



## Marina Warner's *Inventory of A Life Mislaid: An Unreliable Memoir*. From Memoir to Filiation Narrative

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### Abstract

Marina Warner's *Inventory of a Life Mislaid: An Unreliable Memoir* (2021) is her second work belonging to the genre of life writing, more particularly the memoir. She had already written a biography, *The Dragon Empress: The Life and Times of Tz'u-Hsi, Empress Dowager of China, 1835-1980*, about a Chinese empress in 1972, but her memoir is more personal, rather focused on her parents' marriage, life itineraries and travels through Italy, England and Egypt during and after WWII. Interestingly, many characteristics of her memoir fit with another life writing genre, identified by the French theorist Dominique Viart in the eighties as the 'filiation narrative,' initially in reference to French fiction of the same period. The filiation narrative focuses on a self-reflexive search for parental images, reconstructing the mother's or father's life through the excavation of documentation and archives, as well as speculation. This article will attempt to show how such thematic and structural features of the filiation narrative as 'archeological' narration, the use of archival documents and objects to restore a parent's 'lost' life and, most importantly, the metabiographical aspect of the 'enterprise' are reflected, in various degrees, in Warner's memoir, making it waver between fiction and non-fiction. These same features may thus pave the way for the English counterpart of the French '*récit de filiation*' and build a pertinent generic continuity between both memoir and filiation narrative.

*Keywords:* life writing, filiation narrative, memoir, Marina Warner

## خلاصة

عملها الثاني الذي ينتمي إلى نوع كتابة الحياة، وبشكل خاص (2021) مذكرات غير موثوقة: يعد كتاب مارينا وارنر لحياة ضائعة، هسي، إمبراطورة الصين الأرملة-حياة وأوقات تزو: كانت قد كتبت بالفعل سيرة ذاتية بعنوان الإمبراطورة التنين. المذكرات خلال الزواج ومسارات أكثر وتركز على والديها لكن مذكراتها شخصية، 1972 عن إمبراطورة صينية في عام 1835-1980 الحياة والسفر عبر إيطاليا وإنجلترا ومصر أثناء الحرب العالمية الثانية وبعدها

ومن المثير للاهتمام أن العديد من خصائص مذكراتها تتناسب مع نوع آخر من كتابة الحياة، والذي حدده المنظر الفرنسي دومينيك في البداية في إشارة إلى الرواية الفرنسية من نفس الفترة، "سرد البنوة" فيارت في الثمانينيات باسم

يركز سرد البنوة على البحث التأملّي الذاتي عن الصور الأبوية، وإعادة بناء حياة الأم أو الأب من خلال التنقيب في الوثائق والأرشيفات، فضلاً عن التكهنات

واستخدام الوثائق، "الأثري" ستحاول هذه المقالة إظهار كيفية استخدام السمات الموضوعية والهيكلية لسرد البنوة مثل السرد، تنعكس، بدرجات متفاوتة والأهم من ذلك، الجانب الميتابيوغرافي، "المفقودة" والأشياء الأرشيفية لاستعادة حياة أحد الوالدين وبالتالي، قد تمهد هذه الميزات نفسها الطريق أمام النظر الإنجليزي. في مذكرات وارنر، مما يجعلها تتأرجح بين الخيال والواقع وبناء استمرارية عامة وثيقة الصلة بين كل من المذكرات وسرد البنوة

الكتابة عن الحياة، السرد البنوي، فيارت، المذكرات، الرواية الفرنسية، مارينا وارنر: **الكلمات المفتاحية**

'l'existence même est habitée de ces fictions intérieures'

- Dominique Viart -

## Introduction

With the recent publication in 2021 of *Inventory of a Life Mislaid: An Unreliable Memoir*, Marina Warner seems to have crossed a line or two; that of fiction and so-called factual life writing as well as that of biography and autobiography. Warner is a renowned English-Italian cultural historian, mythographer and novelist whose fiction and non-fiction have constantly been exploring the relationship between reality and art, past and present, giving birth to what Warner herself calls 'a bipartite structure [in which] the past is recapitulated in the present'.<sup>1</sup> In addition, Warner's fiction since the 1970s to the new millennium has been engrafted with various life writing forms: letters, diaries, biographies, memoirs, etc. whose structures mix with those of fiction, blurring the boundaries between the two. This aspect of her fiction is called 'metabiography' and is analyzed in depth in my PhD-inspired monograph *Mapping Metabiographical Heartlands in Marina Warner's Fiction* (2019).

In fact, two of Warner's novels, *The Lost Father* (1988) and *Indigo; or Mapping the Waters* (1992), fictionally retrace her family histories. *The Lost Father* tells the story of Anna, (the fictionalized version of Warner?) who relies on her Southern Italian mother and other more or less reliable sources to document and reconstruct her grandfather's memoir and life in fascist Italy, with its partial truths and surreal legends. On her father's side, the Warners were part of the colonialist British empire in the Caribbean, 'the Everard family [who] attempt to repeat their colonial enterprise of the seventeenth century with tourist development today, and Sycorax, who embodies the island, even though her voice is imprisoned and muffled, survives in an altered form to bring about the defeat of these plans...' <sup>2</sup> This is a past with which Warner has never been at ease but which she succeeded in conjuring (and perhaps be half reconciled with) through careful fictional reconstruction and the rewriting of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. She starts her *mea culpa* in a premonitory article titled 'Rich Pickings' (1993) in which she explains the processes of transforming reality into fiction with the aim of transmitting a more ethical version of history. The article starts with a list of objects used by Warner as '*aide-mémoire*', a technique she compares to 'caddis fly hoarding' <sup>3</sup> and which will be discussed later in this article:

1 bottle bay rum

2 oyster shells (fitting together)

A photograph of Thomas Warner's tomb in the churchyard of Old Road, St Kitt's, West Indies... <sup>4</sup>

Warner then explains how she composes her fiction:

For *Indigo*, I proceeded in a similar fashion to my previous novel, *The Lost Father* [...] I quarried my own family history, my antecedents, my social background, my education. My father's family were Creoles [...] I began researching the history of the British Empire development in the Caribbean; and a very [...] distressing story it is, full of [...] cruelty and waste [...] I sometimes think that my half-Italian blood [...] plus the accident of my Francophone childhood [...] has made me a foreigner in England [...] My Catholic girlhood taught me [...] the daily examination of conscience [...]. <sup>5</sup>

So, in a way, Warner has always been retrospectively introspecting, foraging a past and family history which preoccupied her 'conscience' and morality in quest for her identity since the beginning of her writing career. Her reason for choosing the novel

is that it is 'a form in which crossing borders, entering new territories, trespassing and fence-mending can help make up new identities,' thus reflecting her optimistic need and potential to reconstruct her self and her-story through her fiction.<sup>6</sup> This 'ethical', somewhat reparative aspect has been expanded upon by Lisa Propst's *Marina Warner and The Ethics of Telling Silenced Stories* (2020) as the paradoxical attempt to give voice to silenced others which risks silencing them even further through fictional and non-fictional reappropriation. Propst argues that Warner's journalism and fiction have been trying to create a space for such minorities as Vietnam civilians, Caribbean natives, and fascist Italy's women, among other 'others', but can only succeed in its mission through imaginative empathy and hospitality (to use Derrida's term). In fact, it is mostly through metabiography that Warner acknowledges the limitations of her craft as a mouthpiece for muted others and she continues the same trend within her latest memoir, beginning from the very adjectives used to describe her title; 'mislaid' and 'unreliable', the 'life mislaid' being that of her mother for whom she tries to function as a '*shabti*', which are funeral statues:

buried with Egyptian pharaohs, queens [...] the labourers of the other world, who work on behalf of the deceased to meet their needs and provide for their comforts during eternity [...]. figurines in wood, clay, stone and glazed turquoise faience, they're surrogates—copies, dummies—of the dead man or woman [...] 'Shabti' is a play on the verb 'to answer', so shabtis answer and obey; they play-act someone else, and live their lives, speak their lines [...]. They live in relation to the dead, trying to keep faith with them. Their time is a continuous now [...]<sup>7</sup>

So this is how Warner envisages the purpose of her memoir, re-establishing truths and giving voice to her own mother, but how accurately can she do that? In *Mapping Metabiographical Heartlands*, metabiography is explained as a trend within Warner's fiction, mainly through Ansgar Nünning's 'Fictional Metabiographies and Metaautobiographies', as he refers to the 'crisis in representation' and questions the textual reconstructions of the past as 'more and more novels not only cross the boundaries between fact and fiction, they also tend to blur genre distinctions. As a result, an increasing number of postmodernist novels seem to resist generic classification all together, or at least test the limits of it.'<sup>8</sup>

Warner's metabiographical turn has thus come full circle with her present memoir which, most interestingly, was at first intended as a novel: '[i]t's a novel, because I need the freedom to enter characters' thoughts and feelings, and I want to write dialogue; besides I was a small child at the time and so my memories, though vivid,

are fragments.<sup>9</sup> Although it is not her first attempt at reconstituting another person's life as she wrote the biography of a Chinese Empress in 1972, Warner still seems attached to the novelistic form and even considers it as continuous with history, itself a narrative. In her extensive book on Warner's fiction and non-fiction, Laurence Coupe, who calls Warner's first biography (and first published book) 'an historical study of a career', develops this idea as follows: 'as we know from its etymology (Latin *historia*, 'story'), and so overlaps with myth (Greek *mythos*, 'story'). Imagination is the very stuff of history; we cannot understand ourselves or others without understanding the way we narrate our own and others' lives.'<sup>10</sup> Coupe then proceeds to summarize Warner's selection of rumours for the writing of the biography and its implications for the representation of the empress as a figure of female authority, 'a fascinating protagonist', at a time when feminism needed support. Warner's choices also meant, according to Coupe, that 'the problematical nature of the relation between fact and interpretation' persists.<sup>11</sup>

However, while *The Dragon Empress: The Life and Times of Tz'u-Hsi: Empress Dowager of China, 1835-1908* is focused on a distant female figure from a different culture and period, *Inventory* is more personal, more intimate, focused on her parents' marriage, life itineraries and travels through Italy, England and Egypt during and after WWII. To be more specific, British Esmond had met Italian Ilia during World War II in southern Italy, after which they married and she traveled to post-war London as a complete stranger/foreigner who had to adapt to a completely different setting and lifestyle. Warner's somewhat fictional threads are reconstituted in order to build the reader's perspective on each of her parents and the caddis fly starts her hoarding: the first part of the memoir inventories Warner's mother's most cherished and representative objects, wavering between Italy and England, such as her hatbox, the books she had brought with her or the customized brogues she had had designed and which symbolized Ilia's difficult adjustment to the intricacies of British mannerisms, lunch and dinner parties, and other idiosyncrasies. The second and third parts take place in a different setting: 1950s Egypt, where the father set up a branch of WH Smith bookshops and settled his family. The objects referred to are more practical, relating first to her father's Bridge Club and the 'Bill of Lading', detailing his British imperialistic attachment to everything 'civilized' and upper class. The remaining objects in part three mostly reconstitute Warner's parents' Egyptian lifestyle and their growing further apart, while subsections titled 'early memory' mark pauses or autobiographical reliefs, following up into parts four and five of the memoir, bringing Warner herself as a child into the limelight. The final two sections develop Warner's etymological and historical speculations about British, Egyptian and other famous

characters and events, or even analyse books, stylistically resembling her cultural histories. The 'Cairo Fire' and revolution brings the family's life and dreams in Egypt to an end, and the final two sections are devoted to her mother's final moments. Could that intimacy bring more truthfulness or, on the contrary, less reliability to Warner's memoir?

Following on the aforementioned caddis fly metaphor, her memoir is indeed a rich and varied mosaic of diaries, letters, inventories, objects and photographs which strive at authenticity and reliability, a point whose difficulty Warner acknowledges many times in her memoir. The prologue of the memoir is the first section in which Warner expands on the idea of remembering the past and the departed ones, using second-person narration and the metaphor of the two rivers of 'Lethe' and 'Eunoe' respectively as sources of forgetfulness and remembrance, in a mixture of religious guilt and childish sensations: 'You are somewhere you know very well and a door appears; when you open it you find yourself in a backstage area you've never entered before. You're following those you have lost: they're lingering in obscure recesses, shadowy as the interior of a confessional box when you were a child.'<sup>12</sup> But what is the function of the memoir and why did Warner choose this particular descriptive term? Memoir is defined by *The Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms* as a genre which 'personalize[s] history and historicize[s] the personal [...] memoirs are about individuals' but also about 'an event, an era, an institution, a class identity.'<sup>13</sup> Memoir is also defined in *Encyclopedia Britannica* as

history or record composed from personal observation and experience. Closely related to, and often confused with, autobiography, a memoir usually differs chiefly in the degree of emphasis placed on external events; whereas writers of autobiography are concerned primarily with themselves as subject matter, writers of memoir are usually persons who have played roles in, or have been close observers of, historical events and whose main purpose is to describe or interpret the events.<sup>14</sup>

So the focus of the memoir is rather on external events and persons, a focus which still reflects the selective process of the memoirist, thus painting an implicit portrait of the latter as well. So Warner's efforts at reconstructing her parents' lives through narration and materializing them through a collection of concrete 'remains' and memorabilia bring to mind the crucial concept of relationality in memoir, autobiography and metabiography, highlighted mainly in John Paul Eakin's 'Relational Selves, Relational Lives: The Story of the Story' and Gunnthórunn

Gudmundsdóttir's *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*. Warner also describes her own memoir as 'unreliable,' again indicating her lack of clear-sightedness in light of the intimacy she shares with the lives she is compiling: her own parents, her closest family members. This brings to light the second concept, crucial to this article, which was defined and developed in 'A Harki History Lesson: Dalila Kerchouche's Filiation Narrative *Mon père, ce harki*' by Rebecca Raitzes. This article is about an autobiographical French novel and its definition as '*récit de filiation*' which Raitzes defines as 'a variant' of the 'archaeological novel [...] Contrary to memoir, the emphasis is on what is not known and the effort to uncover traces of the past. In addition, the investigation and the conquest of knowledge are incorporated into the narrative.'<sup>15</sup> Indeed, this autobiographical mode does not exist in the English language or life writing field as its main proponent is a French specialist of life writing: Dominique Viart. This theorist has been focusing on the incessant evolution and increasing influence of the autobiographical mode, in particular within French literature, since the 1970s. He explains that there is a renewed interest in the self and in structurally categorizing the new literary forms which have been experimenting with this mode, all the while remaining weary of the full credibility of the 'autobiographical pact' as a truthful and reliable account of the narrator/protagonist/author.<sup>16</sup> Among such new literary forms, he provides two examples: '*fictions biographiques*' or biographical fiction/novels and '*récit de filiation*' or filiation narrative. Relationality is at the heart of this type of novel which focuses on the life of the subject's parents and the vision of oneself one can acquire through the reconstitution of that life. Interestingly, Gudmundsdóttir had already identified such a 'significant strand in recent life-writing' and 'the narrator's search for identity through writing on his or her family'<sup>17</sup> (which I tentatively consider as the English non-fictional counterpart to French filiation narratives) as the relational or 'collaborative' autobiographies of the eighties and nineties. Eakin names it 'the story of the story'<sup>18</sup> and the '*mise-en-abîme*' of a parent or parents' biography within the narrator's autobiography.

This article will thus attempt to show how such thematic and structural features of the filiation narrative as 'archeological' narration, the use of archival documents and objects to restore a parent's 'lost' life and, most importantly, the metabiographical aspect of the 'enterprise' are reflected in Warner's memoir which thus builds a pertinent generic continuity between fiction, memoir and filiation narrative.

## Features and history of the filiation narrative

It is thanks to the various experimental works in 'autofiction' of Serge Doubrowsky and Roland Barthes that the boundary between fiction and autobiography, besides the other conventions of autobiography, was blurred and the fictionality which is inherent in the genre accepted as such: 'If autobiography should contain any truth, it is in the way it is told, not in what it tells. The truth of each individual must invent itself, and it invents, each time, a way of writing/telling.'<sup>19</sup>

What is striking in Viart's first overview of autofiction is that, based on some French novelists' examples like Annie Ernaux and Patrick Modiano, autobiographical novels tend to cover not only the narrator's but also his/her parent's lives and memories, which is inevitably and inextricably linked to theirs.<sup>20</sup> The focus on the one who writes, rather than the one who is written about also increased in modern autobiography<sup>21</sup>, which is one of the many consequences of the "death of the author" and signals the beginnings of metabiography and metafictionality.

The '*récit de filiation*,' an 'insisting' literary genre in Viart's terms, was born within the contemporary French fiction of the eighties<sup>22</sup>, and is thus aptly described as a move from 'interiority' to 'anteriority'<sup>23</sup>, that is from a focus on one's self to one's predecessors, namely one's parents. Viart thus provides the following definition of the filiation narrative as focusing mainly on

family issues [...] exploring paternal or maternal figures [...] but always following a distinctive approach, more archeological than chronological [...], often fragmented, in which a real person restitutes/restores through investigation, conjecture, collection of information or documents, the life of a parent or ancestor [...] through a heightened meta-literary consciousness of one's enterprise.<sup>24</sup>

The various constituents of this definition will structure my article, particularly the relational, archeological and metabiographical aspects of the filiation narrative. It would be important to note at this point that French filiation narratives are novels and Warner's memoir, despite the fact that it was meant to be one at the beginning, ended up submitting to the generic requirements of this hybrid type. French novelists were, so to speak, hiding behind fiction in order to be able to write more freely about their personal life histories, an embarrassing difficulty which is constantly revealed by Warner's reluctance to probe her parents' intimate life too deeply: 'it feels sacrilegious to press too far into the private life of your own mother and father. It is also frightening [...] and you shrink away from it. Rather, I shrink away.'<sup>25</sup>

Viart links this genre to its cultural period and its concomitant doubts about social/ethical values following the First World War. Among these doubts, parents no



longer represented models or 'exemplars' to their children, nor even a source of values and ideas. Rather, they slowly turned into victims of their own period, looking up to their children to help them understand the new values of a society based on fast technological advancements. Viart explains: 'the filiation narrative is born out of something lacking'<sup>26</sup> and so becomes a potential attempt at giving their voice back to one's ancestors.

Four main aspects define the filiation narrative: relationality, generic experimentation, archeological narration, and ethical reconstitution. The first characteristic can be summarized in the following quotation: 'The narrative of the other - the father, the mother or a particular ancestor - is the necessary detour (or sinuosity) to reach one's self, to understand oneself in this heritage: the filiation narrative is the substitute for autobiography [...] knowing *who* we are by interrogating what we inherit.'<sup>27</sup>

The relationality which is inherent to this type of narrative is based on intersubjectivity, more specifically the dependence of one's identity construction on the knowledge of an 'other,' in this case the mother, father, grandfather, etc. So it is necessary, even crucial, to know and understand one's parents' lives and characters before one can safely look into oneself and interpret one's life because we inherit from them their genetics, their habits, their vices and virtues. This necessity positions the filiation narrative in the present, just like Warner's shabti's 'continuous now,'<sup>28</sup> as it is the biographer's current understanding of the past which will be validated and integrated into one's knowledge of oneself.

On the other hand, as Lisa Propst states in *Marina Warner and The Ethics of Telling Silenced Stories*: 'To publish another person's 'life' invariably grants the writer an authority the subject does not share. The writer is the one selecting, framing, analyzing details, and ultimately presenting the work to the public.'<sup>29</sup> In other words, the notion of inheritance and relationality becomes partial when it comes to filiation narratives as they are centred more on the biographer than the biographee, thus bestowing more authority on the former in terms of life and identity construction.

The second characteristic of the filiation narrative is the generic experimentation which this form demands. Paradoxically, Viart coined the term and genre in relation to only French fiction while stating that 'the text *badly copes with the novelistic model*, and tries to find a form proper to it, outside the boundaries of the traditional autobiographical journey'. Since filiation narratives need to compromise with fiction because of the necessary fictionalization of certain episodes, as well as with autobiography for its inherent factuality and intimacy, they need to find a genre which allows them to never quite fully submit to their rules.<sup>30</sup> This means that the filiation

narrative requires its own generic structure which coincides with Marina Warner's choice of the memoir over the novel form as its focus and structure are not limited to the parents but also extend themselves to their environment and historical circumstances.

Thirdly, the filiation narrative is not based on reconstructed chronological linearity, but is, first and foremost, a collection or gathering of documents and objects. This reconstitution is related to the type of narration used in these narratives which is archeological rather than chronological: 'It [the filiation narrative] is first a collection',<sup>31</sup> which means that it is made up of a collection of recollections, that is written documents, photographs and objects. So narratively speaking, the filiation narrative is based more on a compilation, assemblage, or catalogue of memorabilia than on the conventional storytelling or story construction related to life writing.

The author of this type of narrative is thus similar to a detective performing an investigation, and relying on both research and conjecture. This is mainly because it is neither possible to know all about the parent's internal life, that is their thoughts, dreams or torments, nor their external environment and the morals of changing times.<sup>32</sup>

Last but not least is what Viart terms 'hightened meta-literary consciousness,' especially in relation to an adequate and ethical representation and tribute to one's ancestors. This aspect of the filiation narrative was addressed by French novelists like Annie Ernaux through the thorny question of the type of language to be used to better reflect their parents' lives and personalities. Most often, it is the social discrepancy between the two generations which leads the author to wonder whether stylised or formal language is better or less adapted to the representation of peasant life and dialect. The filiation narrative thus asks the question of language<sup>33</sup>: how to be loyal to the parents' universe and/or social status by using a language which aptly describes/fits in with the stories of their lives.

The following three sections will focus on relationality, archeological narration, and meta-literary consciousness, particularly in relation to the ability of the memoirist-daughter to pay tribute to her parents by reconstructing their life stories.

### **Features of the filiation narrative in *Inventory of a Life Mislaid***

#### 1. Relationality or the importance of inheritance in the constitution of self:

In her memoir, Warner structurally enriches and continues, so to speak, her parents' stories through the inclusion of short, numbered autobiographical sections she calls '*Early memory*.' Although this memoir is devoted to telling the life stories of her mother

and father, as the filiation narrative is often initiated by the death of a parent, there is still a need to reminisce her own vision of the past and its role in the construction of the person Warner has turned into in the present. Mostly, these personal shots of autobiography display Warner's childhood in Cairo as well as her relation to her mother and to her own femininity, such as sensory memories of Ilia surrounded by birds while knitting: 'With flowery corsages and beaded bodices, the clothes she was making floated and fluttered like the birds at their flirty display [...] as they flew down to share our breakfast.' Warner indeed uses the metaphor of knitting to define herself as a writer: 'Because I no longer sew, words that were familiar in her vocabulary are no longer in use in mine or have acquired a different meaning. For example, *basting*: the loose stitches used for the initial stages of making a dress [...] How such terms lend themselves to metaphor: basting for the shallow safety of the unexamined love [...]'<sup>34</sup> Other memories include having her head shaved because of lice: 'my head felt fragile and cold, like an exposed China cup [...] this must be my earliest memory of all', about her games during siesta time, learning to count, or again her desire to resemble a little girl in a picture.<sup>35</sup> These various short sections are not only relational in that they define the memoirist in light of the way she perceives her parents, but also trigger the most important themes of the memoir in the way that Warner's childhood illness leads to the following chapter's discussion of balm and cures.<sup>36</sup>

In these 'sketches', Warner repetitively wonders, in metabiographical comments (which will be discussed in depth in the third part of this section), whether she inherited her father's colonialist and imperialist mindset, all the while asserting her continuous rebelliousness against it. In 'Report to the Memoir Club', Warner expands on this fear of inheritance in a short presentation of her memoir, then planned as a novel: 'the critic and writer's task often takes place within existing circuits of value, the logos which they (we) struggle to reshape through a counter-utterance, a counter-script.'<sup>37</sup> Esmond's colonialist mindset is also introduced in some of his letters to his parents before the end of the war, then in his reconstructed monologues when he tells his wife about his travels and their accompanying anecdotes (to be detailed in the analysis of his letters and other archival documents in the next section). Warner is clearly 'scared' of her heritage, using such words as 'inscribed' and 'corrupted' to reflect her apprehension at the potential irreversibility or indelibility of this familial trait. This fear is also most explicitly expressed in the section titled 'A Bill of Lading', in which Warner provides Esmond's detailed list of indecently luxurious items imported from England to Cairo, when the whole family moved to Egypt in the fifties, and comments on it as follows: 'a moment in history [...] It flooded me—still floods me—with conflicted feelings: somewhere between amazement at how things were

and how they have changed, embarrassment at the assumptions behind that journey into Egypt, and of course a sharp sense of absurdity and pathos.' The memoirist cannot help but feel ashamed at her father's imperialistic and snobbish mindset and even tries to legitimise this lavishness through speculative questions: 'Was Esmond thinking of trading in some of these items included in the bill of lading? The quantities of silver do seem excessive [...] perhaps he'd started dealing in antiques [...] Or perhaps he imagined silverware might be used to barter [...]? Or were these stray wedding presents [...]?' Warner then takes the opportunity to level her Said-styled criticism at all of England: 'The rings circling out from the centre to the periphery don't lose force: British ways of doing things loomed larger in Egypt in principle and in assertions of principle [...] Like so many other Brits, Esmond would hurl himself into contrary, furious patriotic self-righteousness, the more he felt Egypt swing in the direction of national autonomy [...]'<sup>38</sup> But Warner's worried questions and speculations remain unanswered as '[t]he list remains mute,'<sup>39</sup> and reveals the limitations of her knowledge in particular, and of all memoirists' in general. Warner comes back to issues of fears of inheritance in 'The Little Girl in the Picture', in which she dwells on her childhood readings as well as her father's 'anxious snobbery, which went with a kind of quick touchiness over social slights, imagined and other' and her own worry over

bear[ing] the stamp of colonial ambivalence, the creep and cringe of those exiled from the metropole, combined with the brutal superiority of the official class [...] I fear that something I do or say will betray that early imprint of empire yarns, my childhood saturation in derring-do adventure stories [...] in which the villains are foreigners [...] the breadth of this term [...] discloses the blanket sense of otherness that issued from the vantage point of imperial London to demarcate most of the rest of the world. I have always been scared of this, as I read my way through the books of my father [...]. They were the authors I loved in my formative years [...]<sup>40</sup>

In fact, Warner's worry is related to being a daughter of the empire, unconsciously, unintentionally but very physically, even genetically haunted, inhabited by unwanted mindsets:

Woolf's excoriation touches my live fear that I too have been inscribed, and the script has sunk all through my jelly without my being aware of it, making me part of thoughts and values that are not my own but come from the cellular mitochondria of my father and his tribal loyalties [...] The history of the Warners in the Caribbean went on rumbling under the story of my father's attitudes: his

Britishness was cadenced by the long, deep roots of the family in the empire; I have been writing throughout my life in response to this background [...] I've worried, as I often have in the past, that my colonial background and the adventure yarns of the empire have corrupted my mind, when I've looked at my appetite for exotic places and ripe language.<sup>41</sup>

Warner is indeed afraid of being determined, or to use Virginia Woolf's metaphor of 'inscriptions scored upon [...] the jelly of bone marrow, stem cells, DNA',<sup>42</sup> by Esmond's character, as she is also afraid of being determined by her mother's inclination towards easy judgment of people's appearances and her exactness at her daughter's awkward femininity: 'I tried my hardest to do my [...] curtsies to please her, she could not control the dismay and disappointment in her face: I was my father's child, and none of her willowy grace had passed on to her first daughter, as it would, later, to my sister. When I think of her, it is often in contrast to myself—she felt a kind of rivalry, envious of the chances Laura and I had, so very different from hers.'<sup>43</sup>

Warner also criticizes her father's rage fits, such as his overreaction in Cairo to what he saw as a too extravagant silver photograph frame Ilia had bought<sup>44</sup> (which is ironic when one thinks back of the bill of lading), comparing his Hulk-like transformations to a 'werewolf's with 'claws and fangs and rank breath and bloody eyeballs and stiff short-haired pelt [...]',<sup>45</sup> 'Discomfort, unease, constraint, suffocation, these almost capture the sense of oppression I too felt, with a father also given to rage and then to bouts of abject remorse [...] Comparable fits, which we children also saw, would have remained from later years. Inside her, his rage had struck a deep wound which closed and congealed in scar tissue, gradually thickening to an icy numbness, as she realised what Esmond could be like and how he could do her harm.'<sup>46</sup> It is thus through knowing and understanding the nature of her parents' relation and witnessing her father's stinginess and her mother's frustration and devious ways of making her own money that Warner made decisions for who she wants to be: 'Knowing these humiliations she suffered, I resolved I would never ever depend on a husband [...] and, though I would marry, I would "paddle my own canoe".'<sup>47</sup> She also rages against her parents' snobbish, judgmental attitude, thus reflecting her own tolerance and interest in, and acceptance of difference and of what others would call 'strangeness': 'This phrase made a claim based on class affiliations which I wanted to delete from my own family's sense of itself,' '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.'<sup>48</sup>

## 2. Archeological narration:

The reason behind the use of the term 'archaeological' is that the narrative is more like an investigation based on 'un-knowledge' and reflects ignorance rather than knowledge. So the memoirist investigates the past from the perspective of the present, rather than using chronological linearity from past to present as s/he gradually creates new knowledge about the parent. Viart explains that 'The narrative would be constructed like an excavation of past time, written with the help of archives, documents, received stories [...] the archive [...] is everywhere, taking all sorts of forms'.<sup>49</sup>

In *Inventory*, Warner relies on the use and description of archival documents and objects such as photographs, letters, diaries, shoes, a hatbox, as well as lists and inventories. The latter are exposed as such in the book and accompanied by pictures or photographs for a greater visual impact: 'Since the turn of the millennium she [Warner] has been increasingly fascinated by the capacity of objects to map memories and provide guideposts in the effort to retrace lives [...] domestic objects as metonyms for family histories [...] The power of objects to convey life stories.'<sup>50</sup> In 'Report to the Memoir Club', Warner links this type of narration to a freer form of the memoir, with such lists including 'the vocabulary my mother had to learn to become the wife of an Englishman who considered himself a gentleman [...] the bills of lading of the goods my parents brought with them to set up house in Cairo; the ingredients and recipes she learned to cook to conform to his taste.'<sup>51</sup> These lists, for example, are displayed in order to expose the lavishness and exaggerated decorum of social class which were important to her father, reconstituting what Warner calls 'an identikit portrait.'<sup>52</sup>

Esmond's letters, old maps, and record collections complete his picture as a self-conscious but awkward gentleman. At the sight of Hildegarede's records, a potential former lover of her father's, Warner expresses her desire to know more (and paradoxically not so much), comparing herself to the music trademark's mascot:

the dog in me wanted to go beyond listening and pass through the audible and the tangible into what has evaporated and taste it, eat it [...] commune with the person whose voice was coming out of the shiny black planet in orbit on the gramophone [...] the purpose-built record cabinet was a family treasure chest, and opening its doors with the little key and taking out its contents was not exactly forbidden, but aroused a similar order of excitement to trying on Ilia's clothes when she would let us play at dressing up in them, or putting on her jewellery and stepping into her shoes and even her underwear. The cabinet in the hall had an aura, like Ilia's jewellery case [...] It opened paths into the past [...] Trying to think back to what

happened before I knew how to pay attention to adults, the scene seems thronged with such personae, or rather, Ilia splits and multiplies, as do Esmond and Hildegarde [...] Our parents are perhaps the people we have the opportunity to know best, but these opportunities are missed.<sup>53</sup>

The previous quotation shows how important objects are to archeological narration, not only in relation to their impact on the memoirist's senses, enriching her vision with sounds and mental images, but also metaphorically allowing her to re-live her parents' lives and experiences as if by proxy. On the other hand, Warner refrains from digging too deep, expressing her extreme unease and impressions of mentally and morally trespassing through second-person narration, repetition, and explicit adjectives as in the following extract:

Inquiring into a parent's sex life, especially before he had even met your mother and your existence was not even imagined, feels *vertiginous* and *voyeuristic* as well as a bit *sordid*, but I have long been curious about the family story that my father had a long love affair with a nightclub singer, 'Chanteuse internationale, Hildegarde' [...] The singer had prepared the way. My ignorance about her surely didn't arise from lack of interest but from the tacit prohibition against examining fathers and their sex lives at all. It's *just about tolerable* to accept that a father had to do it so that you could come into being [...] the thought is *appalling* [...] rather than dwell –or inquire more–I turned away from the scene [...] Any closer inspection would have felt *obscene*; envisaging Daddy in bed with Mummy was already *unthinkable* but imagining him in bed with someone else demanded something more, and I wouldn't—couldn't—go that far.<sup>54</sup>

In addition, many objects are related to Ilia and portray the mother's beauty, craftiness, sharp intellect and stylish *coquetterie* as vividly and accurately as possible through the books she read and annotated, the brogues made up for her upon her arrival to London and which imposed a sort of inadequate, heavy Englishness upon her, or the powder compact she received as a present from one of her many admirers in Cairo. In the section titled 'Hatbox', a detailed physical description of the object pictured under the title in the vein of archeological narration helps in the reminiscence and precedes that of a photograph, both objects marking Ilia's arrival in the Warner family house and the contrast between the newly arrived southern Italian young lady and her British upper-class in-laws:

Fifteen inches in diameter, seven inches deep, dark blue buckram laid on board, with a leather strap [...] there are hats inside which Ilia has trimmed, including the lacy one made of straw with dark ribbons which she is wearing with a slightly self-conscious smile in the press photograph taken of her with her father-in-law Sir "Plum" Warner, in the *Illustrated London News*; he is wearing morning dress, too, and looks Chaplinesque beside her tallness; they're standing outside the gates of Buckingham Palace.<sup>55</sup>

Most importantly, Ilia's diaries, although engrafted sparingly within the memoir, provide more intimate details, at times 'too' intimate for Warner who is at once fascinated by and 'revolted' against her mother's 'vivacity and charm':

in a diary entry many decades later, in 1989, six years after my father had died, she writes, in Italian: "*Io sono sempre stata la parte attiva nell'atto sessuale*" ("I have always been the active partner in the sexual act"). Was this really possible? At first reading I was disbelieving—shocked. It is difficult to think of one's mother in this way, of course.<sup>56</sup>

Near the end of the memoir, Warner goes back to Ilia's diaries, reporting them indirectly (and perhaps unreliably) in relation to the metaphor of disguise which dominates both her narrative and her mother's secret life:

She left many journals behind, after she died, mostly written in Italian in her characterful spiky handwriting that is rebarbative to read. They are filled with recipes, notes on books she was reading, teaching notes about Italian literature for the classes she began giving, and lists of proverbs; also many, many pages about love affairs, mostly unsatisfactory [...]. I remember how she could rekindle a room filled with deathly dull 'old sticks' by putting on all her liveliness. She performed gaiety so it seemed real; she was masking the terrible, appalling anguish I found in her diaries [...] Coming across her diaries of this period, all in Italian, the writing agitated and sometimes desperate, filled me with rage on her behalf against him. The scenes aren't to be repeated here: her ghost would shudder at the memory of those times of deep unhappiness. Yet she didn't destroy these notebooks, several volumes of them, brimming with more hopes of love.<sup>57</sup>

Also important to archeological narration are photographs, as Viart explains how 'photography holds an essential place [...] the medium of recall or of reconstruction.'<sup>58</sup>



Indeed, by engrafting photographs of Warner's parents, of her mother next to her father-in-law not long after her arrival in England, of herself as a child, or of the burnt Cairo bookshop, not only help better visualize the (often dead) persons and the lives presented in the memoir, but also help reconstruct the past more reliably and realistically. As the reader turns into a spectator, sometimes even a sort of 'voyeur', drowning in the past and in the private lives of Warner's parents, another (auto)biography takes shape, the reader's. Other interesting photographs include that of Hildegarde<sup>59</sup> which bestows even more romance and glamor on the parents' life in Cairo.

Letters are also crucial to the understanding of a person's mindset and personality as shown by Esmond's first letters to his parents. These letters constitute an interpretative space left for the reader to judge his character as the father's voice is transmitted through first-person narration and at times a Joycean free indirect speech, 'he told his mother.'<sup>60</sup> Esmond's voice textually and symbolically dominates the first part of the memoir and his complacent attitude is reflected in his epistolary descriptions of Ilia, of her future life with him, and the words he underlines: 'they have nice friends of "the professional classes" type. Ilia however (you know she is only 21) belongs to the new world, and her life will be mine, not her circle's', 'her combination of spirit, vitality, and what a pleasure to look at, like a 2-yr-old filly now, "rangy" NOT quite filled out! [...] In character she has much in common with "Ju-Ju" aged 3, including that almost fierce possessiveness.'<sup>61</sup> Esmond constantly compares his would-be wife to such animals as dogs and horses and Warner explains the meaning of the words and provides her own commentary: 'Ju Ju was a pet, much loved, but a dog. And a filly, well, is a young pony', 'Elia is a greyhound [...] [she] has the lightest step I ever met.'<sup>62</sup> Apparently, neither she nor her mother appreciated these comparisons, but the daughter's judgment is not the harshest in the memoir as she later adds: 'Yet, all in all, "filly" was preferable to Mummy. But filly was something sporting, too [...]'<sup>63</sup> Religion was also a topic which reflected the father's paternalistic complacency regarding his would-be wife: 'her remarks about foreigners amuse me, if it was NOT rather sad. Elia is of course a RC [...] I was rather delighted to find that she barely knew there were any other Christians except RCs!!' On the other hand, Esmond's letters reflected aspects of Ilia's character and the nature of their relationship as he explains at the end of his letter: 'She is very worried you will think of her "NOT good enough for me" when the facts are very much the other way, and I say that most objectively.'<sup>64</sup> Warner comments on those letters and photographs through her doubtful, retrospective metabiographical comments, trying to understand, to find a justification for her father's mindset:

It is disorienting hearing your father's voice from long ago, sounding in the chamber of memory, and seeing your mother then, before everything that was to happen. I can't help flinching at the way he wrote about her— was it naïveté? Yet he was raised to worldliness, far more than she.<sup>65</sup>

### 3. Restitution of a parent's life as reconstruction or the 'ethical turn':

Warner's memoir is titled *A Life Mislaid* so the explicit aim of her work is to restore and reconstruct the truth, especially in relation to her mother; giving back what she was deprived of, a restitution of her personality, dreams, hopes and disappointments—without turning it into a model to be followed or moralizing.<sup>66</sup> Viart explains this through Annie Ernaux's use of a simple style in her fiction, for example, in order to be closer to her peasant parents and their identity. Viart adds: 'Most novelists are attached to the explicit justification of the poetic choice governing their writing,'<sup>67</sup> but no matter how aesthetic, such issues mark what Viart calls '*le tournant éthique*' (the ethical turn) or 'ethics of restitution' of literature. So behind Warner's explicitly expressed attempts at finding the right words, structure or style for her memoir, there is an ethical move:

Filiation narratives deploy in fact a double restitution [...] it is about [...] establishing what took place, reconstructing what was undone (untied/disordered). Starting from the material which is mingled (brewed) by these narratives, a reconstitutive work is devised which attempts to give voice to that which did not have access to language or narrative. But "restitute" also means "give someone something back." It is then about giving back their existence to those who have been deprived (stripped/robbed) of it: conferring on them a lost legitimacy, reestablishing their mangled (mislaid) dignity.<sup>68</sup>

Giving her voice back to her mother by telling her story in her memoir is thus an act of rebuilding her dignity and 'reestablishing' the legitimacy of an Italian woman from the rural south within British and Egyptian environments in which most acquaintances misunderstood or misinterpreted her, not least of which her own husband. In the 'Bill of Lading' discussed earlier, Warner notes the absence of items belonging to her mother's world, symbolically hinting at her lack of influence and presence, or her neglected status within the English Warner family.<sup>69</sup> Perhaps Warner herself, in spite (or because) of her own love and occasional judgmental attitude towards her mother, fears misinterpreting her in turn, even while trying to

build/identify her own identity against/in relation to her mother's. One example of Warner's criticism is reflected in what can be considered as metabiographical extracts in which the memoirist-daughter expands on the definitions of Italian expressions like 'magari' or 'fare figura' in order to provide autobiographical comments not only on her mother and her relationship to her, but also to criticize the contemporary modern condition:

another of my mother's carefully preserved mementoes that gives me a cold shudder of recognition, because learning to anticipate how others see you was taught early, to boys and girls, but more especially girls [...] It wasn't an ethical ideal but a call to masks [...] to conscious moulding in the mirrors of others' responses [...] Facebook profiles, Instagram boasts, aren't a diabolical contemporary invention; they merely transpose into the tentacular sphere of the virtual the same social requirement, to anticipate what others might think [...] Sometimes, my mother would sit with one girlfriend and [...] They'd laugh together about the size of someone's bottom [...] I remember how, during my overplump childhood, she wouldn't exactly comment directly but would reassure me: "Plain girls are much more likely to be happy." [...] It was really my mother I hated for judging people so harshly, and no doubt harbouring thoughts that I didn't come up to scratch either.<sup>70</sup>

In an article in *The Guardian*, as she explains the reason behind writing her novel *The Lost Father*, Warner provides intimate details which may account for her choice to write about her parents:

It was written after the death of her father, when she realised that she had never really spoken to him. "I hadn't talked to him enough about his life and what he felt about things. I was too young, antagonistic and hostile. We'd always end up having a fight about Arthur Scargill instead of me asking him any interesting questions. I still regret that, so I made sure I did ask my mother about her life. She had been transplanted from Italy, and I told her I'd seen newsreel footage of when Mussolini asked women to give up their wedding rings as part of the war effort in Abyssinia and they got a ring of iron in return. It turns out my mother went with my grandmother to do this.<sup>71</sup>

So in addition to her feelings of regret about not having asked 'any interesting questions' to her father which would have allowed her to know him better, Warner discovers that her mother's life had had wider meanings in relation to Italian and

World War II history. Hence, as such reconstructions remain 'lacunary', it is necessary for the memoirist to reconstruct the facts and compensate for her lack of knowledge or understanding with metabiographical comments, especially to highlight the difficulty of remembering or of knowing what the deceased parent would or would not have desired:

It is necessary to construct hypotheses, to imagine [...] [memoirists] give space to uncertainty, unfold conjectures, suggest many potential versions for the same event. They display their hesitations [...] evocative narratives, but never completely known, not very sure of themselves and suspicious of the novelistic model which could distort them.<sup>72</sup>

The section called 'Hatbox' also imaginatively reconstitutes the mother's first experience of exile and difficult adjustments in England which reads like a Dickensian novel, with its lengthy portrayals of Post-war London and her mother as the 'transplanted' but kind heroine:

Today's skies were clear blue. She saw islands beneath her [...] She'd read about Great Britain in a textbook about Europe [...] She kept her pocket Italian-English dictionary in her handbag near her compact and lipstick [...] A light rain wept on the windows of the bus [...] The porter opened the door to her [...] The fug of the mansion block [...] made of the coal-fired air that lingered still from the wartime struggles against raw chill and damp, and the general stewed comforting frowziness that, somewhat shocked, she came to know and recognise so clearly as the smell of England. Mouse droppings and rats' nests, suet and soot, cabbage and cabbage water, [...] lard, mustard [...] chicory coffee; then the hoarded treasures, eked out one by one, rationed crumbs in cake and biscuit tins [...]—she would always let her new in-laws have her portion of sweets [...] This whiffiness of London startled her. She came from a country where white linen was hung out of the windows daily [...] she was never to become accustomed to the sluttishness of her new countrymen and women—especially among the well-off and the well-born [...] As she began to learn the customs of the house, she would stay in her room and arrange her things [...]. Soot, radiating out from Pelham Street [...] Soot, cinders, potash, coal—burning in furnaces the length and breadth of the country; smoking up chimneys in their millions; plumes of smut-laden smoke unfurling thickly through the murk [...]. [T]he empire's bloodstream ran mineral black [...], with

Esmond still away and no news of his return, she could not be confident that she knew what was going to happen to her.<sup>73</sup>

So Warner's text, despite (or thanks to) its fragmentation, remains suspicious of itself, hesitant, acknowledging its own limitations through the '*mise-en-abîme*' of metabiographical comments and commenting at the same on the genre of the memoir:

You move back through the shadows of the past, you listen to the voices of the dead, and if you are trying to reimagine what they did and what they thought (if you are writing a book) you can go some distance, but only so far [...], your arms clasp nothing but your own hallucinations. It's not only that it feels sacrilegious to press too far into the private life of your own mother and father. It is also frightening for the same reason, and you shrink away from it. Rather, I shrink away.<sup>74</sup>

In the previous quotation, Warner goes as far as to acknowledge the impossibility of reconstructing the lives of her parents, expressing her anguish about the dig in the process. Warner thus romances her parents' lives as she reconstructs their imaginary conversations, using direct and free indirect speech, wavering between Ilia's and her 'English officer's' perspectives, while the former was listening 'carefully', 'intently' to vivid descriptions of his incredible voyages, as 'she asked him to repeat words; [and] committed them to memory':

Esmond had traveled the world [...], he told her; before this beastly war, he'd toured Italy and seen more of her country than she had; he would show her Venice too, one day [...], the family had been on long sea voyages, all the way to Australia with his father on a cricket tour in 1911. [...] "Australia! Daddy was playing there, you see. His game, cricket. The game you don't have in Italy – not yet, anyway. [...] It's the embodiment of what it means to be British." [...] [He] was laughing that hooting laugh of his, which misted his specs so he had to take them off and wipe them and mop his tearing eyes. He collected himself. [...] "I ran the deck from stern to prow to look – the Suez Canal! It unfurls calmly level with the wide flat desert on both sides. [...] What a sight it was! What a triumph of raw human will! [...] We fought to hold Cairo and Egypt because of it: it's the empire's coronary artery."<sup>75</sup>

One cannot help but notice the father's imperialistic stand in these reconstructions, a stand which Warner's sense of ethics never accepted. Still, the memoir includes tender

portrayals of Esmond's jolliness and sociability which nuance his daughter's image of him: 'Laughter was Esmond's chief mark of identity, the fingerprint of his very being, the signature of his iris. It exploded and cascaded throughout his life, reverberating through the bodies of his parents and siblings, friends, and, later, of his wife Ilia and his daughters. As a little girl, I always knew where to find him: I'd follow the laughter that shook him and the ground beneath him.'<sup>76</sup> Warner's 'early memories' also seem to attempt to nuance the father's image through sensitive childhood memories, reverting to the use of 'Daddy': 'Daddy taught me to swim. [...] When Daddy joined us, he took me on his back which was flat and large and smooth like a fat dolphin's.' These attempts reach their climax after the Cairo fire which had 'a brutal effect on my father's state of mind. [...] It embittered him [...] – the voice of that younger man, the officer who'd felt sympathy with the prisoners of war [...], grew rough and vengeful'<sup>77</sup> and this also nuances his own daughter's rebelliousness against his ideology in her constant attempts at (re)reconstructing her own identity and her vision of history and the state of the contemporary Arab world:

During the early 1960s, I rose in equally vehement revolt against him and all he stood for. Nasser seemed to me a shining liberator and a unifier, justified in his defiance of the British [...]. But either age has dimmed my own ardent longing for liberation, and moved me closer to my father's views, or the last half-century and more of rising ethnic nationalism and bigoted demagogues – by no means only in Egypt— has modified my ideas. [...] The rhythmic pulses of history nevertheless keep returning to these ideals again and again and they need attending to and struggling for.<sup>78</sup>

Warner's anguish materializes more fully at the end of the memoir with the question of whether her mother would have wanted her narrative to be reconstructed and exposed. A question Warner analyzes through the metaphor and symbolism of the *shabti*, a figure who performs the tasks of the dead in the afterlife so they can enjoy themselves:

I'm fumbling towards an analogy with writing, or at least with the kind that Margaret Atwood describes as "Negotiating with the Dead". In the case of a writer, a ghost is a kind of *shabti* [...] who takes on their subject's identity and labours in the public arena of the world on behalf of the other person. [...] She is addressing me; she knows that after she has died, I will go through her things. [...] I am trying to be her *shabti* and answer to her ever-present ghost [...], to continue her being and

register her experience by responding to the traces of her acts [...] can I interpret her and relate the story? [...] she calls me to answer, to witness the arc of her life.<sup>79</sup>

Such acts of bearing witness<sup>80</sup> include the 'polished' and honored image of Ilia and her extreme kindness to others, culminating in her later joining the Samaritans, which is described in a reconstructed scene between her and a homosexual friend whom she consoles and understands.<sup>81</sup> The final eulogy reaches its peak in the final section, or 'Epilogue: 26 January 2008, London', which is entirely devoted to her mother's difficult last moments before death and opens up on the description of a biscuits packet which had served to give her 'Communion' as part of the last rites. It tells the final anecdote of Ilia's deathbed,

already an effigy that over time brass-rubbings and footsteps have worn away [...], except that she was still drawing breath [...]. Beyond that softly uttered cry, I could see the long years stretch, years of her unhappiness, her self-denial on our, her children's account, her consent to how things had to be, during all that time when she had done all she could to keep everything together.<sup>82</sup>

Warner's memoir thus ends with the death of her mother, sadly, touchingly, almost unbearably, as it ends with reminiscences of her sombre moments and resilient, kind heart.

## Conclusion

What was initially intended as a novel has transformed in the process of composing it into a memoir, one with the purpose of remembering, bearing witness and restoring justice to past moments of history and of the lives of Marina Warner's parents, no matter how imperfectly:

writings may also become part of a strategy to disguise the truth—not intentionally, but as a consequence of wishfulness. A memoir like this one, which needs must be unreliable, since it is not possible to know your parents or their lives or yours before the age of six, substitutes for what really happened and who they really were; its work on their behalf inevitably misremembers or misrepresents, or, at best, embellishes, failing to set out what really took place.<sup>83</sup>

So this memoir not only reconstructs Esmond and Ilia's lives through Warner's perspective, but also reconstructs an awkward autobiography which shines new lights on the memoirist-daughter herself and her vision of, and relation to both of her parents. By rebuilding such a lost link between past and present generations, Warner succeeds in her mission; that of transmitting, of being the inheritor of her ancestors' values and mindset, even while contradicting or criticizing them.

By adopting the perspective of the filiation narrative and its salient generic features, originally applied by Viart to French novels, this article also tries to bear witness to a similar trend in English life writing in general, and memoir in particular. Thanks to relationality, archeological narration, and the memoirist's duty to restore both truth and justice, Marina Warner's *Inventory* not only reflects the blurriness of the boundaries between fact and fiction but also introduces the mode of the French "filiation narrative" into English theory and criticism.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Warner, Marina, 'Rich Pickings', in: Boylan, Clare (ed), *The Agony and The Ego: The Art and Strategy of Fiction Writing Explored*, London: Penguin Books, 1993, 33.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, 30.

<sup>4</sup> Idem, 29.

<sup>5</sup> Idem, 30-32.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, 31-32.

<sup>7</sup> Warner, Marina, *Inventory of a Life Mislaid: An Unreliable Memoir*, London: William Collins, 2021, 362-64.

- <sup>8</sup> Nünning, Ansgar, 'Fictional Metabiographies and Metaautobiographies: Towards a Definition, Typology and Analysis of Self-Reflexive Hybrid Metagenres', in: Huber, Werner, Martin Middeke, and Hubert Zapf (eds.), *Text and Theorie, Self-Reflexivity in Literature*, Würzburg: Könningshausen and Neuman, 2005, 195.
- <sup>9</sup> Warner, Marina, 'Report to the Memoir Club: Scenes from a Colonial Childhood', in: Ryan, Derek and Stella Bolaki (eds.), *Contradictory Woolf: Selected Papers from the Twenty-First Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf*, Clemson SC: Clemson University Digital Press, 2012, 61.
- <sup>10</sup> Coupe, Laurence, *Marina Warner*, London: Northcote House Publishers, 2006, 1-2.
- <sup>11</sup> *Idem*, 5.
- <sup>12</sup> Warner, 2021, 1.
- <sup>13</sup> Buss, Helen M, 'Memoirs', in: Jolly, Margaretta (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, volume 2, London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001, 595.
- <sup>14</sup> Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, the, 'memoir', in: *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 29 January 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/memoir-historical-genre>, date accessed: 29 March 2023.
- <sup>15</sup> Raitses, Rebecca, 'A Harki History Lesson: Dalila Kerchouche's Filiation Narrative *Mon père, ce harki*', in: *European Journal of Life Writing* 11 (2022) 11-27, 12.
- <sup>16</sup> Viart, Dominique and Bruno Vercier, 'Les écritures de Soi', in: *La Littérature Française au Présent: Héritage, Modernité, Mutations*, second edition, Paris: Bordas, 2008, 27-8.
- <sup>17</sup> Gudmundsdóttir, Gunnthórunn, *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writing*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003, 183, 200.
- <sup>18</sup> Eakin, John Paul, 'Relational Selves, Relational Lives: The Story of the Story', in: Couser, G. Thomas and Joseph Fichtelberg (eds.), *True Relations: Essays on Autobiography and the Postmodern*, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998, 65.
- <sup>19</sup> Viart and Vercier, 2008, 31, this and all the following quotations from references by Viart are my translations.
- <sup>20</sup> *Idem*, 38-42.
- <sup>21</sup> *Idem*, 48-49.
- <sup>22</sup> Viart, Dominique, 'Les récits de filiation. Naissance, raisons et évolutions d'une forme littéraire', in: *Cahiers ERTA* 19 (2019) 9-40, 9.
- <sup>23</sup> Viart and Vercier, 2008, 79.
- <sup>24</sup> Viart, 2019, 10-11, 14, 18.
- <sup>25</sup> Warner, 2021, 304.
- <sup>26</sup> Viart, 2019, 94.
- <sup>27</sup> Viart and Vercier, 2008, 80, 82.
- <sup>28</sup> Warner, 2021, 364.
- <sup>29</sup> Propst Lisa, *Marina Warner and The Ethics of Telling Silenced Stories*, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020, 29.
- <sup>30</sup> Viart, 2019, 81.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.
- <sup>32</sup> *Idem*, 92.
- <sup>33</sup> *Idem*, 81.
- <sup>34</sup> Warner, 2021, 370-1.
- <sup>35</sup> *Idem*, 157, 183, 220, 250, 198-99.
- <sup>36</sup> *Idem*, 259.
- <sup>37</sup> Warner, 2011, 57.
- <sup>38</sup> Warner, 2021, 172-3.
- <sup>39</sup> *Idem*, 148.

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- <sup>40</sup> Idem, 215-6.
- <sup>41</sup> Idem, 215-17, 229.
- <sup>42</sup> Idem, 216.
- <sup>43</sup> Idem, 294.
- <sup>44</sup> Idem, 319.
- <sup>45</sup> Idem, 321-22.
- <sup>46</sup> Idem, 320, 322.
- <sup>47</sup> Idem, 323.
- <sup>48</sup> Idem, 227, 74-5.
- <sup>49</sup> Viart, 2019, 13-14, 94-95.
- <sup>50</sup> Propst, 2020, 149.
- <sup>51</sup> Warner, 2011, 61.
- <sup>52</sup> Warner, 2021, 148.
- <sup>53</sup> Idem, 160, 168-9.
- <sup>54</sup> Idem, 163, 171-2, my italics.
- <sup>55</sup> Idem, 43.
- <sup>56</sup> Idem, 29.
- <sup>57</sup> Idem, 367, 370.
- <sup>58</sup> Viart, 2019, 95.
- <sup>59</sup> Warner, 2021, 165.
- <sup>60</sup> Idem, 13.
- <sup>61</sup> Idem, 17, 26.
- <sup>62</sup> Idem, 27, 42.
- <sup>63</sup> Idem, 27.
- <sup>64</sup> Idem, 41.
- <sup>65</sup> Idem, 42.
- <sup>66</sup> Viart, 2019, 18.
- <sup>67</sup> Idem, 15.
- <sup>68</sup> Idem, 16.
- <sup>69</sup> Warner, 2021, 149.
- <sup>70</sup> Idem, 74-75.
- <sup>71</sup> Anonymous, 'Absolutely Fabulist', *The Guardian*, 22 January 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/jan/22/history>, date accessed: 12 January 2023.
- <sup>72</sup> Viart, 2019, 95.
- <sup>73</sup> Warner, 2021, 45-7, 56, 61-2.
- <sup>74</sup> Idem, 304.
- <sup>75</sup> Idem, 30-32.
- <sup>76</sup> Idem, 112.
- <sup>77</sup> Idem, 251-2, 358.
- <sup>78</sup> Idem, 359-60.
- <sup>79</sup> Idem, 368-71.
- <sup>80</sup> *The Lost Father* is interestingly described by Lisa Propst as 'a deliberate act of witness, a commitment to the memory of the people who have passed away', 61.
- <sup>81</sup> Warner, 2021, 195-6.
- <sup>82</sup> Idem, 373, 377.
- <sup>83</sup> Idem, 371.