



**Marina Warner, *Inventory of a Life Mislaid: An Unreliable Memoir*
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In *The Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, Francis Russell Hart is quoted as having written that '[m]emoirs personalize history and historicize the personal ... memoirs are about individuals,' but they can reflect 'an event, an era, an institution, a class identity' (qtd. in Buss 595). This fits in perfectly with Marina Warner's *Inventory of A Life Mislaid: An Unreliable Memoir*, her latest publication and most openly autobiographical one. On the one hand, crucial historical moments are personalized such as post-World-War II British neo-colonialism or 'soft power' in Egypt and the ensuing 1952 Cairo riots whose circumstances and consequences her parents, Emilia Terzulli and Esmond Warner, went through. On the other hand, Warner's personal past, or rather her parents' first meeting, wedding and various trips which transported them from Bari to London, then to a cosmopolitan post-war Cairo where the father opened a WH Smith bookshop, are historicized. Such family memories are indeed reconstructed through various photos, letters, diaries, objects and notebooks recovered after the Warners' deaths. These objects and memorabilia structure the various sections of the memoir, turning it into an 'identikit portrait' (148) of her parents. However, this memoir reads at times like a story, almost a novel,¹ as first-, second- and third-person narrative perspectives alternate. While Joycean free indirect speech helps reimagine her mother's thoughts and reactions, Dickensian descriptions draw a sensually accurate picture of 'cabbagy' post-war England. Among the most conspicuous and pertinent novelistic techniques are such suspense-building sentences as '[Esmond] turned to Cairo... but his experiences there were to change him,' (145) and events as the first violent outburst of Warner's father in Cairo which, in a plot-like fashion, leads to the climactic fire and ending of Cairo life and

its sweet comforts. In fact, Warner's parents' disappointed hopes become an important theme as they go through transitional periods, very much in parallel with crucial historical events as WWII and the Cairo Fire.

The memoir is made up of a prologue, five parts which are spatio-temporally traversing the lives of Warner's parents from 1944 in Italy to 1952 in Cairo, and an epilogue. There is a number of black-and-white photos on the inside covers and within the memoir which are strategically positioned so as to emphasize the people or situations discussed, as well as 'vignettes' which work as adornments, transitions from one section to the other, and highlight intense moments. The prologue and introductory section detail the etymology of various words encountered by Warner thanks to her multicultural background such as the Italian word *Magari* or the Arabic *Malesh*, and it is on the occasion of such enlightening linguistic explorations that Warner's mastery of the nuances and layered meanings of both Arabic and Italian is most brilliantly exposed.

Within each part, smaller sections are punctuated by family objects which are meticulously described, visually autopsied so to speak, and are related to a specific period or location such as her mother's diamond rings or hatbox in 'From Italy to England'. In this first part, her father's letters abound; they are engrafted in the memoir and often repeated for emphasis, thus reflecting Esmond's mindset and his sometimes embarrassing view of his wife-to-be as a 'greyhound' (42) or 'filly' (26), besides his attachment to English gentility and its manners and his imperialistic vision of British presence in Egypt.

Archival material about historical places as well as documents constitute the second part, the shortest one, such as the 'Cemetery,' or 'Bill of Lading,' for example, which documents the lavish furniture brought by her father from London to Cairo in 1947. Love tokens like the 'Powder Compact' offered by one of Ilia's 'soupleirants' during the following two years in Cairo are related to various family anecdotes and famous friendships, including a full biography of Loretta Sell Hildegarde, a singer of the 1930s whose photographs Warner describes in a Barthesian fashion. Part four, by far the longest and most intricate, includes an 'Old Map' and 'A Silver Photograph Frame' which detail the lives and explorations of a few historical and religious personages and objects, especially balm and its links to such famous women as the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. The final part, entitled 'Revolution' describes the Cairo fire while conjecturing about its causes; the remaining parts contain Warner's etymological and metaphorical digressions about books and *Shabtis* and their connection to her own life and career.

The final three parts also include shorter sections called ‘Early memories,’ written in italics and numbered, which not only provide a more openly autobiographical stance on Warner’s own childhood memories, but also constitute a form of ‘relief’ from the sometimes Warnerian laborious, trance-like lucubrations on English history, archaeology and painting, as well as her thorough analyses of books and essays by Virginia Woolf, Sophie Basch or Carmelo Colamónico’s geography textbook. Essay-like discussions of contemporary issues also punctuate the memoir and build important bridges between past and present such as the influence of social media, modern-day politics, wars, the Corona virus pandemic, colonialism and imperialism, Brexit, refugee camps, etc.

The memoir comes full circle as Warner ends her memoir with some of the objects which initiated the first sections, especially her mother’s book collection which reflects the latter’s incisive mind and lively spirit, but also leads to Warner’s own novel, *The Lost Father* (1988), dealing with her mother and the issue of privacy. This form of emotional and linguistic paralipsis can be compared to a hesitating waltz as Warner tries to delve into her parents’ intimate relationships, her mother’s ‘beaux’ or her father’s fling with a cabaret artiste before the war. Just like the figure of speech, she does what she prohibits herself from doing, going so far as to consider her mother’s diaries and notebooks as a hint to her to write her story, despite Ilia’s clear protests against being ‘exposed’ or ‘read about’ (Warner, *Inventory* 304).

Whether consciously or not, two crucial events are dealt with rather summarily by the daughter-memoirist: the family’s life in Brussels and her father’s death. Indeed, only one expeditious sentence informs the reader of Esmond’s death while the epilogue is devoted to her mother’s last days, narrated in a novelistic manner and sounding like a delayed epitaph or homage to Ilia. As a result, the memoir lacks closure, perhaps sadly echoing the sense of incompleteness pervading her mother’s life and lifelong achievements. The memoir is clearly biased against her father for having ‘mislaid’ her mother’s life by making it difficult and unhappy.

Warner’s memoir ends in a vein similar to her historical novels, that is with a detailed ‘chronology’ of the most important historical events paralleling/ echoing those of her memoir, followed by explanatory notes to clarify some of the translations recurring in the book, then a bibliography and a list of illustrations. On the very last pages, Warner adds a theatrical device to her book: a section, very much like a genealogical tree, which she calls ‘Cast of Characters,’ organized into family, friends, and the professional sphere. Interestingly, the last part she calls ‘More dramatis personae’ and declares it contains some ‘imaginary personae,’ adding to the metabiographical aspect of her memoir.

Most importantly, there are two central metaphors traversing her entire fictional oeuvre that is again echoed in this memoir: the first is the constant but unrequited human attempts to reach the hidden truth about self and past. Warner, in fact, seems to be, at various points in the memoir, apologizing for, sometimes tentatively legitimizing, the most impossible task of ‘know[ing] your parents or their lives and yours before the age of six’ (371). Still, she undertakes the exploit of this romanticized memoir which follows in the metabiographical trend which has marked life writings by the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. Indeed, from the very title of the book, the words ‘mislaid’ and ‘unreliable’ set the tone and announce the ‘color’ of the memoir, as the French idiom goes. It is life writing which openly scrutinizes itself and declares its unpretentiousness from the start: that of not transmitting total fact or pure truth about a person’s life, namely Warner’s mother and father. Signs of this life writing modesty run through the memoir as ‘used pages have been torn out... remain[ing] unknown’ (132) and ‘list(s) remain mute’ (148) as in A. S. Byatt’s futile biographer’s pursuit of lost and found documents and objects in *The Biographer’s Tale* (2000). In addition, Warner as a memoirist and biographer often confirms the metabiographical trend in her memoir through metabiographical comments interspersed throughout the book such as ‘As I moved among my ghosts and rummaged about in the past and tried to find my way back through the darkness that wraps them,’ (285) ‘[b]ut the past won’t shape itself into a page-turning story, not for me... I can’t eavesdrop in make-believe any longer,’ (301) or ‘I’m fumbling towards an analogy with writing’ (364).

The second metaphor concerns disguise as performance and masquerade, which leads to various discussions of themes and ‘characters’ in the memoir: from her mother’s linguistic and sartorial appearance as an Englishwoman and a wife who pretends to be happy to the nineteenth-century reversed ‘mimicry’ by English ‘servants of empire... dressing-up as locals’ and posing for portraits (200-201). Also related to this notion of performance are the social use of the French language by the *gratin* of Cairo in the 1950s and her father’s ‘wild guffaw, the very seal of the roaring English gentleman’ (112). When discussing her father, Warner unwittingly (or not) exposes difficult father-daughter and mother-daughter relations, especially concerning her difficulty to tolerate, even less adopt, her mother’s ritual of ‘keeping up appearances’ or *fare figura* comparing them to today’s ‘Instagram boasts’ and bringing up the disguise metaphor again: ‘It wasn’t an ethical ideal, but a call to masks and camouflage... it was really my mother I hated for judging people so harshly ... harbouring thoughts that I didn’t come up to scratch either’ (74-75).

Warner's memoir also allows the readers of her fiction a few insights into certain episodes of her life which were fictionalized and made into novels and short stories. For example, as I have been reading and exploring her fiction for the past fifteen years, I could recognize 'A Family Friend' and 'A Rare Visit,' short stories from her latest collection, *Fly Away Home* (2015), in the Cairo section of the memoir. The shaded Cairo apartment seems to have inspired romantic visions of the many soirées and visits which filled Warner's parents' lives during their stay in the ebullient and exuberant atmosphere of the Egyptian capital during the postwar period.

Another episode is narrated by Warner in 'The Cemetery at Rayol' in which, forty years later, she encounters a familiar sight in a French village: 'I recognized the place, experiencing that eerie sense of time folding up against itself and bringing back my child self, turning me into my own revenant' (142). Indeed, Warner, specter-like, revisits a memorial and reads the inscriptions on the graves. This is reminiscent of Miranda's 'metabiographical experience' in *Indigo; or Mapping the Waters* (1992) during her visit to her father's native island: "Both a 'daughter of the empire' and a Creole Englishwoman, she [Miranda] reads her ancestors' epitaphs during a visit to the isles... A female [deconstructive] reader belonging to both sides of the story" (Zekri Masson 75-6). Other aspects of Warner's personal life such as her mother's origins in Mussolini's southern Italy as well as her grandfather's cricketing and colonialist past are important building blocks for *Indigo* and *The Lost Father* and show how the writer ingenuously transformed these historically crucial moments of the past and interwove them in her fictional stories.

In spite of the marked historical, autobiographical and aesthetic strengths of this memoir, the sections detailing the lives of historical figures can become laborious, especially for a non-British reader. It would have been more interesting to tell other episodes in the father's life such as the stay in Brussels and the circumstances of his death. Last but not least, it would have been pertinent to explore the linguistic and etymological possibilities and ironies of the phrase '*Sikket Al Fadl*,' the name of the street on which the father's doomed bookshop was situated. Among the meanings of this name, there is 'grace' and 'favor'. There is also a typo in 'c' as in '*çi-devant*'.

Marina Warner's memoir is a fluent, eloquent and touching metaphorical exploration of her parents' and her own past, never falling into too much sentimentalism and always attempting to be as honest and objective as it is possible when reminiscing and trying to do justice to a parent's life and death. *Inventory of a Life Mislaid* does keep its promise of unreliably relating the disappointments of the WWII generation, at the risk of perpetrating/ perpetuating the same mistake of mis-

narrating a life so muddled with one's own, clearly adding a precious stone to the pyramid of Warner's fictional and non-fictional corpus.

Works Cited

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Notes

¹ Warner mentions in an interview with *The Guardian* that it started out as a novel before her editor advised her to put 'real people in it' (qtd. in Higgins).