (Hillary and Bill), from Henry Kissinger to Bob Dylan, the memoir has become the contemporary genre of choice. And since even doctors, dogs, and historians have gotten in on the act, it would be easy to make light of the contemporary publishing fad as a scribble in the winds of fashion. Indeed, a recent article in the *New York Times* has done just this, complaining that the democratization of the genre has provided almost every American with the publishing equivalent of Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes.<sup>1</sup>

The memoir boom has now vibrated in our collective consciousness for well over a decade, and it presents the historian with a special challenge. Unlike literary critics and theorists whose object is to interrogate memoirs as a specialized form of text, historians are accustomed to viewing the memoir as a source.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, for historians the memoir is an important historical tool, and for social historians especially, it provides the appealing voice too often

otherwise missing as we try to reconstruct the lives of ordinary people. Given the often trivial form that it can take and the temptation to dismiss it as a fad, I hope to use the following essay to rescue the memoir and to present its current popularity as a useful, even essential form of writing in our time. I will also suggest something about the memoir as a teaching tool.

The following inquiry into a select number of memoirs sets out to return the memoir to a position of historical seriousness and to argue that its contemporary popularity is in the deepest sense an expression of the widespread engagement with history in the contemporary world. I will suggest that the appeal of the memoir is related to a growing sense of the speed of change and the declining importance of distance on our planet. Indeed, it may be appropriate to ascribe the proliferation of serious memoirs today to a new consciousness of the contingency of time on our shrinking planet as "globalization" threatens an older sense of time and change. This new emphasis on capturing time through print is perhaps also a sensibility created by a pervasive sense of the unpredictability of the self as we are caught up in this new world.

So many of the memoirs I have examined show this deep commitment to capturing the passage of time that it may be possible to conclude that memoir writing today provides insights into how history is experienced today. Like all forms of writing, memoirs are deeply implicated in complex issues of representation, and most of these writers use their reflections to deal with and overcome issues related to the authenticity of the self today. The "memoir problem" is thus widely and significantly inscribed in late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century culture, in its literature, its social developments, and in how we seek to express and define the self in the contemporary world.

At the same time, we should not exaggerate the contemporary quality of this publishing phenomenon or its meaning. John Hodgson, for example, noted in 1993 that, "the last fifty years or so have witnessed the publication of autobiographies of all sizes and degrees of significance."<sup>3</sup> And recent scholarship has made clear that childhood (a favorite site of memoir) and memory are deeply implicated in the eighteenth-century's explorations of the human.

As an initial stab at making sense of the contemporary memoir, I selected from the literally hundreds of recent memoirs half a dozen that engage my own interests as a cultural and social historian who is concerned with transnational identities and global issues. None is written by a very famous person, and they thus participate in the current democratizing of the genre. With the partial exception of Pipes, all of them explore private matters, though these frequently figure in the context of very public issues. Each of the memoirs I have chosen depicts the experience of someone whose sense of self challenges conventional categories of nation, race, or class. As a historian of children, memoirs that explore childhood in some depth or with unusual sensitivity also hold a special appeal for me, although only one of those included here

(Aciman's) is in a form that William Coe has called "the Childhood," that is a memoir that captures only that early life phase.<sup>4</sup> With these two inclinations in mind, I have selected books written not by extraordinary individuals who have helped to fashion the culture or shaped politics, such as a Dylan or Clinton might, but those people whose movement between cultures lies at the core of their identities and whose childhoods were so defined. As it turned out, and probably not entirely to my surprise, most of these memoirs are by academics or intellectuals, and two are by historians. I did not set out to find these as Jeremy Popkin did in an essay in the *American Historical Review* when he reported on historians writing about their own lives. Rather, I found myself fascinated by the experience of people whose lives have been spent engaged with ideas. All of them, except Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation* were published within the past ten years and half within the last five. All of them are serious and significant expressions of the need to make a personal note, to share a memory, to leave a memento, which I take as the essence of the memoir. In so defining the memoir, I freely admit to adopting my own definition, since none of the available attempts to distinguish the memoir from other autobiographical forms seem to have any genuinely common agreement and some analysts make no profound attempt to separate the two.<sup>5</sup> This urge to memorialize has a variety of consequences for how the self is presented, but it is the memory or memories, rather than the self (as in an autobiography) that is being inscribed and preserved. I am not arguing that these memoirs are representative, only that, in their individual ways, they may be coaxed to tell us something about the genre more generally and possibly even about the contemporary urge to examine, define, and explain the self through its form.

If this is what they all share, it is also where similarities end. These very different books vary enormously in style, form, aesthetic aim, and texture. Some ooze with wildly vivid memories, while others seek out elusive secrets. From Richard Pipes's prosaic memories of a long productive life, to André Aciman's poetic invocation of a lost past, Hoffman's dedication to finding a coherent personal voice to the urge to embody a family portrait that drives Robert Stepto, these memoirs suggest the range of possibilities available to the memorialist and the rich choices available to readers and to the historian intrigued by the phenomenon. These are all thoughtful memoirs and it should be said at the outset, that all are well worth reading. But, we are forced immediately to ask, worth reading for what purpose and to what end? Why read the personal at all, except for the sheer delight of meeting someone new or someone you thought you knew whom you now see differently? Since I have not chosen a Clinton or a Kissinger who makes public policy, what is there to be learned from sharing the memories of a marginal (though interesting) and complex (and frequently struggling) human being? <sup>6</sup> I am thus asking quite candidly why we would want to read the democratic memoir, and whether it can tell

us anything that we, as historians, would want to know. I reject the idea that our current fascination is simply another result of inhabiting a society in which we, as an Oprah-primed audience, are eager for the thrills of self-exposure. These books are just too full of good writing, sharp insight, and important reflection to be mere contracts with an exaggerated sensationalism.<sup>7</sup>

Let us begin therefore with what will first attract the attention of a social historian—the attention memoirs give to the social details of life.<sup>8</sup> Even those memoirs least devoted to reconstructing social spaces because they describe a long slice of time or emphasize personal encounters, such as Richard Pipes's, expose large swaths of social life, in his case of bourgeois Jewish Poland before the war and of American academia after the war, not least Harvard University. For the social historian—for whom institutional and social environment matters greatly and who is always searching for ways to delve into the lived experience of the past—such depictions are of considerable interest and moment. Those memoirs that are deeply redolent of place and genuinely pungent, like Carlos Eire's, soak the reader in the smell, taste and sweat of Cuba before, during, and after the Revolution. Eire describes houses, vegetation, cars, streets, and school and household routines with verve. Even if many of these details are imaginative recreations, rather than pure memory, they are a rich source for historians. In the hands of a true artist, such as André Aciman, these matters become Proustian as they convey how ordinary objects are figured as psychological artifacts. The personal, we realize with Aciman, is never far from the social, the self from the family (however defined), and the psychological and the material are entwined in a fateful embrace.

Even books where writers describe themselves as eager to escape from the narrow socio-material world from which they came, as Nuland and Hoffman do—Nuland from the poverty and deprivation of the New York Nudelmans and Hoffmann from the *nouveau petite bourgeoisie* of 1960s Jewish Canadian refugees (though not of her childhood Poland)—convey some sense of what these lives might have been like. There is little wasted devotion in these books, but plenty of emotional affect that beckons the reader to enter a past material space whose meaningfulness (or meaninglessness) is never far from the writer's attempts at self-extrication. With Robert Stepto, the invitation to join in a family reconstruction is irresistible as the social world is spun out of family memories. Stepto builds what he calls in his subtitle a "Personal Geography" that draws the reader further and further into a past created from his own memories of family and his memory of family stories (memories of memories). The result is arresting as we begin by picturing physical geographies, such as cabins along Lake Michigan and city neighborhoods, then move on to visualize and learn about other kinds of mapping—summer routines, the varying textures of African American hair, and the subtle musical ranges of family affection.

The social is always present in the pages of these books, ready to be plucked by historians or students eager to get some sense of the lived past. But this is a past as a personal context only, not a past as a reliable record of place, time, or event. No historian would settle exclusively for such partial views to understand and evaluate the larger subject, and anyone writing about the Cuban Revolution will surely not want to depend on Carlos Eire's deeply biased, and often strange childhood memories that crush together fears of political tyranny with terrors of homosexual rape. Similarly, no one will expect to understand the growing panic for Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland by reading Richard Pipes's description of his family's easy escape. No, the memoir is not a substitute for systematic historical reconstruction, and the personal is never the same as the social. The personal can provide a sense of the unique individual variation on commonly depicted historical experiences. And, of course, the memoir illuminates subjectivity, how the social and political are processed. While this too invites enormous variation, memoirs force the historian to remain aware of the often-silent realm that exists everywhere and always as a function of human consciousness. Disassembling objectively known events and facts, whether about the Holocaust or the Cuban Revolution, the memoir reminds us that people remain the fundamental unit of historical experience and they are sentient beings, not simply masses of faceless humanity.

All the memoirs I read confirm the resilience of this personal vision. They do not shy away or hide from it. The memoir does not pretend to be inclusive, representative, or sufficient. And this is one of the features of today's pervasive culture of memoir writing that needs to be at the center of our attention. Only as we recognize the degree to which the recording of personal experience is understood to be urgent will the memoir's current popularity as well as the nature (and limits) of its utility become apparent. The need to record the personal and to proclaim its meaningfulness is written into the nature of the genre. What I am suggesting cannot easily be reduced to the pervasiveness of a psychotherapeutic perspective, although this is present in many of these memoirs and prominent in Hoffman and Nuland. Nor can it be dismissed as the self-indulgent expression of a narcissistic age, certainly not from the evidence of the memoirs under review here. Instead, the memoir appears to me to have become the response to a heightened sense of the transience of all contemporary experience and a testament to the fragility of human enterprises. That is to say that the memoir is the embodiment of a spreading understanding of the nature of historicity and of historical displacement.

This is perhaps best seen in Robert Stepto's wonderfully delicate evocation of the African American middle class in *Blue As the Lake*. This book registers a different kind of black experience than we normally expect to read about and it insists on its vitality and significance. Indeed, in many ways, *Blue As the Lake* is aimed at readers nurtured on memoirs about Manchild in Harlem. In

its place, Stepto gives us a Midwestern boyhood that begins in the all-black and very middle-class resort town of Idlewild, where his extended family lives deeply interdependent lives, and a boyhood lived in interracial privileges of a solid Chicago neighborhood that is still very much alive with culture and social supports. A bookish light-skinned boy, whose hair turns blond on his summer-tanned arms, Stepto remembers the charms and relaxed refinements of those summers spent *en famille*, at a place where earlier African American intellectuals, like W.E.B. Du Bois and Walter Chestnutt owned property and also vacationed. But, *Blue as the Lake* is about far more than pleasant places in time and insistent family ties. It is about a self constructed out of memories of past generations deeply tied to a long American history, proudly reconstructed for the sake of one's children. This is an African American memoir whose ties to America are fierce and whose claims to a well-earned upper-middle-class position (the memoir begins in Idlewild and ends in Martha's Vineyard) are deep. Stepto has earned his claims to being a professor of *American Studies* (at Yale) not by turning his back on his family's past but by inhabiting it fully.

While Stepto's claims are firm, his is nevertheless and paradoxically a memoir of personal marginality in a culture of impermanence. As an African American, Stepto struggles to claim a specific identity of his own, not one manufactured for him to wear like a store-bought tee shirt, an identity that too often has become synonymous with a caricature of the minority subculture that he is somehow expected to represent. Rejecting loud rap, bad manners, and ready-made slogan-laden tee shirts, Stepto reclaims an authentic voice whose specific timbre is being lost in the ever more insistent whine of modern culture. Like Ralph Ellison, whom he adores, Stepto wants to be seen for who he is and not assigned to a role as a "black man" in a white world.<sup>9</sup> This is a deeply serious book, which denies the reader easy access to stereotypes by a man whose quiet responsibility is embodied in the tone, language, and rhythms of the book, a book which uses swear words so rarely that they function to great effect.

Restrained in so many ways, Stepto is also restrained in his expression of anger, reserving his own for his aging father, who refuses to be engaged in Stepto's adult life. In *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, Carlos Eire, who is a professor of history and religion (also at Yale) expends his anger freely, letting it loose in many directions—toward his father and the treacherous son he adopted from the Havana streets, the Castro regime, school teachers and officials, the cold rationality of Immanuel Kant, President John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert, and insensitive Americans who treat Eire as a homeless "Spic" after he and his brother come to the United States as poor orphans during Operation Pedro Pan. Where Stepto inherits a full past and can replay many chords of family memory, Eire sees that past ripped away as his childhood is severed by historical events. Eire's memoir attempts to reconnect with that past, by bringing it once more to conscious life.



Despite his vivid recollections, Eire is less successful in inviting the reader into his space than Stepto because Eire is on the constant edge of explosion and bellicosity: a man full of the need to show off his *cajones*: a man demanding his boyhood back. *Waiting for Snow in Havana* is filled with incidents that are not likely to have been retained in such elaborate detail in a boy's normal memory, and Eire tells us that they came all at once, hauntingly in a short space of time, as he was writing the memoir. But since Eire never discusses why his memories have been urged to pour forth into present time, the reader must trust that they are a more or less accurate reconstruction of lived experience. In not addressing what work memory is being asked to do in the construction of the self, Eire's book focuses his attention intensely on the assaults on the self from the outside. But like Stepto, Eire's primary goal is to bring that lost world, a discontinuous world, into view, to make it real again. Where Stepto offers himself as an embodiment of that lost world and proposes that readers engage with his sensibilities as a means to connect with it, Eire presents a Cuban child separated from his future, a child left behind in another world.<sup>10</sup>

The repeated evocations of a fragile past and a lost world reconstructed through the personal voice of the memoir should make us once again take note of the pervasiveness of considerations of memory in our current historical moment. This is not, I would argue, simply a disciplinary fact, but a significant claim on our present consciousness. It suggests something about how sensitive people are responding to the recent past, since even fairly recent events have become part of a lost world.

These worlds left behind are also the themes of Hoffman's and Nuland's memoirs. Different as these are from each other, both consciously play with the idea of a "lost" world in their titles (*Lost in Translation*, *Lost in America*) and both set out to capture those worlds in print, not because they are precious but because they are deep and deeply disturbed parts of the self. Both books are acts of excavation and each rests firmly on psychoanalytic frameworks aimed at the creation of a more whole self through an effective reconnection with the traumatic. Both authors are highly successful examples of American social mobility, each rising from immigrant roots to positions of accomplishment in their fields, Hoffman as an editor at the *New York Times Book Review* and Nuland as a professor of medicine (once again, at Yale). But, like previous representations about the rise to success of immigrants or outsiders, perhaps best exemplified in the lightly fictionalized autobiographical novel *The Rise of David Levinsky*, and Richard Rodriguez's memoir *Hunger for Memory*, these acts of self-fashioning exact their psychic costs.<sup>11</sup>

Eva Hoffman's trauma results from her physical and cultural displacement (piled on previous family trauma) as the Poland of her childhood is replaced by the strange new world of North America, whose language, habits and behavioral styles she must master, first in Canada and then in the United



States. For Nuland, the displacement is social, as immigrant poverty and family abuse is replaced with social acceptance and academic distinction. Both Hoffman and Nuland initially run from their families only to find that they and the past of which they are part are still buried in their psyches—lost but not forgotten and still capable of injury.

*Lost in Translation* is a little gem of a memoir based on the technique of self-revelation through intense introspection. The strange (to her) world that Hoffman observes after she leaves Poland is carefully and beautifully described in language that is sure and searching. We feel like witnesses to the events, even though we see them through Eva's eyes exclusively. And we see Eva observing her new world and revealing herself at the same time. This is a memoir of self-reflection and of self-observation that never comes off as self-absorption. Instead, there is exacting observation of others and the drive for mutual revelation. "My American Friends and I are forced to engage in an experiment that is relatively rare; we want to enter into the very textures, the motions and flavors of each other's vastly different subjectivities. . . . My American Friends are so many, and they share so many assumptions that are quite invisible to them, precisely because they're shared. These are assumptions about the most fundamental human transactions, subcutaneous beliefs, which lie just below the stratum of political opinion or overt ideology. . . . To remain outside such common agreements is to remain outside reality itself—and if I'm not to risk a mild cultural schizophrenia. . . . I have to translate myself. But, if I'm to achieve this without becoming assimilated—that is, absorbed—by my new world, the translation has to be careful, the turns of the psyche unforced" (pp. 210–11). Hoffman's translation of self is, of course, finally what she offers the readers. But why should we care to read her, apart from the pleasures of language and observation she provides. What makes this worthwhile to us?

Hoffman's very specific loss is hardly common or usual, but in a world of global migrations, Hoffman's tale of transplantation provides a subtle and searching sense of the ways in which children and adults can expect to experience the displacements of language and the self that is created through language. But Hoffman is not only an immigrant whose conscious observations about cultural displacement are worthy of our attention at a time when migrations are becoming a world-wide phenomenon, but also the child of Holocaust survivors who were painfully but successfully hidden in an attic in Eastern Poland. Hoffman's very life and her subsequent career hang ever so precariously by an unlikely historical thread. Hoffman was born and spent her childhood in Krakow until she was thirteen when the return of strident anti-Semitism finally forced most of the remaining Polish Jews to flee. And while Hoffman understands this, she sees her own departure as taking place very much against her will. Hoffman loved her Poland and her Polish childhood, and it provides her with a difficult but deeply authentic self that she

preserves in the very best (first) part of her book, where the joys and struggles of her early life are remembered as if in a bubble of transient delight. As it is for Eire, that childhood self is gone, but unlike Eire, Hoffman maintains it inside of herself throughout the subsequent adventures as a measure against which she sees, reads, and reflects upon her strange new world, her relationship to it, and the differences between her earlier and later selves. Hoffman makes this into a fruitful mode of perception and way of operating in the world, and we, the readers, come to see with her and appreciate what we see because she speaks with a fresh and probing voice.

*Lost in Translation* thus becomes very much a memoir for our times as it explores worlds left behind, times transformed, and individuals struggling to make themselves meaningful and coherent in spite of it all. And this is a commentary on both time and history. Instead of offering continuity, time seems today to represent the opposite—abrupt and permanent change, and an absence of commonality. Hoffman clearly speaks to those interested in language and how language constitutes consciousness, but she also speaks to an America in which languages are likely to collide on the streets of cities and in schools and sports arenas. In a world in which distance seems to have shrunk and formerly distant people to have become neighbors, we can take Hoffman's unusually acute self observations as a point of departure for an understanding of a world in which the past of one person may not be the past of another, though they may now both be joined in a single social world. In Hoffman's telling, the past is fragile and personally alive, but utterly meaningless as a common denominator. The memoir thus becomes the means to establish the foundations for a self that must provide individually the grounding that seems not to be available in an objective and shared history, as the self becomes both the object and the subject of memory.

Sherwin Nuland's confessional memoir is more tightly focused than others reviewed here on the pain of his past and more specifically on the pain of an oppressive father. His father is both weird and tyrannical, and once Nuland goes to medical school at Yale, he finally diagnoses his father as having suffered from the symptoms of untreated syphilis. He keeps this knowledge secret, and it, as well as the secret of his wretched childhood, lies at the heart of his memoir. Nuland defines his memories through a scrim of disgust. "Of course, the sense of being different that pervaded my perception of our family did not come from Pop alone. The difficulties with English, the lack of assimilation, the looming aura of yet another tragedy to come, the perpetual envelopment in pessimism—all of these had been shared by Lutsky [his mother's family] and Nudelman adults since my earliest awareness of them. Though my father was the exemplar, I viewed with shame everyone who had brought me up" (p. 195). Pain and shame were the deep stimulants to achievements for Nuland, academic achievements that would take him beyond his father's reach and

way outside of his father's circumscribed social realm of immigrant poverty and deprivation. Smart and ambitious, Shep Nudelman becomes Sherwin Nuland (new land), reborn, renamed, and refashioned as an American success story. In its attempts to recapture a lost world, this book is full of the Yiddish speech patterns and Yiddish names of Nuland's relatives, but the big loss at its center is of Nuland's father, Meyer Nudelman, a failed husband, a failed businessman, a frightful father. This was a man whom Nuland describes most simply as "Meyer Nudelman, which meant that inevitably there would be problems" (p. 201). This is a son's ambivalent and troubled memoir of a father whose presence was a curse, but whose absence is hardly better.

Nuland is today a successful professor and author of a widely read and admired book on the physical process of death and dying.<sup>12</sup> If that book was about the transience of the flesh, he writes here about another kind of transience—the transience of time. If the body sickens and dies, what happens to the memories of the past? Do they sicken and die too? Nuland was himself badly sickened by his memories at a strategic point in his life when his sense of guilt about his father and a renewed sense of loss occasioned by an approaching divorce, impeded his further ascent into successful adult achievement. Instead of moving forward through time, he collapses and is eventually forced to move backward. Memories left to die had made Nuland ill. When he resurrected them through therapy, he was able to recover. Here he recreates them as a document of health and of life. We come to understand that only by stopping the awful, deathly flow of the past into oblivion can the human spirit continue to prosper.

The sense that time cannot be allowed to disappear without being recorded holds a critical key to all these memoirs. They are a cry against the impersonality of time. As forms of self expression, the memoir enshrines the past, not as better (surely this was not the case for Nuland) or even as purer (the clichéd dream of childhood) but simply as real. The memoir makes the invisible world of memories visible and the past important. The memoir confirms history. It is witness to a passing past. It refuses to let it move on unnoticed and unremarked upon. This is true even in the most conventional contemporary memoirs and the most lyrical and imaginative.

Nuland, Hoffman, Eire and Stepto's careers are all distinguished and important to them, but largely marginal to their books. Their inner lives and childhoods are rich apart from the success of their careers. But careers are often the very reason for the existence of memoirs, the basis for readers' interest and of the publisher's commitment to the project. For Richard Pipes, whose career as a historian of Russia and as an advisor to presidents is the source of our interest and of his literary importance, the memoir is a means to help define the public record. And in *Vixi*, Pipes uses this occasion in many traditional ways. He tells us whom and what he knew, a matter of some consequence to

Cold War strategy during the Reagan Administration when Pipes helped to formulate the hard line against the Soviet Union that was known as National Security Decision Directive 75. Before that, Pipes had been a member of Team B—a group of policy experts who argued that the United States should be prepared to use nuclear weapons in the event of Soviet aggression. Thus as a mover and shaker, Pipes's memoir allows him to provide traditional kinds of useful historical information. And while Pipes supplies the political historian with bits and pieces of insider information about who was goading whose ox and how things really happened (that will need to be weighed against the recollection of others by political historians), this material seems unexpectedly pallid.

Much more revealing than the grand "I have lived" of his title is his subtitle, *The Memoir of a Non-Belonger*, for the real drama in this memoir lies elsewhere than in the overt demonstrations of power. It lies in the honors and encomia that a Polish immigrant receives in the country from which he was forced to flee and in the academic accolades received by an old man who naively started his college life at tiny Muskegan College. In that sense, this is the "outsider as insider" book, the tale of a man of pluck, wit, and intelligence who lands finally at the top of the academic hierarchy and with his hands on the engines of international decision-making about war, peace, and human survival. Pipes is eager to justify himself and the decisions he made in these respects, but seems amazed that he has something to tell. There is a charming quality about Pipes's voice throughout the book, as he seems to ride unknowingly toward success. We are reminded here of Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, the *locus classicus* for the tale of the innocent traveler who finds himself unexpectedly knowing all the right people by being at the right place at the right time.<sup>13</sup> Pipes is the man who will exact his pound of flesh from a Soviet tyranny which—like the Nazis from whom his family fled and therefore allowed his life to become noteworthy—is a life-denying force, but who himself remains guileless.

As a result, Pipes's engaging memoir tells us a little bit about Warsaw, Poland, a little bit about Cambridge, Massachusetts, and a little bit about Washington, D. C. It tells us a lot more about the unexpected twists in the passage of time and the changes in circumstance that this brings. Time itself is the author of change, while Pipes rides time through two horrific empires toward a more just present by refusing to belong to anything other than himself. In the end, this is not, however, a triumphal story. Of course, Pipes was right all along because he relied on a sure and dependable self. But, even though Pipes witnesses this movement toward greater freedom and justice and American world victory, he has seen too much change to confidently predict an end to history.

And time is the trope that drives André Aciman's wondrously imaginative, *Out of Egypt*. From its title's acknowledgement of the Jewish exodus several

thousand years ago, to the passage of time in the book as members of Aciman's extended family, bit by bit, are forced to flee from a modern Egypt in which Jews are not wanted, to the explicit invocation of Proust, the allusion to past time is what connects, infuses, and inspires this extraordinary illustration of the art of memoir. Based on the acute observations of a precocious child enchanted by his surroundings, and subsequently augmented by interviews with surviving family members, *Out of Egypt* is a boy's memory of a family assemblage, of meals with and gossip among an extended clan of irascible, sometimes haughty, sometimes tricky, but always engaging Jewish Egyptian businessmen and the women who run the family. These characters are finely and convincingly portrayed, while the reader is immersed in their milieu, discovering them with the young André, who is not so much learning about himself (though this happens naturally) as learning about the world through his family. He learns about tradesmen, about officials, about competition and solidarity, and about the world outside of his family circle through the servants in the family. And we learn how these Alexandrian Jews are different from the Egyptians around them and among whom they live privileged lives. This clan group lays claim to Italian background, thus they see themselves as European and they all speak French, though most are actually from Turkey, having come to Egypt to follow the illusion of a main chance at wealth. Rendered with the kind of precision that only a deeply educated and fully formed literate adult could bring, Aciman nevertheless is able to recapture the tempo of childhood experience and the hierarchy of childish values. It is a remarkable feat that is enchanting without being either nostalgic or romantic. These are real people, often silly and immature, sometimes exploitative and bullying, but all are lovingly rendered.

Although they are sometimes called the "People of the Book," the Jews in Aciman's story are bound together not by books or even religious rituals, but by a shared history. It is the long history of the Jews and their deep well of historical memories in which Aciman floats his story of a family in a place not usually associated with modern Jewish life. Aciman resurrects this small corner of Jewish experience and attaches it to a much longer memory. This is not the post-Holocaust world of Hoffman's Poland or the immigrant New York Jewish milieu of Nuland's childhood, but a different tale, flavored with exotic spices, connected nevertheless to these others through a sense of how time and displacement has affected the Jews through a long past.

Of course, it is not only Jews who are displaced, but it is Jews who illustrate this displacement most thoroughly. Stepto is also displaced, and so is Eire. All these memoirs concern childhoods lived in specific places and times, and this is where the social historian gathers her best materials, but in the end the agitating force driving each rememberer to write is a sense of historical impermanence and the tenacity of memory. Memory and history are thus at

the root of this literary phenomenon, each offered up to a world where history is insecurely connected to the present and thus individual memories are required to provide a more certain foundation for the self.

The concept of alienation used to be viewed as the guiding spirit of American literature, a nation in which the self and the society were said to be at odds with each other since Herman Melville's time. But these memoirs give no hint of alienation, even when the self and the society are clearly coming from very different places as in Hoffman. Instead, the memoirs grow from the desire to imprint on paper memories of another time (and sometimes of another place). These memoirs remind us that we inhabit a globalizing world, a world in which distance has come not to matter very much, but where places nevertheless remain discontinuous. Eire is swept up in an airplane in Havana and lands in an altogether different world in Florida where he is first sheltered by a kind Jewish family. Pipes leaves Nazi-occupied Poland and winds up in Muskegan, Ohio. Hoffman moves from Krakow to British Columbia and then to Texas enroute to Cambridge. Aciman leaves Alexandria for London, Paris, and New York; his family remains scattered in many places. The world has become very small and history very fast, but childhood still slowly replays itself in our heads. For this reason, I think the contemporary memoir is ultimately about time itself and the responsibilities that it imposes on those who understand something about its secrets. "Time," Eva Hoffman writes at the very end of *Lost in Translation*, "pulses through my blood like a river" (p. 280).

The six memoirs that I have discussed have entirely different centers and provide very different selves to the reader. Hoffman's memoir is about self-formation through intercultural dialogue; Nuland's about how the self is formed in relation to the father both when he is present and when he is absent; Pipes's self grows through a gradual education in the ways of the world; Eire develops a self through emotional separation; Stepto's grows from deep family affiliation; while Aciman develops a self as the engaged observer and chronicler of the family. There is ample room for self-expression here, but expression itself is not problematized and the self is not alienated (though it may be wounded). Instead, the self is used to create a monument to a past time by sharing its memories. It is a responsible self that serves larger purposes. These memories have become precious objects of personal obligation in a world where time and place seem ever more fluid.

Does this mean that we are in an age when history matters because time matters more than it once did since it leaves so many urgent memories? Or that time has become increasingly fractured and personalized? Does it mean that these very selective and highly self-reflective intellectuals are onto something wider in the culture? I simply do not know. The selection I have made has obviously biased my sample, but it is nevertheless revealing that within it, time and historical change should play such central and controlling roles.

All of these writers wrestled with a history that not only constituted their own selves, but one that has now disappeared. In using the self to testify to that past, these writers are engaged in a form of history-writing and making a profound decision that requires some examination.

All highly literate people (three of them schooled in literature, two in history) these memoirists are no doubt aware of the degree to which an awareness of time (and indeed of personal time) has been the subtext of modern twentieth-century literature since the heyday of Joyce, Proust, and Mann. It is probable that this knowledge of the modern tradition governs their own literary endeavors. As modern men and women, they are engaged in a conversation with the literature of the twentieth century; Aciman surely is in a dialogue with Proust and Steptoe with Ellison, while Nuland may be more aware of Henry Roth than he acknowledges.<sup>14</sup> Each has read fiction seriously, but in the end has chosen a different form. And this choice raises the question of why the memoir has become such an important late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first century phenomenon.

There was a time, not so long ago, when American intellectuals (including historians and literary scholars) were ambitious to write what was called "the great American novel," as if the fictional form was the most appropriate for self-expression and cultural importance. In choosing today to write the memoir, are these same people just being more direct by admitting that many novels were never much more than forms of autobiography as we have come to learn about the later Henry Roth, for example?<sup>15</sup> Or is the current memoir just a different form of novel writing, allowing its authors to embellish their lives, give them focus, and narrative direction, while they give themselves a voice? As early as 1709, Richard Steele wrote in the *Tatler*: "[T]he word *Memoir* is French for a novel."<sup>16</sup> The line between fiction and memoir is complex and meandering as Philip Roth has insistently demonstrated throughout a long career, not least in a masterpiece like *Patrimony* (a memoir) and more recently, if less successfully, in a novel *The Plot Against America* (2004), which rewrites history. And it is revealing that a local adult evening school near Berkeley is offering a course on writing memoirs much as an earlier one would have offered a course in fiction writing.<sup>17</sup> Writing about the self, one could argue, takes whatever form is commercially viable. And at a time when publishers' suffer from memoir lust, writing about the self through this form makes sense.

Still, we cannot leave it at that. There is more at stake in all of this than merely a question of form, and it is a question of considerable moment for historians. The memoir, like the novel, embellishes and trims as the adult writer rearranges childhood and other memories and provides carefully chosen details. But while the novelist looks for a voice with which to tell some larger truth, the memoirist seeks to give voice to a historical experience or episode that he cannot forget. The novelist may cull details from the past, from



newspapers, from historians, even from diaries, but the fiction writer cannot remember that past as the memoirist does. Each may be urged on by serious commitments, but it is the urgency of and the responsibility for the memory that defines what is serious for the memoirist.

The memoir is not just an engagement with history, as is the case with Roth's most recent novel. It also becomes a source for history writing, something *The Plot Against America* will never become. History grows and develops from people's memories, and historians in the future will use these memoirs (carefully) to reconstruct it. Our students need to know the difference and make this distinction. Most of us have had the experience (unfortunately quite often) of students referring to monographs and other history books we assign as "novels" and most of us cringe at this miscomprehension. The memoir is the form where these confusions are very likely to come to a head, and if we want to use them now or in the future, we will need to be able to tell our students how memoirs and novels differ. If the memoir can pretend to see through the eyes of a child as Aciman does so effectively, and if it can rely on shaky memories as Eire does, how does it differ from Roth's *Call it Sleep*, which does much the same thing?

The difference I would insist is one of responsibility. The memoir, like the novel, seeks to tell a kind of truth, but it is a truth that depends finally on an honest desire to bring back a real experience. With all their literary contrivances and even some faux memories, memoir writers seek to recapture the fleeting past and to stake a claim to its reality. The memoirs I read are intent on trying to coax memory to deliver as much of this tricky substance as possible so that it can be imprinted on the page. Obviously, some memories are bogus, and some memoirs can even be entirely fabricated, and the lust to write and the desire for fame can exact deep costs for historical accuracy.<sup>18</sup> But the writers under review write as if the integrity of the past mattered to themselves and to others. By writing memoirs, they have chosen to make the facts of the past a real possibility to themselves and to us. They have chosen to remember because remembering is what they need to do in order to make a difference to themselves, the selves they are searching out and the selves they are revealing to us.<sup>19</sup> It is these memories from a different time, a time that today seems to be moving ever more quickly away from the present, and these diverse pasts more than ever disconnected from the present and in flight from memory, that the memoir aims to catch and keep alive in the fleeting times within which we are all caught up. Today, as more and more pasts are disappearing into a whirlwind of chaotic remainderings, and the United States becomes the place to which people from elsewhere try to reconstitute themselves around a personal past, we can expect more and more serious writers to seek out fragile and lost histories in memoir form. Indeed, the flowering of memoir may represent the sense of the loss of a deeply experienced common history.

And if this is so, it speaks deeply to us as American historians struggling to rethink, reframe, and re-imagine the contours of our subject.

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1. Millie, Barbara Bush's dog, famously wrote her memoir as *Millie's Book*. As *Dictated to Barbara Bush* (1990). For reviews of historians who have written memoirs, autobiographies, or engaged in similar kinds of endeavors, see Jeremy D. Popkin, "Historians on the Autobiographical Frontier," *American Historical Review* 104 (June 1999): 725-748; and Michael Dintenfass, "Crafting Historians' Lives: Autobiographical Constructions and Disciplinary Discourses After the Linguistic Turn," *Journal of Modern History* 71 (March 1999): 150-65. On mockery of this fad, see, for example, "Gone With the Wind? No Way." *Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 2004, p. I1; and William Grimes, "We All Have a Life. Must We All Write About It?" *New York Times*, March 25, 2005, p. B25.

2. See, for example, Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, trans., Katherine Leary (1989); Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (1985), and Eakin, ed., *American Autobiography: Retrospect and Prospect* (1991); Richard N. Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (1984); Michael Gorra, "The Autobiographical Turn," *Transition* 68 (1995): 143-53; Betty Bergland, "Autobiography and American Culture," *American Quarterly* 45 (Sept. 1993): 445-58; Juliana Spahr, "Resignifying Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*," *American Literature* 68 (March 1996): 139-59. An important exception to this is the historians who have been thinking about issues of memory and history. See for example, Susan A. Crane, "Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory," *American Historical Review* 102 (December 1997): 1372-85.

3. John Hodgson, *The Search for the Self: Childhood in Autobiography and Fiction Since 1940* (1993).

4. Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, 7. He notes: "By definition, the Childhood is an extended form, carrying the self from first consciousness to full maturity over an allotted span (normally of some fifteen to eighteen years" (p. 7).

5. Lejeune has made the most systematic attempt to distinguish among forms of autobiographical writing. In his view, the memoir is a comment on something outside the self but also part of the self. An autobiography emphasizes a chronology of the self. In these terms, Pipes's book is an autobiography, but he himself calls it a memoir.

6. William Jefferson Clinton, *My Life* (2004); Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (1979), *Years of Upheaval* (1982), and *Years of Renewal* (1999).

7. For a contrary view see, David Blackburn, "How was it for you?" *London Review of Books*, October 30, 1997, pp. 23-4.

8. In commenting on his own drive to write memoirs, Alfred Kazin noted: "From the beginning I wanted physical images, straight from the belly. In memory again . . . I step off the train at Rockaway Avenue, smell the leak out of the men's room, then the pickles from the stand just below the subway steps." "The Past Breaks Out," in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (1987), 91.

9. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1947; reprint, 1972).

10. In terms of Coe's definition, Eire's deep probing of his childhood is still not "the Childhood," since it describes a childhood that did not mature.

11. Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917; reprint, 1993); Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, *An Autobiography* (1982).

12. Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter* (1994).

13. Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings* (1986).

14. Some literary critics argue that because of the presentation of a coherent self, the memoir or autobiography is always an old-fashioned literary device and can never become truly post-modern. See, Spahr, "Resignifying Autobiography." Clearly, I am arguing that these writers are very much in the flow of twentieth-century cultural trends. Henry Roth, *Call It Sleep* (1934; reprint, 1962).

15. Henry Roth, *Mercy of a Rude Stream*, vol. I, *A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park* (1994), and vol. II, *A Diving Rock on the Hudson* (1995). For the controversy over its publication, see Robin Pogrebin, "A Deep Silence of 60 Years, And an Even Older Secret," *New York Times*, May 16, 1998, p. B9.

16. Cited in Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller*, 3.

17. According to "Gone With the Wind," these courses are proliferating rapidly as all kinds of people are trying to write and then to publish or self-publish their autobiographies and memoirs. The article goes on to describe how technological advances and dozens of small publishing houses have altered the landscape. According to the reporter, Catherine Saillant, most of the students at these courses are women, and many of the students are older, ranging in age from 50 to 92.

18. This was infamously the case for Benjamin Wilkomirski's faked Holocaust memoir, see *Fragments: Memories of A Wartime Childhood*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway (1997).

19. See also Jacqueline Dowd Hall's fine exploration of how historians can use the differences between memoir and history and not dismiss the former as unworthy of history, "'You Must Remember This': Autobiography as Social Critique," *Journal of American History* 85 (September 1998): 439–65.