

# Long Paddock

**SAADI NIKRO**

*Memory in a Paratactic Register:*

*Abbas El-Zein's Leave To Remain: A Memoir*

**"Memory, whether individual or generational, political or public,  
is always more than only the prison house of the past."**

Andreas Huyssen

Having previously written short stories, essays, and a novel (*Tell the Running Water*, 2001), in his new publication *Leave To Remain* (2009) Abbas El-Zein sifts through memories of his personal past, fashioning a narrative style that interweaves memoir and autobiography. The title, which is also employed as a chapter heading, is based on the British term for *visa*. For an Australian it sounds a bit awkward, and can even be read as something of an oxymoron - how does one both leave and remain, go and stay? The term *leave*, of course, should be read as a noun, as something one is given or granted - such as *permission*. El-Zein's choice of title relates to the memory of his initial departure from Lebanon to take up graduate studies in England, and otherwise suggests the sense of estrangement and imaginary associations informing his narrative as he travels to different parts of the world, eventually migrating to Australia. And yet the title also captures El-Zein's constructive approach to personal memory, as something of a remainder, or perhaps reminder of various experiences developing their sense through their telling, taking leave so as to remain as stories that can be told and heard.

Subtitled *A Memoir*, the narrative approaches memory as a residue of personal experience and public event. As a residue, memory remains contingent on the circumstances and motivations of the mobile present, as well as on how the potential value and significance of past events and experiences can never be exhausted by a particular point of view. As residue, memory is not so much a knowing of one's past, but of crafting a capacity to tell the past as a story that can be passed on to others and public culture. The residue, then, traverses both personal/public memory and the personal/public engagement achieved through the publication of the book. In this way memory is not only concerned with that which is deemed past, but also the way in which past events and experiences gain their sense and value in the present - indeed structures the necessary, irretrievable gap between what is eventually constructed as past and present.

The interchange of personal and public structures the work from almost the beginning, when a brief description of El-Zein's family and childhood house is followed by mentioning historical events of the time: Vietnam, nuclear non-proliferation treaty, the six-day war of 1967 (5). And it informs the final, more philosophical reflection of the book: "For what is one's life but the story - at once

painful and sublime - of coming to terms with the savage intimacy between self, history and culture"? (288). Between self, history and culture the story of one's life emerges through the finitude of historical circumstance, as well as an ironic play with the structure of personal expectations and imaginary associations. This gives events and experiences a chance to elude any ready-made formula for their understanding. El-Zein reflects on this through the developing memory of his childhood reading of Hergé's Tintin stories and those of René Goscinny's Asterix. Where, in the Tintin stories, the "world was as clear, angular and authoritative as the book's drawings", in the Asterix comic strips the world "was full of irony, rough humour and puns". In contrast to Hergé's "naive Eurocentrism", or else his unreflective assumption of language as somehow a transparent medium free from particular values informing its capacity to represent others and other cultures, with Goscinny "travel yielded a humorous, unpretentious caricature of the world seen through imperfect eyes" (69). Hergé's depiction of Arabs, El-Zein points out, was so different to "the images conveyed by my surroundings, my own teachers, friends and parents, by my Arabic literature and history books" (70).

These reflections inform a particular theme, if not obsession, threading its way through the text, concerning the author's youthful preoccupation with travel and adventure, whether through his childhood reading of comic strips or his fascination with family stories of an ancestor, Ali El-Zein, whose journeys and daring exploits are told with swashbuckling flair. This preoccupation leads to El-Zein's own travels to study or work in England, France, Japan, and Australia. A particularly inventive aspect of El-Zein's writing style is how he manages to approach memory as a narrative interweaving of past and present, or how stories of the distant past come to inform the way in which more recent circumstances are experienced. Ali El-Zein's (his ancestor's) exploits are told through recollection of the family's experience of traveling around Lebanon amidst the civil war, looking for a safe haven during the Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982. As the family decide to return south, negotiating road blocks, destruction, and their own anxiety, the story of his ancestor, however fantastic and romantic, provides an imaginary reference point to somehow subdue the stammer of traumatic experience. "Perhaps blindness, not vision, was the condition of escape and adventure" (96), El-Zein muses to himself. And yet the intimation of trauma leads him to a less romantic view of his ancestor: "Although I would not easily admit it to myself, I suspected that my ancestor's story might lose some of its gloss if I examined it too closely" (97).

For a Lebanese, history is indeed both savage and intimate, as many major events happen not on the other side of the world but almost at one's doorstep. Living in the Middle East, especially in Lebanon, one tends to carry a sense of history as more immediate and personally contingent, affecting the way in which one goes about planning their present and immediate future. History, in this immediate sense, is not something that can be quickly forgotten by switching the television or radio off, but maintains a nagging insistence for its practical negotiation. As El-Zein's narrative style renders history open to the fragmenting force of memory, events are presented as a range of contingencies against which the drama of personal recollection plays itself out. Just as people claim an acute memory of where they were and what they were doing when a major event is

recalled (Kennedy's fate is a popular example, although Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005 is even better) this is even more so for those who live within the orbit of history's savage intimacy.

Within this orbit time comes to be experienced more as a series of packages, or snapshots, rather than a continuous movement with an identifiable purpose or goal, or else a definable beginning and end. As El-Zein reflects to himself while musing on the motivations for his conflicting views of America, "I wasn't going to let chronology interfere with my fantasies" (108). This refers to the positive image he, as a graduate in the 1980s, had of Woodstock, hippies, and anti-war movements, driven by his fantasies of "green university campuses, fast-track careers and intensely fulfilling relationships with female liberal-arts students". But the passage is telling of the way in which the paratactic tenor of El-Zein's narrative constrains history to entertain the fragmenting force of memory, whereby the significance of a particular experience or event is often twice removed from the mobile present, told through the blurring associations of a former present, itself now deemed past. This play between pasts and presents works to depict experiences and events through the motivations structuring their significance - motivations imbued with an imaginary understanding of self and circumstance. More significantly, the contrapuntal, paratactic style avoids positioning the present as a mere effect of the past, or else understanding the past as a mere constructive effort of the present.

El-Zein writes about his Shiite Muslim background, his great-grandfather and grandfather both having been *Sheikhs*, or spiritual guides and religious scholars, as well as the secular outlook of his father and himself. Where his forbears served their communities through the transmission of tradition, a modern sensibility approaches history and community through change and renewal. And yet this secular outlook has a fundamentalist tendency to approach the passing of time as an obsessive concern with the future, somehow cut off from the past. This has some bearing on how El-Zein approaches an understanding of his work as an engineer, a profession that exercises a high degree of rationality, though tends not to reflect on the social background and consequences of the way in which it plans and carries out its work. He discusses this in respect to the killing of Lebanese civilians by Israeli war planes. In its extreme form of a well trained army, whereby problems and tasks are viewed strictly through a lens of functionality, the ability to reflect on the moral consequences of technical application is often reduced to something of a caricature, played out as political farce. As Zygmunt Bauman argued not so long ago (*Modernity and the Holocaust*, 1989; see also *Postmodern Ethics*, 1993), the capacity for social responsibility is greatly diminished when the preoccupation with function, with order and strict forms of pedagogical reasoning, structures an irrecoverable separation between actions and their consequences.

Between the secular and sacred, the world for El-Zein is "made up of contradictory images" (71). Rather than simply opposed as backward and progressive, both tradition and modernity share a propensity to fundamentalise history - the former attuned to an unproblematic continuity with the past, the latter attuned to an unquestionable, narrowly defined future. These reflections come from his chapter 'Time's Arrow', the structure of which maintains El-Zein's paratactic approach to memory as a range of traces that cannot be definitively

located *in* time, but whose telling serves to fracture time so that the traces may emerge through consequent gaps and fissures. The chapter begins with the story of his maternal grandmother's death in 1978, when Israeli warplanes were busy dropping bombs in southern Lebanon. The news of her death fills the family house with a solemn silence broken only by his mother's anguished shrieks. El-Zein's tender words remain true to his narrative's fracturing approach to the passing of time: "It was as if the past, bereft of physical presence, had colonised the pores between our spoken words and had engaged us in a quiet conversation with our loved ones, those who have departed to other continents or died closer to home, but somehow still lived with us" (57).

As the chapter goes on to abruptly recollect and juxtapose a number of different stories concerning the religious, political, scholarly and literary occupations of his forbears, the aforementioned interest in comic strips and travel, thoughts on the engineering profession and social responsibility, one begins to wonder how the fragmented stories and reflections hang together. And yet in the concluding paragraphs of the chapter the seemingly unconnected pieces suddenly come to illuminate each other, and one begins to appreciate the aesthetics of El-Zein's fracturing, not to say aberrant, narrative style. This style, as I have been suggesting, could be described as *paratactic*, bringing together dissimilar images or stories, seemingly unconnected, though somehow developing their significance through juxtaposition. Above all, this style is not so much concerned with how the past determines the present, but rather how narrative and the fracturing force of memory constitute creative sites for the telling of time's passing, as a range of crisscrossing stories that can be passed-on, not passed-by.

In Australia in recent years I think of Sally Morgan's *My Place* structuring a similar approach to memory, significant not only because of the seldom told histories and stories the book charts, but also in respect to the aberrant style that constructs the possibility of viewing a particular experience, person, or place from the existential circumstances of varying points of reference. Symptomatically, in respect to the generative entwinement of memory and narrative, it is also compelling to consider how the stuttering traces of trauma can, indeed, never be passed-on directly, but only through the polyphonic resonance of various voices.

In a certain sense the writing of one's life performs a coming to terms with two forms of experience: those that readily fit into language and its capacity to disclose the productive split between narrative and story; and those that have to do with trauma, holding their sense in reserve, inadvertently exposing themselves at the point where language fails as a representative vehicle of understanding. Proust's distinction between *mémoire volontaire* and *mémoire involontaire* goes some way towards articulating these two forms of recollected experience, although his extreme subjectivism underestimates how the value and significance of both these forms are often contingent on how others (family, friends, acquaintances, public culture) remember and articulate shared experiences. Toni Morrison's term *rememory* wonderfully captures this non-self-centred approach to memory, and could well be applied to the way in which El-Zein's memoir (much the same could be said of Morgan's) modestly takes into account the ways by which others lead him to discover either a different view of

shared experience or an experience whose remains have been forgotten, the restless traces of a disarticulated stammer clamouring to have itself heard.

The prose of Proust and that of Morrison otherwise share an interest in how memory locates itself not only through the fracturing of time, but also in respect to an experience of space. This informs El-Zein's use of spatial images to develop the recollection of his memory. In the chapter 'The Making of Family Trees' he begins by describing two solitary fig trees standing on a vacant piece of land next to the family's house in the village of Jibsheet. The trees carry their own associations, such as the story about a famous anti-French rebel of the 1930s riding through the village and stopping to admire them. The trees and plot of land constitute the site of boyhood games, playing out the role of rebel. More significantly, the site affords images and memories of his Father's Aunt, Sakeena, who told many stories that must have been partly invented for the imagination of a child preoccupied with swashbuckling adventures.

In terms of an experience of public space, recollected memory is fractured by physical changes to the urban environment, especially sudden changes brought about by war and destruction. The narrative lingers on the physical changes to the city of Beirut in the post-civil war years of reconstruction, changes that nevertheless resist an imaginative leap from the past into the present. This serves to dislocate any easy assimilation of space to time, forgetfulness working to repair this rupture. As El-Zein says of his memories of violent experiences: "My memory of these events were not suppressed. At least, many memories did survive. But alive as they were, they remained dormant most of the time. My mind-set was a benign case of obliviousness, which left me free to walk happily through the streets of my childhood". Forgetfulness comes to have a practical necessity: "Many Lebanese of my generation had to be likewise engaged with the city, in what amounted to a collective practical forgetfulness, rather than amnesia" (187). The so called 'Green Line', which separated west from east Beirut during the civil war, and was consequently a primary site of desperation, is in the post-war context difficult to imagine as an ordinary urban thoroughfare. In such circumstances memory fails to distinguish the past from the present, forgetfulness becoming a practical exercise in repairing this disjuncture. The old centre of Beirut may well have undergone a reconstruction project, gentrifying it into an exclusive shopping, restaurant and business location, but how do its former inhabitants imaginatively reconstruct the disjuncture of past and present, the temporal and spatial coordinates of their experience?

In another chapter, 'Mutilation Street', El-Zein again employs a descriptive incident that develops into imaginative and conceptual associations. This concerns his arrival and first experiences in Sydney, encountering a dog with only three legs on Abercrombie street. While the dog belongs to the café *3 legged Dog*, the recollected encounter becomes an occasion to develop a notion of migration as the loss and growing of body parts. For migrants, "New ears and new eyes are perhaps their most valuable acquisitions. New tongues are much harder to come by". This affords insight (somewhat Lacanian) into how migrants strive to reconstruct an imaginary identification that would somehow prevent them from falling apart, breaking up into pieces: "Just as they need a body to inhabit, they need an identity, a self-image, to stare at and display. Otherwise, they might discover that they are made up of individual parts and can be easily

unmade" (158). However this self-image may be constrained by personal dilemmas and structural associations in the new land, what to some extent interests El-Zein is an understanding of migration as a "form of freedom" (152), as an opportunity to engage in self-determination. Part of this reconstructive engagement involves accepting "the fragility of our constructed selves", a fragility that is both attractive and anxious.

El-Zein's memoir includes a number of photographs of his families - his parents and siblings, his own children, as well as buildings and streets in Beirut and Sydney. I found this use of photographs interesting, as it suggested to me how most families go about maintaining a physical record of the past. Since the invention of film as a reproductive medium, photo albums have been used to collect family photographs together, in a way that they may be viewed, shown to family and friends. While the photos bear an irrefutable witness to the passing of time, their viewing become occasions for the telling of stories, recollecting past events and experiences through informal and very often spontaneous narratives. In other words, rather than serving to arrest time, dissociating a fleeting moment from a before and an after, photographs constitute a reconstructive site so that *the telling* of time's passing may be articulated.

Addressing his photographs, El-Zein performs this reconstructive engagement, as when he writes about his mother's various hairdos, four of them juxtaposed on one page. As a child he discovered that a major event he would hear about in the news coincided with his mother changing her hairstyle, such as when the day after an official agreement between the Lebanese government and the PLO was announced, his mother "spurned her long-time hairdresser Joseph and went for a radical French plait" (18). The story itself is both humorous and fascinating, affording insight into the way in which as a child El-Zein went about conjuring such connections between home and the world at large, the world made up of events reported on the news. And yet his recollection serves to transform the photographs into a site of storytelling. More significantly for El-Zein's paratactical style, the eventual form of the recollection works to coordinate the structure of his memoir's prose, foregrounding the contingency of the present. One could add that the value of the recollection - the juxtaposition and narrating of the photographs - can never be exhausted, as its significance remains further contingent on how El-Zein's reconstructed memory will eventually be drawn into the future, as the author comes to be further transformed into a character by others addressing his life and work.

In my opening remarks I suggested that the story of one's life emerges through the finitude of historical circumstance, in respect to the way in which memory is recollected through the transformation of knowing into telling. This finitude is to be sure informed by conventions of language, which, it seems to me, can be both constraining and enabling. Many of the experiences and events presented in *Leave to Remain* must have once been surrounded by, if not immersed in, a colloquial Arabic language, though they are told here in English. In a certain sense this immersion has undergone a threefold transfiguration by the writing of the memoirs: that undertaken by a more literary language attuned to a paratactical style of narration, whereby many of the recollections may never have previously been brought together in this fashion; the stuttering articulation of various experiences too traumatic to be represented directly; and of course

the telling of the recollections in an English language whose signifying capacity substitutes itself for, though does not exhaust, former associations.

On the whole, one has a sense that composing the memoirs in English has been a valuable experience for El-Zein. Not only does his prose carry a certain lightness unconstrained by angst, shame, or regret, but the irony is always playfully understated. This playfulness extends to and animates the paratactical style, which tends to encourage a creative reading of the memoirs, especially concerning the seemingly arbitrary juxtapositions. In one particular incident El-Zein writes about how, as a child, he bore the brunt of the school bullies, due to his slight frame and timidness. While in Arabic, he relates, there were many words and expressions signifying *weakness*, there were none in Arabic to designate *bullying*, and consequently he had no linguistic resource by which to pathologise his tormentors. But he later discovered the English words "bullied, picked on, tormented, taunted", which gave him a capacity to articulate his suffering not as a personal disposition, but as a social convention. As El-Zein says in respect to an adjacent recollection, language "was the trigger for an act of self-inscription by the child, of writing a mode of being into oneself" (14). This subtle view of language as both somatic and symbolic is carried over from Arabic to English, giving El-Zein's prose an illuminating quality. Whether writing about Beirut, his schooldays, his family village in southern Lebanon, or migrating to Australia, it is the peculiar, inseparable combination of physicality and conceptual association that informs El-Zein's paratactical approach to recollected memory.

El-Zein's memoir straddles, in the main, an experience of Lebanon and Australia, and potentially contributes to the public cultures of both countries. In Lebanon, the civil war and its uncertain aftermath (from 1975 on) marks a significant turning point in literary production, especially in respect to the form of the novel, departing from a previous literary preoccupation with realism and ideological commitment. Civil strife and the breakdown of traditional social structures gave rise to a large output of novels and memoir/autobiography by women writers, as well as ushering in a highly experimental style attuned to episodic narrative fracture. Concerning male writers, the work of Elias Khoury is an extreme example of this fragmentary style, though symptomatic of a post-patriarchal revision of former affiliations to ideological explanations of history. For Khoury, memory has been a productive concept, often set against a critical notion of History as largely pedagogic.

In Lebanon the state has been unwilling and unable to provide any adequate means by which political culture can come terms with the immediate past. In the context of this state-sponsored amnesia, cultural production in the forms of fiction and memoir plays an important role in maintaining the past as a potential site for discussion and dialogue. Along with his earlier novel *Tell the Running Water*, El-Zein's present work contributes to this potential, and not only in terms of content, of historical reference, but in terms of the very style by which language may be inventively employed as a narrative exercise in memory and storytelling. Like other contemporary Lebanese/Arabic literature, the very temperament of El-Zein's style is symptomatic of the social rupture and civil fragmentation brought about by the civil war. Interestingly, Lebanese writers have approached narrative not as a site to repair or patch-up traumatic

experiences of rupture and dislocation, but as an experiment with genre distinction and anachrony, or the productive disjuncture between narrative and story. El-Zein's memoir emerges from, indeed embodies, such historical/cultural circumstances.

Concerning Australia, *Leave to Remain* partakes in a considerable output of travel and transcultural autobiography and diary, such as, to mention only a few, that of R. A. Baggio, *A Shoe in My Cheese: An Immigrant Family Experience* (1989); E. Ciccotosto and M. Bosworth, *Emma: A Translated Life* (1990); S. Kastamonitis, *The Endless Journey of Stefanos Kastamonitis: From the Diaries of a Migrant* (1987), D. Malouf, *12 Edmondstone Street* (1999) and more recently the fictional *Seducing Mr Maclean* by Loubna Haikal (2002). Like the work of Haikal, and that of Jad El-Hage (*The Last Migration*, 2002; *The Myrtle Tree*, 2007), El-Zein's memoir circles around the impossibility of naturalising a sense of place and location. What energises the work of these writers is not merely a coming to terms with the strangeness of the foreign environment, but the developing strangeness of that which their respective narratives situate and associate as countries and cultures of origin. In an Australian multicultural context where the creative work of transcultural writers is often essentialised as reflecting specific 'ethnic' social/cultural backgrounds, the work of these writers can be approached as a discovery of the conventional variability of such backgrounds. El-Zein's paratactic style lends itself to a constructive sense of this variability.