

Jarmila Mildorf

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0073-9641>

University of Paderborn

jarmila.mildorf@upb.de

DOI: 10.35765/pk.2024.4502.14

Time and Transformation in Autobiography:
Candia McWilliam's *What to Look
for in Winter: A Memoir in Blindness*

ABSTRACT

In this article, I discuss transformations of self over time in Candia McWilliam's memoir *What to Look for in Winter*. In this book, the author writes about many life-changing events: her mother's suicide, her two failed marriages, her alcoholism and her blindness, to name only a few. However, the book itself constitutes an attempt at transforming these experiences in the act of writing, to offer restitution to a life gone awry. Time plays a major role in this endeavour, both in the story told and in the way it is told. Anchored primarily in two 'present' moments in the first and second halves of the book, the narrative moves back and forth in time, taking the reader on a painful journey through the author's past. Time furthermore serves as an overarching metaphor for transformations especially due to illness, as can already be seen in the book title's reference to the seasons. What emerges is a highly complex literary autobiography in which life storytelling meshes with metanarrative reflection.

KEYWORDS: autobiography, lifetime, transformation, narrative and self, memory

STRESZCZENIE

Czas i transformacja w autobiografii: *What to Look for in Winter: A Memoir in Blindness* Candii McWilliam

Artykuł dotyczy transformacji dokonanej w czasie w obrębie osobowości autobiograficznej, która została przedstawiona we wspomnieniach Candii McWilliam, zatytułowanych *What to Look for in Winter*. Autorka opisuje wiele trudnych doświadczeń, między innymi samobójstwo matki, dwa nieudane małżeństwa, alkoholizm oraz utratę wzroku. Mimo doświadczonych niepowodzeń autobiografia McWilliam stanowi próbę odzyskania równowagi w procesie twórczym, który ma pomóc nadać życiu utracony sens. Czas odgrywa główną rolę zarówno w samej historii jej życia, jak i w literackim jej przedstawieniu. Zamiast chronologicznego ukazania wydarzeń z przeszłości

Suggested citation: Mildorf, J. (2024). Time and Transformation in Autobiography: Candia McWilliam's *What to Look for in Winter: A Memoir in Blindness*. © ⓘ Perspectives on Culture, 2(45), pp. 181–197. DOI: 10.35765/pk.2024.4502.14

Submitted: 11.04.2023

Accepted: 10.12.2023

autorka konstruuje opowieść w odniesieniu do dwóch wymiarów terażniejszości, którym odpowiadają dwie odrębne części tej biografii. Ponadto czas nabiera znaczenia jako metafora transformacji, co uwidacznia się już w tytule książki nawiązującym do cyklu oraz pór roku. Wynikiem takiego przedstawienia własnego życia jest złożona i pełna refleksji autobiografia autorki.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: autobiografia, życiopisanie, transformacja, tożsamość autobiograficzna, pamięć

1. Introduction

We humans are probably unique in consciously experiencing ourselves as living in time, being able to reflect on the past but also to conjure up possible scenarios for the future. Paul Ricoeur foregrounds the role of narrative in this connection, arguing that

time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 3).

It seems that we can only adequately capture and give meaning to our lived experience by casting it in narrative form, which offers a temporal framework through its sequentiality and usually retrospective orientation. Drawing on Ricoeur, Jens Brockmeier (2022, p. 69) has recently also pointed out that life narratives are stories that give shape or *gestalt* to people's lifetimes ("Lebenszeit"). These lifetimes are in themselves socio-culturally determined constructs. Brockmeier also emphasizes that the experience of living in time and of giving narrative expression to this experience are by no means universal but are strongly influenced by culture-specific conceptions of self, identity and time (p. 79). Still, as far as the Western hemisphere is concerned, one can argue that all life storytelling and, within that, autobiographical writing rests on transformations of a self over time: physical, intellectual and emotional changes that can be considered responses to one's lived experience. In this article, I want to explore this nexus by looking at Candia McWilliam's memoir *What to Look for in Winter: A Memoir in Blindness* (2010). In this book, the author writes about many life-changing events: her mother's suicide, her two failed marriages, her alcoholism and her temporary blindness in connection with blepharospasm, to name only a few. I will discuss how McWilliam reflects on transformations of herself over time and reconstructs herself in her memoir in the process of writing it. The book itself can be said to constitute an attempt at transforming her life experiences in the act of

writing, to offer restitution to a life gone awry. As I shall argue, time plays a major role in this endeavour, both in the content of the story told and in the way it is told, its discourse. First, however, I want to explore the links between time, narrative and autobiography further.

2. Time, Narrative and Life Writing

In a diary entry from 23 December 1911, Franz Kafka wrote:

Ein Vorteil des Tagebuchführens besteht darin, daß man sich mit beruhigender Klarheit der Wandlungen bewußt wird, denen man unaufhörlich unterliegt, die man auch im allgemeinen natürlich glaubt, ahnt und zugesteht, die man aber unbewußt immer dann leugnet, wenn es darauf ankommt, sich aus einem solchen Zugeständnis Hoffnung oder Ruhe zu holen. Im Tagebuch findet man Beweise dafür, daß man selbst in Zuständen, die heute unerträglich scheinen, gelebt, herumgeschaut und Beobachtungen aufgeschrieben hat, daß also diese Rechte sich bewegt hat wie heute, wo wir zwar durch die Möglichkeit des Überblickes über den damaligen Zustand klüger sind, darum aber desto mehr die Unerschrockenheit unseres damaligen, in lauter Unwissenheit sich dennoch erhaltenden Strebens anerkennen müssen.

One advantage of writing a diary is that one becomes aware – with reassuring clarity – of the changes one permanently undergoes. Generally, one believes, suspects and concedes that there are these changes; however, one unconsciously always denies their existence whenever it is important to gain hope or tranquillity from such an admission. The diary offers evidence of the fact that, even under circumstances that may seem unbearable today, one managed to live, look around and write down one's observations. It attests to the fact that this right hand moved just as it does today when, it is true, we are more knowledgeable about our past condition because we now have the possibility of looking back on it with hindsight. It is precisely for this reason that we have to acknowledge even more the bravery of our striving back then, asserting itself despite all amidst our complete ignorance (my translation).

A diary enables one, Kafka writes, to gain certainty about the constant transformations one undergoes, and it offers evidence for these changes of the self, which one would otherwise perhaps not believe in or admit to oneself. More importantly, a diary can bear testimony to the resilience one showed even under dire circumstances, and diary writing itself is a sign of striving for self-preservation (“erhaltenden Strebens”) in such a situation.

Moreover, Kafka juxtaposes the knowledge one has about oneself in hindsight (see also Freeman, 2015) with the lack of knowledge or awareness (“Unwissenheit”) one is subject to at any current moment in one’s life. It is only with a temporal distance that one can become aware of the state of one’s former self and of the changes that constantly reorient one’s life path. Without such changes, there would be no life story because stories require story world ‘disruption’ as one ingredient to become worth the telling (see Herman, 2009, pp. 19–21).

While diary writing chronicles a life ‘on the go’ or online, as it were, and is temporally close to the daily experiences it captures, an autobiography is marked by the temporal distance it usually has to the life experiences it recapitulates. Autobiographers look back on their experiences with the self-knowledge they have accumulated over the years. In autobiography studies, this set-up is captured by the distinction between the *narrating I*, located in the moment of writing the autobiography, and the *narrated I*, the persona whose past life is told. However, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010, pp. 74–75) have argued, the picture is in fact more complicated. For one thing, the *narrating I* may be speaking in several voices, conveying different facets of his or her identity. And these voices may be coloured by other people’s words.

One can see Smith and Watson’s indebtedness to Bakhtin’s concept of multi- or double-voicedness here. In his essay “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin discusses at some length how different people’s words and voices enter a person’s speech both in everyday conversation and, by extension, also in larger discursive formations such as fiction, for example. He writes:

It might be said (...) that in the makeup of almost every utterance spoken by a social person – from a brief response in a casual dialogue to major verbal-ideological works (literary, scholarly and others) – a significant number of words can be identified that are implicitly or explicitly admitted as someone else’s, and that are transmitted by a variety of different means. Within the arena of almost every utterance an intense interaction and struggle between one’s own and another’s word is being waged, a process in which they oppose or dialogically interanimate each other (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 354).

In an autobiography, other people’s utterances may appear in the form of dialogue or direct speech presentation, indirect quotations or unmarked quotations that may easily pass as the author’s own discourse.

Furthermore, and more interestingly for my purposes, the *narrated I* may come in different ‘versions’ that change over time during multiple tellings of one’s life story:

As one narrative, and its narrative moment and occasion, displaces another, stories from the past may be rerouted through different narrating “I”s, who assign different meanings, affective valences, and effects to events, stages in life, conflicts, and traumas. The narrated “I” returns, to be put under a new definition, given new identities, set in a new relation to history. Serializing the “I,” then, asserts the condition of mobility, as one version follows another (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 75).

The autobiographical narrative does not need to be verbalized. Even our internal self-narratives change depending on the situation we find ourselves in at any juncture in our lives (see Thomä, 1998). Moreover, neither the *narrating I* nor the *narrated I* are fully co-extensive with the historical persona or real-life autobiographer. Life storytelling and, within that, autobiography as a genre, always carry an element of self-fictionalization (see also Mildorf, 2023). This is not least so because autobiography involves several temporal dimensions and the respective identities bound up with them. Our memories may allow us only limited access to certain periods in our lives, especially those of the distant past, and much of what we ‘remember’ may be informed by the wishful thinking of the person we are at the moment of remembering.

3. Temporalities in Life Storytelling: Then – the Then Presented in the Now – Now

So, there is the past, irretrievably gone, that one can only access – for better or worse – through one’s memory. Research has amply shown that memory is a superb cognitive endowment while also being inherently flawed, and our memories of the past are influenced by the situations we find ourselves in right now: our current beliefs and dispositions (Brockmeier, 2015). Paul John Eakin (2008) even assumes a meta-reflexive stance in autobiographical remembering when he claims that the target of one’s recall “is not ‘the past’ but self – self performing the act of recall” (p. 163) or that “autobiography’s true or real story is the story of the story” (p. 166), i.e., how one came to remember and talk or write about one’s past. The *now*, ultimately, is the time that engulfs autobiographers when they sit down to write about their memories. This present moment of writing is the anchor point of any autobiographical text, whether this is made obvious or not. Still, the past has its own significance, otherwise autobiographers would not go to such lengths to retrace it, nor would readers show such an interest in another person’s past. Reminiscing about the past also entails an element of nostalgia, a sense of pain experienced on perceiving

the loss of one's past, a past which autobiography may fruitfully bring back (see Wojciechowska, 2023).

And yet, the *then* people write about in their autobiographies are recreations of that past at best. As such, they may also entail a degree of 'creation' or creative invention. In that sense, the *then presented in the now* is not the same as the *then* of the actual past. Kenneth Pike even talks about a "pseudopast" and autobiographies as "novels":

Thus autobiography is not simply an attempt to retell one's past life on a linear scale, but rather in effect a novel written in the present, with one's past life as its subject. Not all fiction is autobiographical, but, on this deeper level, all autobiography is fiction. The past does not exist. There are memories of it – scattered shards of events and feelings – but they are re-created within a later context. There is no way to retrieve the original fact or experience. The only way of giving the illusion of doing so is to reinvent the past in the present. Writing autobiographically is a way of making this process systematic; the act of writing fixes the pseudopast and the present in relation to each other, and lends to both the appearance of permanence (Pike, 1976, pp. 337–338).

The idea of "permanence" is interesting as it suggests autobiographers' desire to immortalize themselves through their life story. Indeed, both Pike and Eakin point to this potential driving force or motivation behind much life writing – of course in addition to many other, perhaps more mundane and pragmatic, reasons such as having to generate an income or to market oneself.

Imaginative storytelling helps us give expression to our life experiences, even those we did not have. As sociologist Molly Andrews writes:

It is the drive of the imagination which impels us to ask 'if only' of our past, and 'what if' of our futures. When we revisit the past, as we do when we tell stories about our lives, it is our imaginative urge which gives us the ability to contemplate a world that might have been, as well as one which might still be (Andrews, 2014, p. 5).

Not only can humans verbalize what they experienced in the past, Andrews argues, but they can even think about alternatives to the lives they lived. In narrative studies, Gary Saul Morson (1998) coined the term "sideshadowing" to capture the possibility of throwing light on life trajectories that were not further pursued but that can still be conjured up and alluded to in narrative. In autobiography, sideshadowing may be a sign of regret about paths not taken or, quite on the contrary, relief about the fact that things turned out differently than expected.

Autobiographical stories thus also have a transformative power. An autobiography can mark selected time periods as particularly decisive while relegating to the background many others; some periods are extended in their retrospective retelling, while others are cut short or even passed over entirely. The transformative power of autobiography also affects the narrated self: with hindsight, as I already pointed out, we can make sense of ourselves in ways that may differ from the sense of self we had when we actually lived through an experience (see Freeman, 2015). Furthermore, every telling of a life story potentially changes the *narrating I*. I now want to explore these different possibilities in my chosen example.

4. Candia McWilliam's *What to Look for in Winter: A Memoir in Blindness*

Candia McWilliam's *What to Look for in Winter: A Memoir in Blindness*, published in 2010, deals with time and transformation in complex ways both on the level of content and its discourse, i.e., its overall narrative, verbal, and stylistic presentation. Time serves as an overarching metaphor for transformations especially due to illness, as can already be seen in the book title's reference to the seasons. Throughout the story, winter serves as an image for the later stage in life that William has arrived at, and also captures the coldness of feelings she experiences because of a perceived lack of love, as I will demonstrate below. The book has two parts entitled "Spectacles" and "See/Saw" respectively. The first part contains memories of childhood, McWilliam's glamorous life when she was a young woman, her marriages to Quentin Wallop, 10th Earl of Portsmouth, and university don Fram Dinshaw, her alcohol addiction and how she overcame it through rehabilitation and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. These memories were dictated by McWilliam to her secretary, Liv Stones, during her blindness. In the second part, begun almost a year after the first part was completed, McWilliam retraces especially the separation from her second husband, Fram, who now lives with another woman, and how this still influences McWilliam's own life. This part was written by McWilliam herself after an eye operation allowed her to see again. Anchored in those two 'present' moments in the first and second halves of the book, the narrative moves back and forth in time, taking the reader on a painful journey through the author's past.

Even before the actual narrative begins, the three mottos that precede the autobiographical text already point to the main themes of loss and changed identity as well as to a potentially bad ending. Elizabeth Bishop's poem "One Art" offers a reflection on "the art of losing" and hints in the

final stanza at the loss of a person the lyrical I loved. The two lines quoted from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ("Be as thou wast wont to be; / See as thou wast wont to see") are lines spoken by the fairy king Oberon when he lifts a magic spell off his wife, Titania, a spell that made her fall in love with an ass. The lines allude to McWilliam's own problems with seeing and to her implicit wish to turn back time. The French proverb, finally, which effectively says that a woman who drinks wine and a girl who reads Latin will find a sad end, touch on McWilliam's predilection for using educated and complex language as well as her alcoholism. The allusion to the "triste fin" already foreshadows a similarly sad ending to McWilliam's own life story. This is interesting as McWilliam, at the time of writing her autobiography, obviously cannot know the ending of her life story yet (see also Abbott, 1988). The allusion thus gives readers a flavour of the author's pessimistic outlook on life.

What emerges from the beginning of the book is a highly complex literary autobiography in which life storytelling meshes with metanarrative reflection. In the following discussion, I will delineate some of this complexity by looking, in turn, at the narrative's multiple openings, the use of time and nature metaphors in connection with McWilliam's reflections on life writing, general narrative trajectories of the text, narrative sense-making in relation to time and, finally, allusions to transformations of self over time.

4.1. Openings

The actual life narrative begins with a memory of how McWilliam was given a Japanese paper umbrella by her mother. Its lack of practical use in the rainy climate of Edinburgh is pointed out, but this discrepancy already characterizes what her mother meant to McWilliam: she managed to create magic in the young girl's life for as long as she was there for her. It is not surprising that McWilliam indirectly dedicates the book within its opening lines:

Tomorrow this book of mine, which is greatly hers, goes to the printer. It is an account of many kinds of light denied. It is also the account of how certain forms of shade are rich if you are fortunate enough to stay sufficiently long to read them. I have already lived for eighteen years longer than my mother did (p. xii).

McWilliam here already uses the imagery of light and seeing, suggesting that she was deprived of "many kinds of light" during her life. That

this negative assessment is intricately related with the untimely death of her mother becomes clear when McWilliam compares her own age with the age her mother was when she committed suicide. As a reader, one immediately senses that this event was traumatic enough to overshadow the remainder of McWilliam's life. Still, McWilliam also opens up the possibility of having rich experiences, which she expresses in the metaphor of shades of colour. By alluding to the 'reading' of colours if one is "fortunate enough to stay sufficiently long to read them," McWilliam not only refers to a life full of experiences but also, by implication, to readers' opportunity to retrace those experiences with the author. It is telling that McWilliam, herself an avid and voracious reader before the onset of her illness, uses reading as an image for life here.

In the opening paragraphs of the second part, McWilliam offers a clear temporal anchor and relates what she is writing now to the first part, which she thought she had already finished:

It is now May 2009, almost a year since I thought I had 'finished' *What to Look for in Winter* and, if anything, the frost has taken a tighter grip on my eyes and upon my life.

I have abstracted myself from that life for two months in order to find a way of thawing it out.

How have I managed to get to where I am now from where I was then?

And which 'then' would that be?

And why should you care? (p. 290)

The inverted commas around the verb "finished" indicate that the autobiographical project is perhaps never to be completed, at least not until we eventually die. McWilliam also suggests that her situation has become worse in the meantime, that "the frost has taken a tighter grip" on her. Again, the frost and winter metaphors are used to convey an idea of McWilliam's emotional state. In literary texts, winter has traditionally served as a metaphor for the end of life. However, McWilliam is not only writing about old age here. The frost that requires some "thawing out" oppresses her mind and hinders her from seeing, both literally but also in a figurative sense.

What is interesting in this passage regarding the theme of time, is the juxtaposition of a past and a present self, a move which is very common in autobiographical texts. The temporal pronouns "now" and "then" are typical for this juxtaposition. McWilliam even invites a deeper reflection about this "then": "And which 'then' would that be?" The question seems to imply that one can compare one's self of the here and now to a range of previous selves from various stages in one's life. Conversely, the question

may also be read as calling into question the existence of such multiple selves and as pointing to some continuity that is worth exploring. McWilliam is careful to include the reader in her reflections. With the question “why should you care?”, she immediately addresses the reader, not only voicing a potential sense of doubt the reader might have on reading this lengthy and rhetorically dense autobiographical text but dispelling this doubt by suggesting an answer to that question. McWilliam wishes to offer an example, to warn the reader of what she subsequently terms “self-unhelp” (p. 290). By laying out the mistakes she made in her life, she is hoping to educate the reader about how to avoid such mistakes.

The inclusion of the reader is continued when McWilliam sets out her plan for the time she has taken to spend on the island of Colonsay, a place with which she also connects fond childhood memories. The reader is directly addressed as one of the recipients of whatever McWilliam is hoping to figure out about herself. Time again becomes important as a theme because McWilliam sets herself a definite time limit:

What connects my blindness, the atheist’s wife and the living words of dead men? I have come to an island to find this out for us, you and me. I have fifty-six days left in which to do it.

During that time, I hope to finish this book, and to set in the ground that I roundly hope will be melted thereby the bulbs whose flowering will I also hope compose a short novel, as vivid as energy and compression under silence can have made it (p. 290).

The mention of “the atheist’s wife” refers back to an anecdote nearer the beginning of the second part, where McWilliam relates how, one day, she met a friend at the supermarket. This friend was the second wife of a well-known atheist and was doing the shopping for the atheist’s first wife, who had fallen terminally ill (pp. 285–286). As McWilliam points out, there are parallels to her own current life since her second husband’s new partner has also taken it on herself to occasionally care for McWilliam, which, as the second half of the book amply illustrates, has led to discontent and jealousy on McWilliam’s part. McWilliam connects this story to “the living words of dead men”, by which she means authors like Henry James and Marcel Proust. As she points out in a preceding paragraph, both authors retired from the world in order to give room to their literary creativity (p. 289). Similarly, McWilliam has now come to the island to finish her autobiography as well as “a short novel.” By referencing James and Proust, McWilliam implicitly gives away the ideal she aspires to in her own writing. At the same time, she creates a lineage for herself as a writer that suggests great self-esteem and confidence, which is in stark contrast

to the self-deprecating tone found in much of the rest of McWilliam's life story. The literary reference to Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* is particularly interesting as the book title seems to become a shortcut to McWilliam's own endeavour in the second part of her autobiography: she, too, is in search of lost time and lost love. Once again, McWilliam uses literary references to make sense of her life and to give her autobiography, if not even her life itself, a literary quality. At the same time, the complex syntax she employs, including hypotactic or embedded structures, as can also be seen in the quote above, underlines this striving for literariness and seems to emulate the writing style of Henry James.

4.2. Reflections on Life Writing: Time and Nature Metaphors

Apart from the season metaphor, McWilliam in good literary fashion draws on nature imagery to reflect on time, life and life writing. One such example is the image of a surface, such as the surface of water on a lake, which represents the present moment. Consider the following quotations:

It has become impossible to write of my far past without being somewhat open about the present and its tense surface (p. 84).

Say the present is the epilimnion, then, of this book; as we swim it so we shall feel the changing temperatures of the past rise up; the weed brush our legs... (p. 84).

Just as “now” and “then” are juxtaposed in other places in the book, it is now “the past” and “the present” that are pitted against each other. McWilliam also uses puns as, for example, when she writes about the present and “its tense surface”, where “tense” can both be read as the adjective that relates to surface tension or as the noun that alludes to the present tense as a grammatical category encoding a certain temporal dimension. The image of the “tense surface,” later taken up again by the hard word “epilimnion,” suggests difficulties in dealing with the present or a kind of struggle when trying to move across that surface. The second quotation concretizes the image of the surface by evoking a pond at the surface of which McWilliam swims. This surface represents the present while the depth of the pond stands for the past. Swimming as a metaphor for life is powerful as it implies that one has to make an effort to keep alive or ‘afloat.’ It also suggests constant movement. The past makes itself felt through its “changing temperatures,” which indicates that memories are

not all the same but may affect one differently at the emotional level. And then there are “weed,” which one can read as reminders of the past that either annoy us while we are ‘swimming’ in the present or that create a soft connection to the depths of time gone. The pond metaphor seems to imply that past and present are actually continuous, that they constantly mix in their confluence of water, and that the present “surface” could not exist without one’s deep and voluminous past experience.

The water imagery is taken up again much later in the book when McWilliam likens “yesterday,” the closest part of the past, to a fish that can be caught from a stream and “tickled up to life” because it is not yet as remote and indistinct as some other moments of the past. This metaphor is preceded by a whole sequence of other metaphors, which together create a complex conceit not unlike the ones found in Metaphysical poetry:

My friend will be looking for a trajectory in my memoir, a plot, a lesson learned, a message that can be extracted from the thousands of bottles.

She has as much chance of finding one as I have of returning to their stems the hundreds of cut daisies that lie now among the lines of clippings on the scented close-mown lawn under my window. Some of the clippings have been caught in the bin of the old mower, some have not. It’s over, it was grass, it will be compost, the flowers fall.

I can say nothing more to my friend that it was my life, that it sometimes went too slowly but was over too fast, now that I look back at it. It was all I had. The miracle would be to convey a breath of how it was.

Yesterday... now, yesterday is good and close, perhaps it may be tickled up to life, taken from the stream, and caught before its freckles and the blue shine on it go? (p. 356)

The starting point is once again a reflection of how difficult it is to identify a coherent “plot” in someone’s life story, both for a reader and for the autobiographer herself. The “thousands of bottles” alludes to the practice of sending messages in bottles across the water. Each bottle contains a memory of the past. This image then shifts to the cut daisies that have just been mowed down and cannot be returned to their stems. The impossibility of making them whole again is linked to the impossibility of finding a message in McWilliam’s autobiography, which is interesting as it contradicts McWilliam’s own claim concerning her didactic purpose of warning the reader of a similar fate, as I mentioned above.

The cut daisies also represent the end of life trajectories and, by extension, the end of life itself since flowers, when they have fallen, cannot live on. There is also an allusion to a transformation: cut grass becomes compost, thus living on in a changed state but, in its new function as fertilizer, nonetheless contributing to the growth of other plants. The random

process whereby some daisies end up in the mower's bag and some remain on the lawn, is then tied back to McWilliam's life, which remains just as inexplicable. All that McWilliam's can say is that her life "sometimes went too slowly but was over too fast." Again, there is a sense of fatality in these words, as if McWilliam's life was already finished even though she is quite obviously still alive. One may discern here an allusion to the topos of 'death in life' that has marked literature from Modernist times onwards, if not before. More importantly, however, McWilliam uses these shifting images drawn from nature to reflect once again about the very act of life storytelling. She writes that it would be a "miracle" to "convey a breath of how it was." Life is presented as essentially non-graspable, and all that remains for an autobiographer to do is to try and catch glimpses of this life with hindsight ("now that I look back at it"). The entire book must therefore be considered an attempt to capture in words what was otherwise a fleeting experience, to give order to chaotic life events. The marking of narrative trajectories on the discursive level becomes especially important in this connection.

4.3. Narrative Trajectories

The challenge for any autobiographer is not only to overcome as best as possible the pitfalls of one's memory but to present the various pieces that one has unearthed in such a way that the resulting narrative somehow makes sense to readers, even if the narrative is creative and unconventional. In retelling her past, McWilliam by and large follows a chronological order, as mentioned above, but she also oscillates between the past and the present. Connections are drawn, for example, by means of foreshadowing as when McWilliam offers some information about her second husband but then refers the reader to a later point in the narrative for more aspects of that narrative trajectory: "Fram is a Zoroastrian, a faith that accepts no converts, although it is so very practical a religion and a way of life. But all that is for later" (p. 143). Because of the vantage point autobiographers inhabit at the moment of writing, they can anticipate parts of the story to create suspense for readers or, more generally, to keep readers engaged. Likewise, this backward-oriented perspective allows autobiographers to reflect on what did not happen, "a world that might have been," as Andrews (2014, p. 5) has it (see above). In narratological terms, this focus on unrealized narrative trajectories is called "sideshadowing", as I explained above. McWilliam's autobiography also contains elements of sideshadowing. An example can be found when McWilliam imagines what might have happened had she stayed in her native Edinburgh:

If I had stayed at home, I wouldn't have talked like this and I might have married a nice Scots boy who really could dance (though in the East coast fashion) and we might have settled down in the couthie Edinburgh life for which, I think, I hanker so, now that I definitively have not lived it (p. 160).

The hypothetical modals already indicate that this is an imagined life path: McWilliam would not have lost her Scottish accent and would have married a typical Scotsman. Sideshadowing in this instance also entails an element of nostalgia or, as McWilliam herself puts it, a 'hankering' after a life that could have been but did not happen. Such hypothetical scenarios say at least as much about autobiographers as the parts of their lives that they do remember and choose to write about. Here, we are faced with a sense of loss again.

4.4. Time and Narrative Sense-Making

Mc William also uses references to time to retrospectively make sense of her life by putting them into a specific sequential and, by implication, causal order. Consider the following example:

I had wondered if I blinded myself when I left Fram, whom I married on 27 September 1986. I left him in November 1996.

The onset of the physical condition, ten years later, seemed like the reification of a metaphor I had inhabited for a long time. This way of thinking enraged the more mechanical of my doctors (p. 219).

The theme of blindness is taken up again and refers both to McWilliam's physical and metaphorical blindness. Interestingly, the author uses the verb 'to blind' to talk about how she potentially deprived herself of sight because she left her husband. This life decision in hindsight turned out to be one of her biggest mistakes, which, as the second part of the book drives home very painfully, has overshadowed McWilliam's life to the present day. McWilliam goes as far as to interpret her actual blindness as a "reification of a metaphor" she inhabited for a long time, thus establishing a causal link between ostensibly unrelated events in her life. The time frame becomes important in this connection as it suggests a logical sequence: after ten years of marriage, McWilliam left her husband; after another ten years, she turns blind. It is this kind of 'magic in numbers' that is often evoked in autobiographical texts. Time is subsequently made to fit a pattern and to be indicative of a deeper meaning inscribed in the life

lived. Time and a perceived progression in and through time also constitute the backbone to the narrative presentation of transformations of self.

4.5. Transformations of Self

At a point right in the middle of her autobiography, when McWilliam remembers her mother once again, she mentions the difficulty in imagining her mother as an old woman since she died at a young age. By contrast, her own ageing is part of her current lived experience and is pointed to in rather negative, self-deprecating tones:

I cannot imagine the sort of old woman she would have been, though I am fast imagining the sort of old woman that I shall become.

In fact, anatomically, I feel that I have become that old thing. I creep, I peer, I fall. I have very nearly forgotten how it felt simply to stride along a street with one's head back and one's hair falling down one's shoulders. Yet this feeling was mine not two and a half years ago (p. 236).

The climax in “I creep, I peer, I fall,” which is an inversion of Gaius Julius Caesar’s powerful and much-quoted words “Veni, vidi, vici” (I came, I saw, I conquered) already highlights McWilliam’s tendency to view her life in negative terms. She has come to a stage where her physical disability incommodes her. This is felt especially sharply because it contrasts with her sense of elation and energy when she was still that beautiful woman walking down the street in strides and, indeed, taking her life in strides. The fact that she was that ‘other’ woman “not two and a half years ago” foregrounds the changeability of self even over short periods of time. Life holds unwanted changes that can literally happen over night. If life shifts and changes like this, autobiography must account for such changes. At the same time, writing an autobiography itself can bring about change, as McWilliam suggests when she explains: “I write because words change one another when they lie together. Because words change things. They make people see” (p. 479). In the final pages of her autobiographical text, McWilliam comes back full circle to the metaphor of seeing. If words can “make people see,” then her autobiography can be interpreted as an attempt at making herself see again, to recognize what is truly of value in her life and what she has shut out because of her many physical and psychological afflictions. Self-transformation is here expressly linked to the power of words – an apt connection in the context of a literary author’s life narrative.

Conclusion

In this article, I analysed Candia McWilliam's autobiography *What to Look for in Winter: A Memoir in Blindness*, with special emphasis on notions of time and transformation. These two aspects can be considered integral parts of any autobiographical text. In McWilliam's book, they are treated both at the thematic level, alluding to changes of the autobiographical self over time, and the discursive level, where the author uses interesting temporal frameworks for her narrative construction, oscillating between past and present but also between different present moments in the two parts of the book. Time and transformation serve as starting points for deep-seated reflections on self, identity and life and ultimately contribute to a complex autobiography that assumes literary qualities. I explored the use of metaphors and narrative trajectories including openings, sideshadowing and foreshadowing. Furthermore, I demonstrated how McWilliam uses time and transformation to make sense of her life in retrospect but also to overcome her multiple griefs in the process of writing. Transformation is thus not only explored but in fact hoped for as one outcome of the autobiographical act.

REFERENCES

- Abbott, P. (1988). Autobiography, autography, fiction: Groundwork for a taxonomy of textual categories. *New Literary History*, 19(3), 597–615.
- Andrews, M. (2014). *Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bakhtin, M.M. (1981 [1934–1935]). Discourse and the novel. In: M. Holquist (ed.), C. Emerson and M. Holquist (transl.), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 259–422.
- Brockmeier, J. (2022). *Erzählen als Lebensform: Ernst-E.-Boesch-Preis für Kulturpsychologie 2021*. Gießen: Psychosozialverlag.
- Eakin, P.J. (2008). *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Freeman, M. (2010). *Hindsight: The Promise and Peril of Looking Backward*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Herman, D. (2009). *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.
- Kafka, F. (1990). *Tagebücher in der Fassung der Handschrift*, eds. H.-G. Koch, M. Müller, & M. Pasley. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer.
- McWilliam, C. (2010). *What to Look for in Winter: A Memoir in Blindness*. London: Vintage Books.
- Mildorf, J. (2023). *Life Storying in Oral History: Fictional Contamination and Literary Complexity*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

- Morson, G.S. (1994). *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Pike, K. (1976). Time in autobiography. *Comparative Literature*, 28(4), 326–342.
- Smith, S. & Watson, J. (2010). *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Thomä, D. (1998). *Erzähle dich selbst: Lebensgeschichte als philosophisches Problem*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- Wojciechowska, S.J. (2023). *Nostalgia as a Mode of Reflection in the Autobiographical Narratives of Joseph Conrad and Henry James*. Lausanne: Peter Lang.

Jarmila Mildorf – a Professor of English language, literature and culture at Paderborn University. Her research interests are in socionarratology, audionarratology, radio drama, dialogue, life storytelling, the medical humanities and second-person narration. She is the author of *Storying Domestic Violence: Constructions and Stereotypes of Abuse in the Discourse of General Practitioners* (University of Nebraska Press 2007) and *Life Storying in Oral History: Fictional Contamination and Literary Complexity* (De Gruyter 2023). Recent co-edited collections include *Narrative and Mental Health: Re-Imagining Theory and Practice* (Oxford University Press 2023) and *Word, Sound and Music in Radio Drama* (Brill 2024).

