
PRELUDE

Many Memories, Many Myths

I can remember a little girl. . . . Where is she now? Yes,
“Where are the snows of yesteryear?” . . . But how can it
really be, that I was the little girl, the little Resi, and that I will
also someday be the old woman — the old woman, the old
Marschallin. “Look, there she goes, the old princess Resi!”
But how can that happen? How does God do it? When I am
still always the same.

Der Rosenkavalier, Act 1, lyrics by

Hugo von Hofmannsthal¹

The project of retrieving my memories of my parents, Lester and Rita Doniger, to put into a book began when the American Council of Learned Societies invited me to give, in May of 2015, the Charles Haskins Prize Lecture, which was supposed to be about my “life of learning.” (You can see my Haskins Lecture online at www.acls.org. From time to time, I have found it unavoidable to recycle bits of the Haskins Lecture in this book for essential pieces of the plot.) I wrote about the people from whom I had learned, and as I wrote, my mother loomed larger and larger, and I fully realized for the first time how much I owed her.

And so, when I was invited to give the Mandel Lectures at Brandeis, in that autumn of 2015, and to use, if I wished, an “unconventional format,” I decided to take this opportunity to write about my parents.

I tried to stick to the Jack Webb approach: nothing but the facts, ma’am.* But the deeper, Freudian, Proustian level kept bubbling up. I had started from the present, the point of view of an aging academic, but then the child’s view kept breaking into the adult’s story. In the end, there turned out to be several significantly different visions of many events. In the historical prequel (Chapter 1), a lot of fairly hazy mythology, consisting primarily of stories I had heard about who each of my parents was before they met. In the two early histories of my parents (Chapters 2 and 3), more factual material, some verified by the records. (Where there are such verifiable sources, I’ve noted them in endnotes.) For the years when I knew them (Chapter 4), still some episodes that could be corroborated, but now heavily colored by my subjective evaluation of them. And when it came to writing about my own relationship with each of my parents (Chapter 5), during the thirty (or fifty) years I knew my father and my mother (respectively), and the forty-five (or twenty-five) years I have lived without them, I found myself drowning in several different subjectivities, some

*For those who do not remember the 1950s, Jack Webb was the star of *Dragnet*; he played a cop who kept trying to keep people from giving their opinions of things, by insisting, “Nothing but the facts, ma’am.”

dredged up from the past and others just breaking into my awareness now. I tried, with middling success, to keep myself out of the story, lurking in the wings until Chapter 5, when I allow myself to join my parents on center stage. But since I could not help referring to myself from time to time, I have supplied a timeline (xi) giving the main events of their lives as they intersected with mine.

Inevitably, my story exists along a continuum from the factual to the mythological. As a woman who has worked on mythological texts for half a century,² I know a myth when I see one, and I see this memoir as heavily mythologized. Through a kind of occupational handicap, I remember best the things that make the best stories, and I have trouble resisting the impulse to make them into better stories. But this is a heightened version of what we all do. For we do not remember the past; we remember our memories of the past, the stories we've told ourselves about the past, and the stories that others have told us. Memory is a chameleon; it changes into the person it's talking to, like Woody Allen's Zelig (in *Zelig*, 1983), and accommodates itself to our present needs. Freud taught us that we never remember the dream, only the secondary revision that we tell ourselves as we wake. And so it is with personal histories.

We can wake up briefly at points in this dream: there are birth certificates, passports, photographs with dates scribbled on the back. I have newspaper clippings about Lester that supply a few reliable dates. And for Rita, I actually

have two archives of her own words. One is the collection of her notes (Appendix 2), and the other is a tape recording made for an NPR program about me that Adam Phillips did in 1990. Because NPR still had generous budgets in those golden days, Phillips flew with me to Great Neck and interviewed Rita, too. He used only a few minutes of Rita's words in the final cut, but I still have the full hour's recording, from which I have cited several astonishingly frank statements that she made. Here, you might think, is the brutal truth, reality. And yet, and yet, 1990 was near the end of Rita's life, when she wasn't always quite in her right mind, and I wonder, when she spoke of the past, just how accurately her words at that time represented the reality of the way she had felt about the events when they had happened so long ago. Mythmaking was at work here, too.

There also are moments when we intersect with other peoples' versions of our past history. I have two brothers, one ten years older than me (Jerry) and one ten years younger (Tony), and any time I tell a part of my story about our parents to either of them, he's almost certain to say, "No, it wasn't like that; it was like this." (And since one of my brothers is a lawyer, he's probably right.)³ But I can only tell you my version, my mythologized memory, which is all I really have. The version that matters to me, the one that I carry within me, defies all other versions of the events. As Oliver Sacks has said of Freud's view of memory, we "re-

transcribe” our remembrances over and over again, so that, even when we are in the grip of false memories or inadvertent plagiarism, “Our only truth is narrative truth, the stories we tell each other and ourselves—the stories we continually recategorize and refine.”⁴ And this process of retranscribing (*Nachträglichkeit*) is one of the most basic sources of our creativity.

One problem I encountered from the start was a matter of balance. Where Lester was intense but quiet, Rita was more dramatic and eclectic, not to say wildly idiosyncratic. Lester was a man of discreet virtue who did not wear his heart on his sleeve; he smoldered rather than exploded, and found subtle ways to manage Rita without generating an actual fight. She, by contrast, was far more aggressive (or at least passive-aggressive) in devising ways to express her suppressed fury about many aspects of her life, including her marriage. So he inspired far fewer anecdotes than she did. This imbalance was further compounded by the fact that she lived twenty years longer than he did, generating two more decades of material. I tried to rectify the balance, but she still dominates the book.

In any case, I can tell you only a fraction of my parents’ lives, the portion that is part of who I am. But I hope that this fragment will leave you with an idea of what it was like for me to come to know my parents’ stories, and how those stories became part of my own story, and how their stories kept changing as I looked back on them from the

steadily widening distance between their deaths and my ongoing life.

I can at least tell their still-evolving stories as truthfully as possible. Ian Parker, writing about the books that Edward St. Aubyn wrote about his ghastly childhood, remarked, “Even if St. Aubyn’s memories of his earlier life, shaped by trauma, are not perfectly accurate, he seems to take care to transmit his memories accurately.” And he quotes St. Aubyn as saying, of those books, “The truth for me is the truth in the books. . . . And the truth in the facts is a derelict ruin.”⁵ For my story, it’s not that I’ve made up memories; it’s that my memory has made up those memories. But those stories have a truth of their own, and I can be true to that truth. Even if none of it had happened, all of it would be true to the life I lived, because I always believed it.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s lyrics for the Marschallin’s soliloquy from the first act of Richard Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier*, my mother’s favorite opera and mine too, cited at the opening of this prelude, are a fitting motto for this memoir. My parents were many different people, and I knew only a few of them. Nor did they live to meet all of the many people I was to become. But this is my story of the lives that we shared.