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**exploring genres - I**

Going Public:
A Decade of Australian Autobiography

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**Autobiography is based on a paradox.** It is a generic representation of identity, but identity and genre appear to be antithetical. If we conventionally think of our identity as unique (singular, autonomous and self-made), how then can the presentation of that identity be generic? How, when narrating our lives, can we be both singular and understandable? Does narrating a life presuppose a way of writing (that is, a genre) that will make it recognizable as a story of a life? And how individual can we be, given that we are social animals? We live in families, form attachments and belong to institutions. How much is identity a case of identifying with others?

These questions call to mind the “relational turn” in the literature on life writing in the last couple of decades, whereby selves are not seen as self-sufficient, autonomous and self-determined. Rather, selves exist in relation to others. Such thinking stems in large part from the work of feminist literary critics who critiqued the autonomous self as a patriarchal construct and argued that the female self (and therefore women’s autobiography) developed and operated in a relational way, taking into account the subjectivities of others. More recently, critics such as Nancy K. Miller and Paul John Eakin have argued for the intersubjective nature of subjectivity and autobiography generally. Relational models of the self suggest that autobiography is a kind of transaction, a telling of others’ stories as much as one’s own.

Not surprisingly, trust is an important feature of such auto/biographical transactions. The element of trust required in a reader is also central. And as readers, we can sometimes misrecognise the autobiographical self in disconcerting ways, as the following anecdote will show. On the cover of Craig Sherborne’s memoir, *Hoi Polloi* (2005), there is a photograph, circa the late 1960s, of a boy holding a small bottle of beer and standing outside the doors of a pub. It was, I thought, perfect for the book, showing the author outside his parents’ hotel in the late 1960s. The bottle of beer was a suitably raffish illustration of the book’s acerbic account of its author’s childhood. Shortly after reviewing *Hoi Polloi* for ABR (September 2005), I commented to Craig Sherborne that I liked the photograph of him on the cover of his book. A mutual friend, who was present, agreed that it was a marvellous photograph. Craig also agreed, but pointed out that it was not a photograph of him. The publishers had bought the rights to reproduce it on the cover of his book from a photograph library.

The photograph appeared authentic, but it was not an image of the book’s author. Finding Sherborne’s biographical details at the back of an earlier book by him, I see now that he was born in 1962. The boy in the picture looks about ten years old, which would date the photograph (had it been of Sherborne) to around 1972. The image looks older than that. I am momentarily piqued by my own credulity. One should never jump to conclusions about autobiographical texts.

This experience of misrecognition in autobiography suggests that as readers we are too keen to
admit to the authenticity of autobiographical writing. Whatever you tell us, we readers seem to say to autobiographers, we'll believe you. Indeed, you don't even have to attest to anything. Black Inc. didn't say that the photograph on the cover of Hoi Polloi is of Sherborne. We'll make it up for ourselves without encouragement.

This tendency can be explained away as a feature of inexperienced reading. But readers who hope to find textual representations of identity within a literary text (especially an autobiographical one) are not wholly to be derided. Reading autobiography as if it unambiguously tells the truth about the narrating subject ignores issues of identity and textuality such as those touched on above. But one can read with a "detached curiosity about, rather than an eager sympathy for, the autobiographical subject," as Tim Rowse (2004) puts it, without wholly stripping the autobiographical text of affect or authority. The "production of truth and authority" in autobiography, as Gillian Whitlock shows repeatedly in The Intimate Empire (2000), is not so much an exercise in capturing the self as capturing the reader, and the notion of authority suggests a public domain within which to be authoritative. In this respect, the tension found in autobiography between identity and genre is a reflection of its need to constitute "private" stories in the "public" domain. As Whitlock demonstrates, this domain is neither universal nor ahistorical, but constituted variously by competing interests, contexts and reading practices.

The issue of authority is real, as can be seen in the case of the best-selling memoir Forbidden Love (2003), by Norma Khouri. The removal of that work from the country's bookshelves demonstrates that authorising an autobiography is neither simple nor lacking in dangers. Before July 2004, when Malcolm Knox, the literary editor of the Sydney Morning Herald, exposed both Forbidden Love and its author as fakes, the memoir was highly successful, selling 200,000 copies in Australia, and had been published in fifteen countries. Forbidden Love was purportedly a memoir regarding an "honour" killing of the author's best friend in Jordan. Knox's story told of Khouri's real identity and the fact that she had lived in the Chicago area during the time of the events narrated in Forbidden Love. Knox and Caroline Overington won a Walkley Award for their investigative journalism, while Khouri and her sequel, "A Matter of Trust," were dropped by her publisher, Random House.

In part, the hoax was a success due to Khouri's public performance of her assumed identity in the media and at literary festivals. According to Knox, "Khouri [. . .] spent much of 2003 retelling [her] story, reducing listeners to tears and anger, in interviews, bookshops and at other events" (Knox 2004). But, as Whitlock points out, Khouri's performance was also literary, and genre played an important role in that Khouri's work clearly addressed a willing market (post-9/11) through the recognisable subgenre of "proto feminist writing about the Middle East" (169). As Whitlock argues, there are important ramifications from the misrecognition of autobiography:

From the Khouri hoax we can learn, to our embarrassment and shame, that we may be especially vulnerable to propaganda in the form of testimony, and capable of an unquestioning acceptance of certain categories of information about other cultures we know little about if it takes certain generic forms of address. (173)

Such vulnerability meant that considerable damage was done to testimonial literature.

A more ambiguous controversy surrounding an autobiographical text regards the reception of Cheryl Kernot's memoir, Speaking for Myself Again: Four Years with Labor and Beyond (2002). The ex-federal parliamentarian was accused by the journalist Laurie Oakes of offering a fatally incomplete, indeed misrepresentative, text by failing to declare her affair with her fellow parliamentarian Gareth Evans. The arguments regarding Oakes's "outing" of Kernot are not overwhelming. In particular, the assertion that Kernot's decision to leave the Democrats to join the Labor Party was influenced by her relationship with Evans cannot be proved, and is probably sexist. Oakes's controversial assertion of the media's right to determine the representation of a public figure is, ironically, one of the features of
Both Speaking for Myself Again and Forbidden Love unambiguously show, in their different ways, that autobiography operates within the public sphere. It is a genre that deals in literary and extra-literary forms of authority. In the ten years since the publication of my book on autobiography, Artful Histories: Modern Australian Autobiography (1996), it strikes me that there is something different about the way autobiographies are written and read. Autobiography has become more visible in, and important to, our conception of a "public culture." At the same time, it is clear that autobiography's significance as a literary form is also more pronounced. In this essay, I want to consider some of the issues and effects (both "public" and "literary") of autobiographers "going public."

Firstly, the literary culture has changed. As a number of commentators (including Gillian Whitlock, David Carter and Drusilla Modjeska) have noted, a major development in Australian literature is the rise of non-fiction as the pre-eminently literary category. This turn to non-fiction illustrates a new self-consciousness concerning the public condition of literary culture in Australia. In particular, autobiography has made a powerful claim for itself as a form of public speech. Private stories are written and read in ways that accept the rhetorical condition of autobiography without closing off the possibility of intervention in public issues.

As a practice that exceeds the purely literary (if there is such a thing), autobiography makes the following assumptions: that autobiography involves dialogue, that an individual's experience is communicable, and that personal experience occurs within a public context. Even the most private and intimate of experiences occur within the horizon of public understanding. Robert Adamson's Inside Out: An Autobiography (2004) repeatedly illustrates this last assumption in its narration of events in the poet's life, from childhood, to teenage delinquency, to the beginnings of a career in poetry. In Inside Out, the road to adulthood is the understanding that private events have public consequences.

The memoirs of Khouri and Kernot should not make us think that autobiography operates in the public sphere primarily as a source of controversy. The relationship between self-narration and wider (public) relations usually operates less dramatically through such sanctioned forms of autobiography as autobiographies of childhood, family memoirs, and autobiographies of careers. (Anne Summers' Ducks on the Pond (1999) and Hilary McPhee's Other People's Words (2001) are especially lucid accounts of important careers.) Autobiography operating in the public sphere can also be seen in various other ways: the rise of the autobiographical essay; the role of autobiographical writing in education; the rise of autobiographical forms associated with trauma and illness (such as autopathography); and the ubiquitous relationship between autobiographical expression and the media. This latter aspect is especially pronounced, seen in celebrity culture, reality television, nationalist auto/biographical programmes such as Australian Story, and blogging on the net.

The link between "public intellectuals" and autobiography is another pronounced, if not so obvious, feature of public culture. If public intellectuals such as Robert Manne, Morag Fraser, Robert Dessaix, Drusilla Modjeska, Raimond Gaita, Inga Clendinnen, Cassandra Pybus, Helen Garner, Peter Singer and Henry Reynolds haven't all written autobiographies or memoirs (and most of them have), then it's notable how much these thinkers invest—in their diverse ways—in auto/biographical discourse.

Literary scholars interested in the public sphere have sometimes viewed autobiography as central to public-sphere issues. David Carter (2001/2002), for instance, has noted the importance of the memoir as a performative genre, engaged in ethical work that is attractive to middle-brow audiences. Li Cunxin's bestselling Mao's Last Dancer (2003) is a successful instance of such a memoir. Australian scholars of autobiography itself have also been concerned in diverse ways with the public sphere. Works such as Rosamund Dalziell's Shameful Autobiographies: Shame in Contemporary Australian Autobiographies and

Autobiography has also received support from Australian public institutions, as the following four examples demonstrate. In 1996 the Unit for Studies in Biography and Autobiography was established by Richard Freadman, at La Trobe University. In 2004 the first issue of the journal Life Writing, edited by Mary Besemeres and Maureen Perkins, was published by the API Network at Curtin University. As well as publishing scholarly essays and reviews, Life Writing also includes autobiographical interventions in its "Reflections" section. In 1998 Julie Meadows inaugurated the “Write Your Story” project for the Makor Jewish Community Library in Melbourne. Under Meadows' coordination, the project has resulted in the publication of fifty-three autobiographies and two anthologies. A combination of private benefaction (from Geoffrey Cains and Michael Crouch) and institutional administration (by the State Library of New South Wales) is behind the National Biography Award, awarded for a published work of biographical or autobiographical writing.

These examples suggest that there is an urgency about autobiography, especially as a form of public speech. In this it articulates one of the conditions of the autobiography of crisis as described by Susanna Egan, in Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography (1999). While crisis and its resolution are central to traditional autobiographical expression, Egan considers how unresolved crisis is a defining feature of contemporary autobiography. Works concerned with such crises cannot assume their own autobiographical authority. Rather, they are inherently dialogic—engaged in dialogue with others—and generically heterodox, incorporating fiction, history and visual forms (such as film and comics). Such autobiographies are also notable for their “foregrounding and emphatic presence of the body” (5).

While not all recent Australian autobiographies engage in the kind of formal experimentation that Egan focuses on, there is nevertheless a general shift (at least among literary autobiographers) towards responding to ongoing crisis through the kinds of strategies discussed by Egan: self-referentiality, generic excess and intersubjective narration. The notion of crisis is not purely personal (as Egan’s discussion of works concerning illness, genocide and film shows). In Australia, the crises found in recent autobiographies reflect wider, public crises. These can be classified as crises of the body (narratives of illness and impending mortality); crises of the nation (centred on indigenous and migrant experiences); crises of identity (relating to childhood and family); crises of history (usually concerning diaspora and non-Australian experiences of genocide); and crises of faith (relating to religious, political and other forms of belief).

Naturally, such designations are fluid. Louis Nowra’s Shooting the Moon: A Memoir (2004), for instance, begins dramatically with a crisis of the body. The narrator is in hospital, his pancreas trying to kill him. But as the later discussion of the narrator’s alcoholism suggests, this crisis of the body stems from an earlier crisis of identity (also the theme of Nowra’s first volume of memoirs, The Twelfth of Never, 1999, which begins with the author’s mother killing her father).

Inga Clendinnen’s Tiger’s Eye: A Memoir (2000) is an almost paradigmatic text with regard to thinking about autobiography in terms of crisis. It begins with the author/narrator becoming seriously ill. Finding herself in hospital, radically dislocated (from her family, her colleagues and her sense of self), Clendinnen begins to write down memories of her childhood. A sense of dissatisfaction with the effects that autobiographical writing produces leads Clendinnen to fiction, the writing of which she describes “as a defiance of exigency” (77).
After suffering the trial of a liver transplant (complete with extraordinary hallucinations), Clendinnen turns first to biography, writing accounts of her parents, and then to history, writing about the journal that G. A. Robinson (best remembered as Protector of the Aborigines in Tasmania) kept in 1841 when he was Chief Protector of the Aborigines for Port Phillip District. As a professional historian, Clendinnen finds writing about Robinson the best therapy after her operation. Among others things, reading Robinson leads Clendinnen to think "harder about the workings of memory", because history and "a reasonably stable sense of self" (221) are both reliant on memory. Fiction, on the other hand, requires a transformation of experience into a thing suffused with "aesthetic delight".

Given the aesthetic care that Clendinnen has employed in the auto/biographical and historical sections of her memoir, this distinction might seem surprising. But it makes sense in the light of the centrality of knowledge in the text. It is no surprise that a historian would place a love of knowledge at the centre of her text, but other than in fiction, knowledge remains profoundly ambiguous and contingent. For instance, the auto/biographical memories that Clendinnen has of her mother are not trustworthy: I am both the sole informant and the sole teller, and I cannot be trusted as either. (140)

Fiction, then, is a historian’s consolation. Nevertheless, history and auto/biography, however complicated, remain necessary, especially as they allow a memorialisation of the dead: of the author’s parents, of the American soldiers, befriended by the author’s mother, who died in the war, and of the murdered Aborigines mentioned in Robinson’s diary.

The link between crisis and generic excess is found in other recent autobiographies. For instance, Doris Brett’s *Eating the Underworld: A Memoir in Three Voices* (2001) ranges from realism to fairy tale in its discussion of Brett’s illness. Robert Drewe’s *The Shark Net: Memories and Murder* (2001), an account of the author’s childhood and a series of murders in 1950s Perth, is an especially notable example of generic excess. It contains elements of the Bildungsroman, the detective story, local history, courtroom drama and even horror. It is also notable for illustrating the potential for intersections between personal and public crises: the sexual fall of Robert and the crimes of the serial killer Eric Cooke (the second last person to be hanged in Australia, in 1964). *The Shark Net* undermines the myth that Perth, prior to Cooke’s serial killings, was living in an “innocent age.” Robert discovers earlier murders in genteel Dalkeith, and references to the “decimation” of Murray River Aborigines show that murder had been present since the state’s inception. To emphasise that state violence was not a thing of the past, Drewe makes the hanging of Cooke a climax to his story.

What do these public stories have to do with Drewe’s private one? Drewe’s accounts of violence are not simply those of the deranged or the distantly historical. He draws his past self into the picture by twinning violence with sexuality. As we discover, *The Shark Net* deals with an overwhelming sense of guilt (a crisis of identity) that is related to sexuality and its consequences. Robert’s sense of guilt concerns his shameful shotgun wedding (having got his girlfriend pregnant) and the death of his mother shortly after the birth of his son. The mixture of emotional violence and sexuality is pronounced. Drewe recounts a conversation in which the family doctor suggests that Robert’s recent fatherhood might have led to the early death of his mother. In making use of genres that we might not expect in autobiography (detective fiction, horror), *The Shark Net* powerfully illustrates that, however we narrate it, the self (our own or that of others) is the site of forces not easily contained or understood. The interaction of these forces makes private stories public ones, open to reporting in newspapers, law courts and autobiographies.

Egan’s model of autobiography involves not only crisis and generic excess, but also “mirror talk,” which involves the convergence of autobiography and biography. At its most general, this refers to writing that highlights the intersubjective nature of autobiography. This can be seen in numerous autobiographies that deal publicly with the crises adverted to above. For instance, Gaylene Perry’s
Midnight Water: A Memoir (2004), which deals with the drowning of the author’s father and brother, represents the narratives of others as crucial to the author’s understanding of the events of her father’s and brother’s deaths. Narrated in third person, the memoir leads to an imaginative recreation of those events.

Peter Rose’s Rose Boys (2001)—part biography, part autobiography—details the author’s life in contrast to that of his brother, Robert Rose, whose sporting career was ended when he became a quadriplegic after a traumatic road accident. In its use of interviews and the author’s diaries, it is a work of dialogue, with others and with past selves. (And in alerting readers to the Robert Rose Foundation, a charity for people with spinal cord injuries, it shows how autobiography can directly intervene in the public sphere.)

Similarly intersubjective are two works concerned with the crisis of nation. Nicholas Jose’s Black Sheep: Journey to Borroloola (2002) is a quest for “Our mystery relative [who] lived with his Aboriginal wife in an up-side-down water tank in a place called Borroloola” (1). Part regional history, part family history and part travel literature, Black Sheep uses the search for Roger Jose, to whom Nick Jose may or may not be related, as an occasion to consider the racialised nature of Australian history. Mary Ellen Jordan’s Balanda: My Year in Arnhem Land (2005) details the author’s year working in a coastal community in Arnhem Land. As a Balanda—a white person—in Arnhem Land, Jordan’s beliefs and assumptions are profoundly tested and revised. By highlighting her own whiteness (a category invisible to many non-indigenous writers), and the competing values and narratives of the community, Jordan represents her experiences as contingent and provisional.

Childhood autobiographies are almost by default also biographical. John Hughes’s The Idea of Home: Autobiographical Essays (2004) focuses on the lives and memories of his mother and grandparents (forced to leave the Ukraine during World War II) in an attempt to understand his own life. As Hughes shows, such autobiographical dialogue is far from simple:

How do you puzzle together a life, part of which your grandparents wanted you to know, and part of which they didn’t? How do you build a puzzle with only half of each piece in your hand? (8)

Mandy Sayer’s Dreamtime Alice: A Memoir (1998) is an account of the author and her father, focusing on their travels across the US as street performers. Hoi Polloi, by Craig Sherborne, is an acidic portrait of the author’s parents, with their classism and racism to the fore. Robin Wallace-Crabbe’s A Man’s Childhood (1997) is also in part an intense portrait of the author’s parents. Mark Raphael Baker, the son of Holocaust survivors, presents a childhood marked by a terrible history. His The Fiftieth Gate: A Journey Through Memory (1997) pits the author’s historical training against his parents’ memories of the Holocaust:

This was the deal: I would give them my knowledge of history; they would give me their memory. An exchange of pasts. (xi)

For some, the crisis of identity is quite clearly marked through the experience of losing parents. Frank Golding’s An Orphan’s Escape (2005) and Sandy McCutcheon’s The Magician’s Son (2005) are quest narratives in which each author searches for his (biological) parents. In both accounts, identity is presented as a process of discovery. Such a process is necessarily both intersubjective (McCutcheon’s research is complemented by that of his recently found sister) and bureaucratic (Golding accesses official files that show that the state had withheld much information “that was rightly mine at the time” (242)).

Golding’s An Orphan’s Escape is one of a number of memoirs written out of the discursive space opened by an official report, in this case the report of the Federal Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care, Forgotten Australians (2004). The autobiographical testimony in this report was a significant feature of the report, and its second term of references makes specific mention of two
earlier reports that also relied heavily on autobiographical testimony: “the committee is to direct its
inquiries primarily to those affected children who were not covered by the 2001 report Lost Innocents:
Rghting the Record, inquiring into child migrants, and the 1997 report, Bringing Them Home, inquiring
into Aboriginal children” (Commonwealth of Australia 2004). Bringing Them Home—the Report of the
National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their
Families—was one of the most important instances in Australian history of autobiographical discourse
operating in the public sphere. The inquiry took evidence, orally or in writing, from 535 indigenous
people, many of whose stories appear in Bringing Them Home. The inquiry concluded that while the
numbers of those removed from their families are difficult to estimate, “we can conclude with
confidence that between one in three and one in ten indigenous children were forcibly removed from
their families and communities in the period from approximately 1910 until 1970” (37). The report
added: “Most families have been affected, in one or more generations, by the forcible removal of one
or more children” (37). The report, as many of its first readers attested, is shocking and painful to read.

The response to the report—extraordinary in the different expressions that it occasioned—is well
documented. In In Denial (2001), Robert Manne articulates the campaign against the report, and how
that campaign related to the Howard government’s “profound ambivalence [ ... ] when it came to
questions of justice” (104-105). The Howard government’s callous and incoherent refusal to offer an
official apology was the most symbolically striking and widely reported instance of such ambivalence.

One of the unprecedented features of Bringing Them Home was the public interest in the report.
This proved to be so great that extracts from the report, along with documents regarding the
response to the report, were published by Random House as The Stolen Children: Their Stories (1998),
edited by Carmel Bird. As Bird’s publication showed, the report was also notable for engendering
further autobiographical expression: from politicians (in parliament in response to the report),
children of those involved and members of the “stolen generations.” As Tiger’s Eye (by Inga
Clenndinen, discussed previously in this essay) suggested, the report also had a profound effect on
Australian historians. As Whitlock writes in “Strategic Remembering” (2002), “black testimony is
triggering white memoir” (163). Such memoirs are produced by a sense of crisis about the nation,
and attempt to bring to that sense of crisis both the authority of personal experience and the
authority of history. Behind those categories, however, lie profound anxieties that aren’t necessarily
resolved through the writing of memoir.

There has also been a significant output of further indigenous testimony and memoir in the face
of black testimony. In part, the production of the former was a function of the report, which led to
the funding of a number of initiatives, including the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project
(managed by the National Library of Australia). A number of the interviews from that project were
subsequently published in Many Voices: Reflections on Experiences of Indigenous Child Separation (2002),
edited by Doreen Mellor and Anna Haebich. Shortly after the publication of Bringing Them Home,
indigenous memoir began to situate itself in response to that report. Rosalie Fraser’s Shadow Child
Repe Powell and Bernadette Kennedy, places autobiographical testimony alongside research into
the archive and overtly presents itself as part of the narrative of Bringing Them Home and its
subsequent effects. Profoundly intersubjective and self-reflexive, the work gives evidence of the illegal
removal of children from their families.

Fabienne Bayer-Charlton’s Finding Ullagundah Island (2002) and Lynette Russell’s A Little Bird Told
Me: Family Secrets, Necessary Lies (2002) similarly present the formation (and distortion) of the past as
occurring in the bureaucratic archive. As Michele Grossman writes, “the textual account each writer
provides of her search functions as a kind of counter-archive to the histories stored, circulated and maintained within the archives of both the family and the state" (2003).

In telling such stories, these autobiographers dramatically bring together the private and personal. The crises discussed in these autobiographies and memoirs require expression that is both understandable and commensurate with the crisis. Ultimately, these crises involve loss, especially loss of selfhood (through, for instance, illness) and loss of others (often through death). As such, they are a form of prose elegy. (Gaita’s _Romulus, My Father_ (1998) is a notable instance of such an elegiac autobiography.) This relationship between crisis and loss suggests that autobiography is a pre-eminent way of discussing loss in public.

All of the features discussed above—generic excess, intersubjective narration, the emphasis on loss—are present in my last example: Jacob G. Rosenberg’s extraordinary _East of Time_ (2005). Rosenberg uses various vernacular genres—the anecdote, the fairy tale, gossip, song and the parable—to recreate the Jewish ghetto in Lodz before Rosenberg and his family were transported to Auschwitz. _East of Time_ is, as its author describes it, a “rendezvous of history and imagination, of realities and dreams, of hopes and disenchantments” (9). Rosenberg’s family (with the exception of one sister who committed suicide shortly afterwards) were all murdered on the day of their arrival at Auschwitz. _East of Time_ is an elegy for his family, but it is also an elegy for the entire Lodz ghetto (and, by association, for all of those who died in the Holocaust).

While there are numerous references to those killed in the Holocaust, the work centres not on the death camps but on the ghetto. The painfully paradoxical effect of this focus is that the book is full of events, eccentric and lively characters, and an overwhelming sense of community. Such memorialising of the people and events of the ghetto allows something of the full horror of the Holocaust to be felt. The inclusion of an extraordinary number of proper nouns (mostly of people, but also of places and titles of books) in _East of Time_ is central to Rosenberg’s elegiac project:

As for the many individuals who populate this book, most, with one or two exceptions, are now dead, murdered during those years of darkness. Some readers may question my purpose in summoning up all these names, but the need to recall them is strong within me; perhaps it is the scriptural influence, or maybe the voice of my forefathers, to whom the mentioning of names was a sacred duty. (10)

Rosenberg’s stylistic variety is also painfully expressive. Jewish life is evoked in baroque detail; the Holocaust is discussed through litotes or bald statement. Given the nature of the events discussed, it is not surprising that Rosenberg deals with oppositions. These are ontological (memory/imagination; history/fiction); stylistic (baroque plenitude/classical simplicity); and thematic. Regarding the last of these, Rosenberg is especially concerned with the disjunction between belief (or illusion) and reality (or experience). Rosenberg reports his father saying that “one illusive beacon in a hopeless night is worth a thousand daylight suns” (160).

The crisis is, as Egan suggests, ongoing. Despite his lucid recounting, the events that Rosenberg narrates defy understanding. As he states at one point: “Nothing will become clearer through explanation, and for the sake of a survivor’s sanity it is dangerous even to ask” (150). In the place of understanding, Rosenberg inserts memory and poetry, a poetry that Rosenberg makes clear comes from the ghetto, a place (despite its deadly conditions) that housed people who continued “to immerse themselves in writing poetry, studying languages, engaging in philosophical discourse and conducting heated debates over purely intellectual abstractions” (204). This, too, as Rosenberg makes clear, is a terrible mystery.

However difficult or ambivalent the texts discussed in this essay might be, their claims to literary as well as extra-literary authority show that they are works that link private experience with the public realm. Their linking of crisis and the public discussion of loss suggests that autobiography acts as a form
of extremely necessary, and urgent, public speech. As G. Thomas Couser (2005) writes in another context, "Psychic work may be inseparable from social and cultural work" (138).

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**Works Cited**


