A PILLOW FIGHT WITH HEGEMONY
“THE MEMOIR” AND CORRECT BEHAVIOR IN STEPHANIE YOUNG

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Stephanie Young’s second book of poetry, *Picture Palace*, considers autobiography as a process rather than a product. Above all, it is an alternative to the official genre of “the memoir,” to the methods and mannerisms of that genre.

Young’s first collection, *Telling the Future Off*, featured anxiously autobiographical lyrics reminiscent of Frank O’Hara, poems concerned with “the high-gloss of boredom, / national pink well-being, preventative / presence of mind.” The best of these poems focused on social anxiety as a public, collective experience, as in the long poem “Age of the Mercenary” in which Young writes:

> are you seeing the same chair I see
> did you hear what I did
> do you have it too
> the real sickness of equating unlike things
> the constant incremental comparisons
> everybody sick to everybody else’s stomach.

Building on this work, it was natural for Young to engage with memoir, the genre in which individual experience is translated into a public form for collective consumption.

“The memoir” as a commercial genre demands that all lives, no matter how extraordinary or aberrant, no matter how different they are from the well-known life story of the affluent bourgeois subject, must nonetheless be represented by the same formal means and strategies. Such a memoir writes a life, any life, as a series of narrative incidents consisting of all the relevant formative details of the writer’s personality, displaying the formation of that personality through the progression of incidents, and supplementing the narrative with dialogue between the narrator and significant others and with the evocation of visual images that supply the narrative with a filmic quality, enabling the reader to visualize the story. In “the memoir” the reader is not mired down with language, but rather the language becomes a vehicle for the transmission of the essence of a particular life. It is a powerfully reductive form, and the reduction serves to enable judgment.

Interesting examples of “the memoir” genre are rarely about typical bourgeois childhoods, but rather tend to focus on the childhoods of people who are raised in poverty or other alternative social contexts. “The memoir” concerns itself with the transcendence of difficult childhoods; through this genre, the writer, although she or he comes from a non-bourgeois context, is enabled to become an affluent bourgeois subject by comprehending the limitations placed on him or her by a difficult childhood and overcoming those limitations. Above all, the formalities of the official memoir genre assert that an affluent bourgeois childhood is both normative and best. "The memoir" represents any other form of childhood as a source of pain, suffering, confusion, and dysfunctional values, and shows the heroic process through which the writer learned to affirm bourgeois values above the false values of a damaging childhood.

In other words, "the memoir" as it exists in our culture acts as social class imperialism, asserting the fundamental superiority of the bourgeois lifestyle by representing all other forms of American living as fundamentally faulty and destructive of the opportunities and mental health of young people. Further, the writer of "the memoir" acts as a willing accomplice of the bourgeoisie, articulating in the most earnest way the failure of the value system and way of life of her or his own parents. Only because the writer has evolved into a bourgeois subject is he or she empowered to write "the memoir" and only because he or she has written the memoir is the writer affirmed as a bourgeois subject. In other words, "the memoir" chronicles the late identification of a troubled young person with bourgeois values and the realization that these values constitute a better and more natural view of life.

Alternative ways of living (including poverty itself) are framed by "the memoir" as carnivalesque—more exciting and more dangerous than bourgeois life. They portray interesting life as something better left to its victims, the children (who are the memoirists). The experience of reading these memoirs shows us that we are better off being bored by the routine and seemingly meaningless conventions of bourgeois life than going through hell or going insane trying to do something else. The memoirist's reliable identification with safe bourgeois normality in the present tense represents any alternative lifestyle as something which has been tried and failed. It is a genre that tells us we will hurt our children if we try to live differently.

The memoir Young did not write concerned a religious childhood, one in which "My Baptist finger picks my Baptist nose," in which "I just lie down when it gets too hot in the home school." But instead Young choose to do something else. On the first page she writes:

> One thought she-child could eventually step outside. She found she could not.
>
> Instead she found it everywhere. (Repetitive arrangements with more than one body. Her own, and other's. The house, its content and structure. Governing bodies.)

Rather than writing an official memoir about the escape from one (nonstandard) way of living into another (better) one, Young has written a book about the continuity of relations, about a life in which living with others in houses according to rules has been the inescapable given. Rather than writing about entrapment in a religious childhood and liberation into a bourgeois norm, Young has written about a life of entrapment. It is a life full of objects and thoughts, a life in which thoughts often have as much solidity as objects and in which objects, through their disposability, can be as transient as thoughts. It is a life of intellectual property (what is on the bookshelf, the I-Pod, the DVDs). I recognize this life. Contained within a house, with objects and by and with relations with cohabitants, it is a life of anxiety and pleasure, a life of anxiety about pleasure.

Whereas the official memoir presents bourgeois life as an empty space into which the memoirist escapes from the crowded and damaging confusion of childhood, there is no culminating emptiness in *Picture Palace*. Instead the flow of sensations among objects is portrayed as a permanently transient condition . . . the mind a flow through which intellectual properties and human relations circulate anxiously and excessively. This flow can be overwhelming or enjoyed—it is both. The container is always full and complete, and it is the very completeness of this life, the lack of extra space within the container, that makes it so anxious. There is always room for new developments, but they must be squeezed in, and this squeezing in of new possibilities represents a constant increase of pressure.

Young writes:

> Don't let me run
> out of Woody Allen. Everybody said
> don't run Stephanie
> out of patience with me Stephanie
> they said take cover.
> Person-shaped cement
> protective device other people
> had and had to show me
> how to use, but I wouldn't. A kind of
> cathedral, it could. . . . not go off instead?
>
> And this would be for everyone.
> Like summer camp.
> A friendly, non-bomb moment.
>
> On the other side of this I am calmly
> cleaning the red carpet. Surveying
> the nice wall. Granted
> that our little hotel is dull,
> and the food indifferent,
> and that day after day
> dawns very much the same, yet
> we would not have it otherwise.
>
> Coming in the door is bad.
> After a while everything
> gets better. If you could just
> calm down. Get in the snow.

There is no place to run out *to*, and there is no danger of running *out of* this life. The supply of life is constant, with no run-off. Such life is a completeness to be rationalized and navigated, challenged with variations on perspective. Rather than running out, a person might "go off," an explosive switch of demeanor. But it would be better to "take cover" in a "Person-shaped cement / protective device," and if everyone did the same it would be "Like summer camp. / A friendly, non-bomb moment." Anxiety must be defused with the assertion (undermined by every formal element in this passage) that "we would not have it otherwise." Above all, "After a while everything / gets better." What can be relied on, confronting the surfeit of experience, is a circulation of perspectives that, after a while, invariably brings "better" back around.

Much of the book revolves around the hope that the author's perspective will change by itself, or, more accurately, will be found to have changed. In the midst of the book's longest section, “Chapters First Through Third,” Young writes, “We shall see if a significant tonal shift has actually occurred” and then goes on to compile a list of evidence that could possibly denote such a shift, a list that is also a parody of the “to do” list. This list represents some of the possible changes that Young could make to shift her own perspective on the charged completeness of her life. She writes:

> Many things must be made new for a tonal shift to stick. She draws up a list:
>
> 1. Recipes
> 2. The type of food we eat
> 3. The locations where we obtain our food
> 4. Pauses (duration, shape)
> 5. Incidence rate of Export A
> 6. Phone calls (duration, shape)
> 7. Social engagements, individual and shared
> 8. The falling asleep process
> 9. Sleep (duration, shape, mood)
> 10. The processes and order of waking
> 11. Saturdays
> 12. Workload
> 13. Movies
> 14. Bedding
> 15. Flatware
> 16. Physique
>
> Any significant change to one item on this list should be enough to alter their course from one loop on another. “Is that all there is?” he whispers, “LOOPS?”

Young’s metaphor is of domestic space as a pressurized compartment, a container that is a complete system that assimilates everything outside of it into its own workings. Because it is a complete system, it can only be modified from within, and yet any adjustment might be sufficient to shift the narrator’s perspective on the entire system. And the list, these 16 items, is incomplete of course—so many other adjustments are possible. Young continues:

> An arrangement of categories on a list? Not enough either! Especially a list that doesn’t include drugs, alcohol, or plainly sexual gestures. Like the houseguest who looks up and wonders aloud why she said what she just said, when it’s the opposite of what she thinks. That’s our list.
>
> Alli Warren: “We are lonely insofar as (because) we are co-each-other.”

Young’s poetic colleague Alli Warren is made the Cassandra, announcing the bleak idea that loneliness is the signature emotion of human relations, that loneliness is in some sense synonymous with interdependence. But loneliness is not the primary emotion here; rather the passage revolves around crowdedness, a sense that the living space is so full of the activity of interaction that there is no place in which to retreat, no perspective from which to (as Williams put it) “witness and adjust.” Instead, Young faces a felt imperative to adjust first in order to enable the possibility of witnessing differently. Were this possible, there could be a “significant tonal shift” that would let the pressure off. Young imagines this possibility in catastrophic terms at the close of the passage, writing:

> outside of all arrangements trying to remain in the house we can’t hear the duali-

> ties go rushing
>
> out the hole blown out the side of the passenger plane—
>
> the change in pressure would be that intense—

Perhaps the biggest question about this book would be whether any significant tonal shift actually occurs in it. I'm not sure. I do not think such a shift needs to occur for the book to do its work of describing this life to us, and perhaps the "significant tonal shift" is more of a deus ex machine or unmet need than it is a formal element.

If the book has a tonal shift, I would look for it in my favorite of the poems, "Epistle Seven," which studies the contrast between law and freedom, and the association between law and sincerity. The poem interrogates how the feeling of sincerity or of wanting to be sincere stands between an individual and freedom. Young writes:

> Don't you remember how it was,
> among the thousand things reflected there?
> I do, perfectly well,
> the place where that rose heap was on display
> sincerity seized its opportunity
> when I approached
> found a way to pervert the command
> which many another better man has
> wrought in me
> to handle and to smell
> every kind of covetous desire
> within a hedge
> without all the paraphernalia of law—
>
> compared to it, the perfume
> sincerity looked pretty dull.
>
> For I was alive apart from the law once
> the year that followed was the saddest
> but when the commandment came,
> sincerity sprang to life
> and I was fooled.

Young reflects on how sincerity (an aspect of the ethos of her religious education, as well as of the bourgeois ethos) has prevented her from enjoying many physical pleasures—more, that sincerity has "fooled" her out of enjoying them. Working with a pseudo-liturgical diction that solemnizes these representations of ethos, Young creates a subtle comedy about her struggle with "the perfume sincerity," a struggle in which the ethos of sincerity wins out (as it tends to) over sexual desire. Sincerity offers transparency of action as a substitute for freedom of action, a substitution Young accepts. She continues:

> Now if I do what I do not want to do,
> it is a vision
> it is no longer I who do it
> broken up by the rhythmic sound of the voice.
> It is sincerity living in me
> which prevents images from crystallizing

> and gets the better of me every time
> causing them to break out into sensation.

Young articulates the pleasure of loss of agency here, how obedience to an ethos produces dissociation ("it is no longer I who do it") and restricts the processing of experience ("sincerity. . . prevents images from crystallizing"). Young describes this abandoning of desire as "one of literature's most abominable scenes" and it is awful in a sense—yet, at the same time, this loss of self (loss of a self identified with desire) is followed by identification with "the rhythmic sound of the voice" of moral authority, an identification which offers some promise of collective good and is foundational to a more nuanced, socialized sense of self. The self that lives the life is stranded between incomplete identifications with desire and sincerity, caught in a state of transparence to a non-existent higher authority. And perhaps the higher authority is not so much non-existent as highly distributed, present wherever any subject struggles to affirm or deny transparency as a virtue—no doubt this is so. Debunked ideology is moral life.

Of course it is a troublesome thing to live in a correct or moral way without any specific ideological stance to serve as the guarantor of that correctness. It becomes a matter of what is comfortable, what makes oneself and others comfortable, and whether people are comfortable or uncomfortable depends on what they are used to, especially on early ideological training. Young is very good at dramatizing a moral situation that revolves around the comfort level of adults who attempt to behave correctly with consideration for each other's feelings, and the many forms of shame that can result (and perhaps such a concern is precisely what it means to be a "Bay Area poet" at this time). The only universal moral idea in this is the tried and true "Do No Harm." But each person's comfort level and sense of fairness relates to early ideological conditioning, which means that in this context moral ideas that are not viewed as having general validity continue to hold sway to the extent that they determine what is comfortable for certain persons. For Young, the Christian demand for moral transparency and sincerity, for motives that can be seen through, is necessary for comfort even while frustrating liberty.

So in general Young is dramatizing how a need for comfort frustrates desires for greater freedom of action. She dramatizes, on behalf of her poetic community, how the personal limits imposed by childhood training don't go away, though the guarantor for those limits changes from "belief" to "comfort," from rigid ideology to the soft pillow fight of hegemony, an angst-ridden internal negotiation with what feels right. The least shameful or unpleasant thing for all involved, of course, is to admit their limitations and talk them out. In this context, a person is a Foucauldian discourse machine, a black box "Insisting on the desire of its personhood." Picture Palace repeatedly queries the limits of this arrangement:

> how is shame different from embarrassment. The anxiety of each. The image of each. Around its idea. Institutionalized. "You will have to give me a wedgie," I said to the text. Is there something which cannot be faked.