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A Memoir of an Other

Robert C. Philen

Abstract

I am the literary executor for my late partner, the prolific poet and essayist Reginald Shepherd. Shepherd often spoke of writing a memoir but never had the chance to do so before his death. However, the essays he wrote, his poetry, his correspondences, and other writings contain many, many fragments of memoiristic material in his voice. I am in the process of assembling these fragments into his posthumous memoir, and the project bears a strong relationship to the long tradition of ethnographic biographies, as well as being a strong example of bricolage and mythic thinking. Here, I will reflect on the relationships I am encountering between memoir, myth, and ethnography as I construct/assemble this book.

April 10, 1963: Reginald Berry, later Reginald Shepherd, is born the oldest child to a single mother, Blanche Berry, in the Bronx, New York. March 31, 1978: Blanche Berry dies from an asthma-triggered heart attack, leaving Reginald Shepherd orphaned ten days shy of his fifteenth birthday. 1993: Reginald's poetry manuscript *Some Are Drowning* wins *The Nation's* "Discovery" award and is published the following year as his first poetry collection by the University of Pittsburgh Press, also winning a poetry award from the Associated

Writing Programs. 1994: Shepherd is diagnosed with HIV. December 1999: Shepherd and Robert Philen, meet at a gay book club's discussion of James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* at the First Baptist Church in Ithaca, New York. November 2007: Shepherd is diagnosed with Stage 4 Colon Cancer. September 10, 2008: Reginald dies.

Shepherd was a brilliant poet, one of the more significant of his generation, ultimately publishing six collections of poetry (one posthumous, Shepherd 1994, 1996, 1999, 2003, 2007a, 2011). These collections were well received and awarded. He was also a superb essayist, attested to by one of his essay collections being a finalist for a book award from the National Book Critics Circle. He was a black, gay man. He grew up exceedingly poor in public housing projects in the Bronx during his first fifteen years. He had an intensely close relationship with his single mother, a woman who died (like Reginald himself) far too young. A woman who was brilliant at working the system to get tutors and scholarships to prestigious private schools for her son while also apparently being highly dysfunctional at just about anything else other than giving her son a leg up in life (at least that was always Reginald's version of her). He was my partner for eight and a half amazing and intense years. He was intensely passionate about music (especially German opera and 80s post-punk and synth-pop), poetry (especially the Moderns, and especially Eliot and Stevens), paleontology (we had many a lively dinner-table debate about the likelihood of endo-, ecto-, or homeo- thermy for various dinosaur lineages), and history (he knew more about world history than any person I have ever encountered). In the last fourteen years of his life, he was continually poked, prodded, and surveilled by a bevy of medical professionals. In addition to HIV and colon cancer, among his "minor" maladies were a slew of kidney stones, polycythemia, osteoporosis, Bell's Palsy, near deafness in one ear, and hypertension. It almost goes without saying that just as my first

paragraph's list of dates and basic facts constitutes but the merest wires to hang a life from, this second just begins to clothe his multifaceted life and identities.

In the last few years of life, Shepherd intended to write a memoir. He had gotten as far as writing a proposal for a potential manuscript and had made some start on it. He had led an interesting life. Although he had not cared so much for nonfiction prose writing earlier in his life, in his later years as he wrote more essays, he developed a significant taste for that form of writing. And finally, given the current publishing trend in which memoirs comprise a significant portion of the nonfiction market, he figured that so long as he had to deal with the psychological baggage that came from growing up the poor, black, gay son of a single mother (when that wasn't a "normal" thing—he always identified strongly with the Supremes' song "Love Child") as well as the physical baggage of his various bodily complaints, he might as well profit a bit from it. I have no doubt that he would have completed this project if cancer had not cut his time short.

At the same time, while he never actually wrote that memoir, he wrote a few memoir essays—and his writings of all sorts, essays, poems, e-mails, and unpublished drafts—contain much memoiristic detail. I am in the process of assembling a memoir in his words from this material, to be titled *To Make Me What I Was* (a modification of the title of one of his more memoiristic essays, "To Make Me What I Am" (Shepherd 2007b).

I have a number of motivations and intentions in this project. First, in my roles as Reginald's partner and his literary executor, I see this process as a fulfillment of one aspect of his work. Further, I see this as a project of inherent interest to the literary community, insofar as he was a significant literary and critical figure.

I also approach this project as an anthropologist. There is a long history in ethnographic writing of giving voice to the "other"

in autobiographical form, whether Ruth Mary Underhill's *Papago Woman* (1926), Paul Radin's *Autobiography of a Winnebago Indian* (1920), Oscar Lewis' *The Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (1961), or Vincent Crapanzano's *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* (1980). I see this work as fitting within that subgenre of ethnographic writing, though the nature of my source material is different, coming as it does from Reginald's words that were written for different purposes, as opposed to spoken words arising in the context of ethnographic interviewing. To use a musical analogy, while those earlier projects might be seen as duets in which the autobiographical words arose in the context of the ethnographic encounter, my project might be seen more as re-mixing. Shepherd's words will be assembled in the context of a particular literary and ethnographic project, but they were in no way prompted by that project.

This memoir project also has an interesting relation to a perennial topic of anthropological interest: myth. I am creating a myth of Reginald Shepherd—no doubt motivated consciously and subconsciously to put the fragments back together to make him what he was in a process no doubt doomed to fail at some level. I am engaging in a process Lévi-Strauss identified as central to mythic thinking, *bricolage*, in the attempt to assemble a coherent whole out of preexisting odds and ends of language. (Incidentally, this process strongly mirrors the process Reginald used in writing most of his poems. While he clearly had what might as well be termed a *Muse*, regardless of one's thoughts on the metaphysics and epistemology of Musical inspiration, he was, like many poets, continually struck by poetic bits of language that he had to write down quickly or lose forever. Most of his poems were the result of assembling the already existing bits of musically inspired language he had written down.)

Bricolage, whether in the forms of myth-telling or the work of the handyman bricoleur, can always result in multiple forms—the same

odds and ends might be put to building a table or a chair, the same culturally significant narrative bits might be incorporated into multiple mythic forms. No doubt, others or I could craft many possible myths out of Shepherd's words—part of the power of bricolage is its ability to craft indefinite numbers of forms out of limited material. At the same time, for *anything* to result, *some* organizing theme has to be at play, though this might involve either applying a given theme to the material at hand or discerning from that material a theme to build with. I am in the process of discerning the key themes around which to sift through all of Shepherd's words (or I should say all his written words that remain within my access) and assemble his memoir.

In doing so, I am currently attempting to triangulate between three sources of conceptualization of the significant themes orienting his writing. First is my sense of who he was and what the organizing themes were in his writing. Second is his sense of the same thing, as seen in his own proposal for a memoir manuscript or in the surface organization of some of his memoir essays. I am also searching for latent themes, for organizing elements that might not have been so explicitly recognized by him or myself, but which might nonetheless play a powerfully structuring role in his thoughts expressed in written word. As Lévi-Strauss (1995) recognized in his work on myth, much that structures myth isn't necessarily in the conscious and explicit thought of those engaged in mythic thought. While Lévi-Strauss used the language of "mythemes" and "sonemes," he wasn't particularly interested in the "emic" in the simplistic sense of the "Native's point of view." I am very much interested in this case in my particular native's point of view, as well as my view of his view, but I'm also interested to uncover less clearly noticed, but nonetheless significant, underlying themes in Reginald's work, and to do so I am currently using the interpretive software package NVivo to draw out key patterns in his writing.

An equally important conceptual process as I engage in this project involves thinking through the relationship between Shepherd's poetry, his life, and his memoir. In his essays, he wrote much about poetry and much about writing poetry; and poetry was a key part of him and frankly one of the main reasons, alongside his essays, that someone who hadn't known him personally might be likely to want to know more about him. Therefore, his poetry can't very well be left out, though figuring out exactly how to include it is a difficult and fraught task.

Shepherd was against what he called identity poetry. He was against the notion that poetry was straightforward self-expression, or that it should reflect biography or a poet's identity—for example, the idea that because he was a black, gay poet, he should stick to writing “black” and/or “gay” poetry. In his essay, “The Other's Other: Against Identity Poetry, For Possibility” (2007c), he further stressed the ways in which poetry or other art might enable critical and alternative thinking. He stressed the role of encountering Eliot's “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and the difficulties he encountered in “figuring it out” as an adolescent, as instrumental in opening his thinking to possibilities outside the poverty of his Bronx neighborhood. Though a skeptical materialist, such as myself (or Shepherd at times), might wonder whether it wasn't also attending a richly endowed private school on scholarship that took him literally and well outside his ghetto home life thanks to his mother's bureaucratic hustling that was also particularly instrumental in opening his thinking.

In any case, it is clear his poetry cannot be easily reduced to his particular life circumstances at the moment of the poem's writing—nor can I imagine why one would want to. To take one example, in April 2008, in a particularly nasty phase of Reginald's cancer, he entered a semicomatose state for two weeks. When he was just

coming out of it, and at a time when he was only semiconscious and unable to talk, he scrawled a poem on a sheet of paper on a clipboard, one of the purest examples of poetry as musically inspired as I can imagine. He was not even aware of having written this poem after the fact, and I found it only after his death. As I discussed in the introduction to Shepherd's posthumous essay collection, *A Martian Muse* (Shepherd 2010, 6), and where this poetic fragment was also published, most of it is completely illegible, as his handwriting was extremely unsteady at that moment, but a fragment of it can be read:

A palmful of Persian peaches,
 the world is a work of wish and
 human circumstance,
 this history of being rusted, being burned
 rusting, being burned
 years burned up, not down
 burned off to the night

The biographic circumstances of the writing of that poem are perhaps of interest, but it is not clear how this writing relates to memoir, nor how the poem itself relates to him or his circumstances.

At the same time, often his poetry was powerfully influenced by circumstances, and often his poetry did express significant things about himself. How could it not? Even while he was against the determinism of identity poetry, that poetry *should* or *must* reflect biography or identity, he in no way rejected the notion that it *could* do such a thing. In his own proposal for a memoir, he even included some of his more autobiographical poetry, and many of the key themes that show up in his essays and memoiristic writing (whether discerned by himself, me, or the NVivo software package) show up as key elements of his poetry. For example, "Mother" shows up as a continual preoccupation in his poetry, essays, and the conversations I had with him. As such, I'd like to leave with the words of one of his poems

(from Shepherd 2011) that I hope demonstrates the significance of poetic writing to his memoir and my mythic project to make him who he was while also indicating the lack of straightforward clarity in so construing him, because of course, the poem (and his other words) is its own object and not him, and its meaning irreducible to events outside it. (As T. S. Eliot, when asked what he had meant by the line in “Ash Wednesday,” “Lady, three white leopards sat under a Juniper tree,” simply reiterated, “Lady, three white leopards sat under a Juniper tree.”)

“My Mother Was No White Dove” from *Red Clay Weather*, by Reginald Shepherd, © 2011. (Reprinted by permission of the University of Pittsburgh Press.)

no dove at all, coo-rooing through the dusk
 and foraging for small seeds
 My mother was the clouded-over night
 a moon swims through, the dark against which stars
 switch themselves on, so many already dead
 by now (stars switch themselves off
 and are my mother, she was never
 so celestial, so clearly seen)

My mother was the murderous flight of crows
 stilled, black plumage gleaming
 among black branches, taken
 for nocturnal leaves, the difference
 between two darks:

a cacophony of needs
 in the bare tree silhouette,
 a flight of feathers, scattering
 black. She was the night
 streetlights oppose (perch
 for the crows, their purchase on sight),

obscure bruise across the sky
making up names for rain

My mother always falling
was never snow, no kind
of bird, pigeon or crow

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