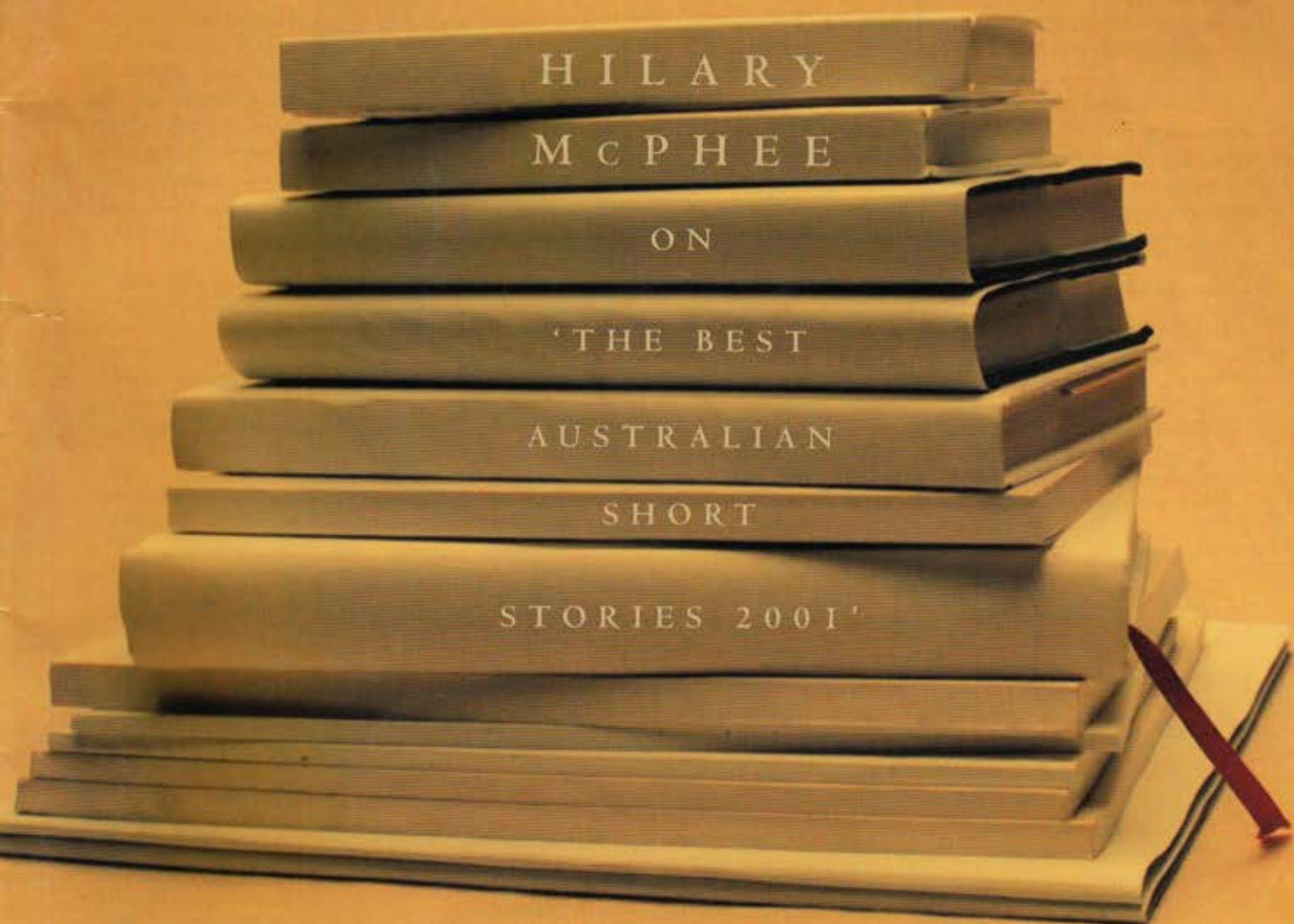


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RICHARD FREADMAN: SUSAN VARGA & LIFE-WRITING

PETER GOLDSWORTHY ON PETER PORTER'S NEW BOOK

POEMS BY CLIVE JAMES, PETER MINTER, CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE

'Heddy and I': Relational Life-writing in Susan Varga's *Heddy and Me*

Richard Freadman

I commend these words to you.
Carve them in your hearts
At home, in the street,
Going to bed, rising;
Repeat them to your children,
Or may your houses fall apart,
May illness impede you,
May your children turn their faces from you.
(Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*)

Introduction

In August 1990, Susan Varga, an Australian Jewish writer of Hungarian extraction, meets up with her mother, Heddy, and stepfather, Gyuszi, in the mother's native city of Budapest. The family, which includes an older sister, had migrated to Australia in 1948. Susan's father had died in a labour camp in early 1944; Gyuszi's wife and two sons were killed at Auschwitz.

During the return trip in 1990, Susan and Heddy visit the flat in which Heddy had lived, with various interruptions, between 1938 and 1948. In her auto/biography, *Heddy and Me*, Varga writes:

Mother is telling me where everything was, how it was, but I really don't take much in. I am content just to be here. I feel comfortable, familiar. I could sit down in a corner and read, or go to sleep. Aah, I am in the land of pre-memory again — I feel this territory. I can feel myself, at three or four, watching from the balcony as the bogey man comes down the street.

This moment of apparently reassuring restitution isn't altogether misleading. Such moments do happen here, as they do in some other second-generation post-Holocaust Australian Jewish autobiographies. Such books often record a return journey to Jewish ancestral places wrecked by the Holocaust. In *The Habsburg Café*, Andrew Riemer describes experiencing a 'moment of integration' in the Hungarian town of Sopron. Visiting Bialystock for the first time, Arnold Zable in *Jewels and Ashes* finds 'romance and terror, light and shadow ... Yet, somehow, never have I felt so much at peace.' But such episodes tend to be fleeting: soon it emerges that the wife of the couple who now occupy Heddy's old flat is an Auschwitz

survivor and that, in reality, Varga is back in that world she calls 'my territory of fear'.

On another day, when they visit the town of Pécs, an information sheet they're given at the door of the old synagogue says that the quotation engraved on the ark reads: 'Those who trust in the Lord will not be disappointed.' Varga writes: 'Bullshit, I think, look what happened to the trusting and the Godless alike.' This, then, is secular, post-Holocaust Australian Jewish autobiography; a form that bears witness, at this antipodean remove from Europe, to 'the territory of fear' that is the European past.



There are about one hundred and fifty volumes of Australian Jewish autobiography in print, many of them by Holocaust survivors or their children. Susan Varga's case is complex in that she is not in any simple sense the child of a survivor. Indeed, this is one of the book's central findings. It is also complex in narrative terms. Like most Australian Jewish autobiographies, *Heddy and Me* is essentially realist in its narrative investments. (These books don't accord with the account of Australian ethnic-minority writing that Sneja Gunew

gives in *Framing Marginality*, an account that sees such writing as fired by resentment towards mainstream Australian culture, and as transgressive in formal terms.) However, the book's narrative structure is unusual in that the Holocaust story is focused through the mother-daughter relationship itself: Heddy and Susan.

How to read such a text? I want to suggest that the text can appropriately be read in terms of what's now called 'relational' forms of interpretation.

Four senses of 'relational'

The term 'relational' is often used nowadays in readings of various sorts of texts, and in descriptions of social behaviour. It is a valuable term, but also one that has come to mean various things. I want briefly to tease out some of these meanings in order to be clear about what it might mean to read *Heddy and Me* as a relational text.

'Relational' sometimes has a causal force: in the object-relations psychological theory of Harry Guntrip, Melanie Klein, D.W. Winnicott and others, it expresses the view that selves are profoundly shaped, from the outset and subsequently, through interaction with other selves. By contrast, a more drive-centred, 'monadic', Freudian model lays greater stress on supposedly inherent developmental drives and phases. In *How Our Lives Become Stories*, the autobiography scholar Paul John Eakin extends this causal view to autobiography as a genre: he argues that because identity formation is relational, the stories we tell about ourselves will be relationally structured, and should be read accordingly. Then there is a differential use of the term, according to which some but not all categories of people are said to be highly Other-directed, interactive, in their personal orientation. Carol Gilligan (see *In a Different Voice*), for instance, argues that girls are more relationally oriented in this sense than boys; and feminist scholars of autobiography, such as Sidonie Smith and Estelle Jellinek, suggest that women's autobiography tends to be more relational, more prone to seeing the self in mutually constituting webs of interconnection with the Other, than does men's autobiography.

'Relational' can also be a normative term: here relational dispositions are seen as ethically and politically superior to autonomous, monadic dispositions. Much political critique, say of capitalistic or patriarchal individualism, is normative in this sense. A fifth sense of 'relational' has a very different trajectory. Analytical philosophers like the Freudian Richard Wollheim use the term to designate relations not between lives, but relations that are internal to single lives. The 'thread' of which Wollheim speaks in his *The Thread of Life* is something that unifies and defines that life.

A fuller discussion of the uses of 'relational' would need to take account of common slippages between terms like self, identity, and identity formation. We would also need to ask where agency fits in a relational view. What volitional, active

part, if any, does the relationally shaped self play in its own shaping, and in the shaping of the self-other relation? A reading of *Heddy and Me* might take us some way in dealing with such questions.

Not properly her mother's life story

Heddy and Me is a collaborative auto/biography that grows out of a literal narrative contract between mother and daughter. In this it resembles an important work of indigenous life-writing published in the same year (1994): *Auntie Rita* is Rita and Jackie Huggins's attempt to penetrate 'a double fold of silence' wrought by colonialism and by the older generation's diffidence about bespeaking the horrors of the past. Susan Varga has been reluctant to probe the European past, but finds to her surprise in early 1990 that, in fact, Heddy wants to talk about it, indeed, has been 'waiting for Susan' to help her do so — to talk not only about her life in hiding with the children during the Holocaust, but also about being raped by Russian soldiers, and much else.

Susan begins recording Heddy's recollections in March 1990. At this point she is forty-seven; Heddy is seventy-three. These sessions last for six months, after which they meet, together with Gyuszi and Susan's partner, Anne, in Hungary. The narrative interleaves four principal time perspectives: first, the period from Heddy's birth, in 1916, to 1960, when the narrative ends, bringing Heddy to the age of forty-four, and Susan to seventeen; second, the interview present, the account of which includes commentary about the two women's experience of the narrating situation, and about the way it impinges on their already complex relationship; third, the post-interview return to Hungary, with its many memory probes back into life before, during and just after the war; fourth, the writing present which renders the interview phase and the return to Hungary as part of the relational past, and from which vantage point the various pasts, together with the evolution of the torn but fond mother-daughter relationship, can be accorded a kind of provisional summation.

As Susan's early warning to Heddy makes clear, this is no simple story of the mother-as-survivor's life: 'I've told her it won't be her life story, not properly. It will be filtered through my reactions and thoughts, my second-generation eyes.'

Acts of restitution

These 'second-generation eyes' belong to one for whom being a daughter involves a kind of existential doubleness: she's a daughter who seems to ascribe enormous causal power to the mother-daughter bond; but she's also a particular kind of daughter: the daughter of a Holocaust survivor. So massively has the mother-daughter relation been shaped and mediated by the Holocaust that Susan, like Lily Brett, whose 'anguish' at her survivor mother's 'anguish' colours everything she writes about her, cannot focus on the

mother–daughter relation without also confronting the Holocaust. The same is true, to some extent at least, for the critic of the text; but what critical perspective could accommodate such complexity? A feminist-psychoanalytic relational reading will address some of the more familiar, so to speak, generic mother–daughter issues. But the Holocaust dimension seems to require forms of discussion that go beyond ‘normal’ developmental processes. To rephrase a line of Melanie Klein’s, children born during the Holocaust fed at some of the worst breasts in history. Looking back on herself as a baby, dangerously ill with dysentery, her mother in terror and hiding, Varga writes of ‘that child who drank in anxiety and terror with her mother’s milk’. One thinks of the refrain from Paul Celan’s great Holocaust poem ‘Fugue of Death’:

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink in the mornings at noon we drink you at nightfall
drink you and drink you ...

In March 1944, when the Germans arrive, Heddy’s milk literally dries up. This is a kind of deprivation to which so-called Attachment Theory, a form of relational theory practised by John Bowlby, Daniel Stern, Leonard Shengold and others, refers. *Heddy and Me* tries to retrace a story of catastrophic disruption in early relation, and to identify and address its consequences in later life.

In a passage from which I’ve already quoted, Varga writes of the interview process:

It occurs to me, too, that maybe I am not just searching for him [her biological father], but also for a small child that didn’t die. I am beginning to wonder about her, that child who drank in anxiety and terror with her mother’s milk and who hovered apathetic between life and death for months. Until now she has been no more than an object. Heddy’s baby, not me.

I inch a little closer to her. She may be nearer than I know, deep within me, still alive. Waiting.

There’s a sense in which autobiographical writing (and indeed autobiographical consciousness more generally) inevitably ‘others’ the self, rendering the written-about self as ‘Other’, an object for the writing self. In this somewhat paradoxical sense, autobiographical writing is indeed constitutively relational. In the above passage, Susan’s infant self appears as ‘object’, as opaque, to her adult consciousness. With Heddy’s assistance, however, she can begin to reconstruct that infant’s world and so, tentatively, begin to match certain persistent feelings with the circumstantial recollections that Heddy provides. This matching resembles what in *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* Stern calls the ‘working heuristic’ through which patient and therapist seek a ‘narrative point of origin’ for emotional disturbances that seem to have their origin in very early ‘interpersonal

disjunction’ between carer and child. Whether the feelings and the reconstructions do in fact match can never finally be known, any more than such things can ultimately be known in psychotherapy. But, in either case, it is the conviction that they do that holds out the possibility of healing. In a sense, the processes of interviewing and writing recapitulate in more sustaining form the inaugurating mother–daughter relation: Heddy’s gift of story helps compensate Susan for the deprivation she suffered as a Holocaust baby.



Susan Varga

In the book’s Epilogue, there is a final and decisive twist. Susan tells of attending a conference called ‘Child Survivors of the Holocaust’ and of its transformational impact on her. She writes of going to the conference: ‘I went as a member of the second generation. I came home a member of the first. I was there.’ She is not just the child of a survivor, but a survivor herself; a child survivor. This puts her in a dramatically revised relation to herself and to Heddy. Of that baby, she says:

I know who she is now. She is a child who survived the War, at the outer edges of the Holocaust. I can trace her through who I am now. She is my fears, my sense of displacement, my omnipresent sense of threat. She is also my resilience and accommodation, my will to find meaning and to make things work.

The emphases on will, agency, the capacity for accommodation are fundamental in *Heddy and Me*. Varga’s ‘will to find meaning and to make things work’ animates a narrative that

has the power, partially at least, to release the self from the most destructive aspects of the past it narrates. We are reminded that in many instances relational developments don't just happen: they are sought, cultivated, elaborated — sometimes, as in the case of Rita and Jackie Huggins, through the writer's agential role in collaborative life-writing.

Varga's narrative records much tension and strife between mother and daughter, especially during Susan's adolescence; but it also charts a profound change that really begins during the interview phase. Finding that her hostile attitude to Heddy's focus on possessions is starting to moderate, Susan writes: 'Only recently have I started to think of Heddy and myself as part of something bigger.' That something, of course, is the Holocaust. Towards the end of the return trip to Hungary, Susan senses 'a new ease, born of something shared, between Mother and me'. During the interviews and, subsequently, during the writing, Susan has had to confront Heddy's stories of terror, rape and loss. Having done so, and having come to know herself, too, as a survivor, as one who shares her mother's historical fate more intimately than she had ever imagined, Susan establishes a new sense of self-in-relation to Heddy; a kind of Other-directedness, *alterity*, that befits this particular shared history. There is nothing normative about this: Varga offers no prescriptions that might hold beyond this horrific and anomalous history; but there is a strong sense that a unifying existential thread — something relating to her status as child survivor — has come to light, first in the talking, then in the telling. The book's title is *Heddy and Me*, but the new-found sense of internal coherence, and the commonality that has emerged through narrative collaboration, occasion a change in Susan's use of the first-person pronoun. The book's last line is: 'We have things in common, Heddy and I.'

Because her mode of relation to Heddy, and the relations between hitherto disparate aspects of her own life, seem so much clearer now, Susan can stand more confidently, more givingly, alone. She has narrated aspects of her mother's and her own past without resorting to disingenuous 'narrative harmonisation' or 'unmediated identification' with the primary victim's experience — two of the perils of trauma narrative identified by Dominick La Capra in his important *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. *Heddy and Me* narrates what the Stone Center authors call woman's 'growth in connection' (see *Women's Growth in Connection*). It suggests that the richest kinds of singularity are sustained by relation.

* Thanks to Philpa Rothfield and Kay Torney for the leads on Attachment Theory, and to Kay for reminding me of the Celan poem.



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