



**Spectres of Derrida:  
*Différance and Supplement in Self-Life-Writing***

Dr. Samir Ahmed Abdel-Naim<sup>(\*)</sup>

Derrida's own typical habit of reading is to seize on some apparently peripheral fragment in the work – a footnote, a recurrent minor term or image, a casual allusion – and work it tenaciously through to the point where it threatens to dismantle the oppositions which govern the text as a whole. (Eagleton 116)

In *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretations*, Gérard Genette identifies the preface, a term he employs to "designate every type of introductory . . . text," as a paratext (161). A book's title and subtitle(s), the name of the author, dedications, and notes are among the many paratexts Genette identifies. Although these elements surround, extend, adorn, and help present the text, Genette argues, "we do not always know whether these productions are to be regarded as belonging to the text" (1). They are liminal, looking both towards the inside of the text and its outside. Paratexts form a vestibule, a fringe, an edge, a zone of transition, a buffer zone, between text and off-text. They are part, and yet not part, of the text at the same time. They can be important, though not really essential. A book can *live* without them: we all know that there are anonymous books, books which lack publication data, dedication, or preface. Genette confides that he calls these elements paratexts "in keeping with the sometimes ambiguous meaning of this prefix [para] in French" (1). Interestingly, the ambiguity of "para" in English is lucidly explained by J. Hillis Miller:

'Para' is a double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, ... something simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold, or margin, and also beyond it, equivalent in status and also secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as of guest to host, slave to master. A thing in 'para,' moreover, is not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and out. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside. It confuses them with one another, allowing the outside in, making the inside out, dividing them and joining them. (219)

This paper seizes on the paratextual prefaces of Mohammed Enani's autobiographical trilogy, *Oases of a Lifetime* (2002)<sup>1</sup>, to illustrate the anxieties haunting self-life-writing. Choosing Enani's prefaces as the main object of analysis in this paper is Derridean in spirit. It entails a focus on peripheral

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<sup>(\*)</sup> Lecturer of English, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Sohag University

fragments rather than the center of texts. A preface is an inessential element of a text. It is, Genette argues, "obviously never obligatory" (163). A text can do without a preface. And when it exists, it is both inside and outside. By definition, it is a pre- / a before. It comes before the essential part, the centre of the text. It is, therefore, outside/before the text. But paradoxically, it is a pre-/a before/an exterior that lies on the inside of the text. In this paper, marginal prefaces are given presence, and enthroned in the center.

In Enani's autobiography, the peripheral presence of the prefaces is accentuated in both form and content. On the one hand, they are very thin indeed – each occupying no more than very few pages. On the other hand, these prefaces are not *essential* part of the autobiographical narrative. Although they provide comments on the nature and purpose of autobiography in general and the *Oases* in particular, they are not part of Enani's life story. In other words, they are avoidable. The reader can ignore them and jump to the pages in Arabic numerals – where the autobiographical narrative really begins. Though not in this case, a preface is conventionally further isolated through pagination in Latin rather than Arabic numerals in English texts, and in letters rather than numerals in Arabic ones. While Enani's breach of this convention brings the prefaces closer to the text in terms of pagination, this bears no significance on the peripheral relevance of the prefaces to the semantic plane of the text(s) proper.

The short prefaces briefly address the same issues: atop come the daunting task of retrieving a past that may never be fully recovered, the role of memory, and truthfulness in autobiography. This study draws on recent developments in autobiographical studies which brought into question – if not wholly undermined – some fundamental beliefs about autobiography, including the ones mentioned above. Also, it makes use of two of Jacques Derrida's key terms: *différance*, and *supplement*. These concepts are appropriated to point to the tensions, stumbles, and possible contradictions which mark the pursuit to write one's life. If writing one's autobiography entails, mainly though not solely, an attempt to recover and reconstruct a coherent meaning of one's life, the paper tries to explain that getting at a firm *full meaning* of one's life is never realized. There is, on the one hand, a practical impossibility in recovering and representing one's life in full:

In theory, one could attempt to represent one's entire life in writing. But in practice, obviously, this can't be done. Life is long (hopefully); life writing, short. Life is multidimensional and complex, sometimes chaotic; life writing must have focus and form. Life inevitably far exceeds the capacity of writing to contain it. (Couser 22)

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On the other hand, there is the highly selective and notoriously unreliable nature of the faculty of memory upon which the whole process of retrieving one's past depends. Willingly or not, little or much of the autobiographer's history slips from memory and does not find its way into the written life narrative. Therefore, as one's life can never be fully presented in an autobiography, making sense of this life remains incomplete. Its full meaning is subject to slippage; it is deferred (from Derrida's *différance*).

Revisiting his *Oases*, Enani unveils in his *last* preface that he will soon publish what he calls "a tail, or tails" to make up for what he had overlooked – one may say had forgotten – in the already lengthy three-part autobiography (III: 2). Enani's intention to write a tail is investigated in the light of Derrida's *supplement* which has the double meaning of an addition, a surplus, an extra, and a substitute or a replacement. The supplementary tail is needed to fill in the gaps in the earlier text(s). Hence, it is an addition. It betrays a feeling on the autobiographer's part that the meaning of his life has not been fully reached. On the other hand, the autobiographical text is a supplement in the sense of replacement or substitute. It replaces the real life of the autobiographer. This strikes me as subtly close to Derrida's reflections on meaning. For Derrida, Terry Eagleton explains, meaning "is something suspended, held over, still to come" (111-12).

It must here be noted that this attempt at conjuring up the spirit of Derrida will probably raise the eyebrows of Enani, whose dismissive criticism of Derrida is well – documented:

I turned Derrida and his method down because he tries to subject the study of literature and criticism to the logic of natural science. This is a methodological fallacy because art does not address the mind only, but it appeals to feelings and the aesthetic sense too. These are domains to which the rules of natural sciences do not apply. (III: 179)

But dismissing Derrida and his method is not new. His work is both highly esteemed by his admirers and vituperatively scorned by intellectual foes. Though acknowledging his difficulty, his followers praise his depth and exceptional analytical prowess. His detractors, on the other hand, dismiss him as inaccessible and meaningless to the point of nihilism; a charge which a number of Derrideans have found difficult to avoid and attempted to mitigate. Gregory Castle, for instance, argues that "deconstruction is not nihilistic, however. To *de*-construct is not to destroy; it is rather to unveil the seemingly hidden workings of language that constitute the very basis of linguistic and textual meaning" (81;

italics in original). Tracing the etymology of deconstruction, Barbara Johnson stresses the same point:

Deconstruction is not a form of textual vandalism designed to prove that meaning is impossible. In fact, the word "de-construction" is closely related not to the word "destruction" but to the word "analysis," which etymologically means to "undo" – a virtual synonym "to de-construct." (xiv)

Like Derrida or loathe him, he remains one of the most influential thinkers in the second half of the twentieth century. A philosopher by training, Derrida's influence has gone far beyond philosophy. The deconstructive method he championed and the key terms he coined became fashionable among scholars, researchers, and students in as diverse fields as literary studies, political science, theology, as well as law, among many others:

Deconstruction, the word he transformed from a rare French term to a common expression in many languages, became part of the vocabulary not only of philosophers and literary theorists but also of architects, theologians, artists, political theorists, educationists, music critics, filmmakers, lawyers and historians. (Attridge & Baldwin n. pag.)

Nevertheless, Derrida remains a controversial figure. Indeed, the polarizing nature of his work is best reflected in the hostile reaction to his nomination for an honorary doctorate by Cambridge University. Many academics questioned the eminent university's move and published a damning letter in an English newspaper, *The Times*, explaining their position. They primarily point to Derrida's difficult style, and his playful use of language: "Derrida's work," Barry Smith and others claim in *The Times* letter, "does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigour." "His works," they add, "employ a written style that defies comprehension. . . . Many French philosophers see in M. Derrida only cause for silent embarrassment, his antics having contributed significantly to the widespread impression that contemporary French philosophy is little more than an object of ridicule" (166). Though he was eventually awarded the degree, the incident is indicative of the controversial nature of Derrida and his work.

This divisive nature of Derrida is partly due to the much talked about difficulty of reading him. "There is no easy way to learn to read Derrida," admits Catherine Belsey (134). This difficulty is related to the unconventional nature of Derrida's writing. After all, the work of Derrida questions the very conventions which govern western thought. It is transgressive in the sense that it defies disciplinary conventions:

From the outset one of the difficulties of Derrida's work has been the way it has moved across philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, literature, art,

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architecture and ethics, and thus evaded traditional discipline and subject boundaries. Not only does Derrida seem not to belong definitively to any one of these areas, his work persistently questions the assumptions and protocols on which they, or their canonic representatives, depend. (Selden et al. 169)

Like Selden and his co-authors, Christopher Norris admits that "the texts of Jacques Derrida defy classification according to any of the clear-cut boundaries that define modern academic discourse" (18). This resistance to classification, subtly and interestingly, brings Derrida and the genre of autobiography closer together. Derrida is a rebel who shows no respect for conventional boundaries between disciplines. In fact, part of Derrida's project is to question these boundaries as well as other modes of conventional western thinking. Like Derrida's work, autobiography is "one of the most controversial literary genres" (Hafez 7). It is transgressive. It is interdisciplinary: partly historical as far as it is concerned with the personal history of the autobiographer, partly literary as it deploys conventions and devices which are traditionally associated with literature. Enani acknowledges the hybrid nature of the genre when he points out that "autobiography brings together the characteristics of both literature and history" (III: 2).

Reinforcing the interdisciplinary nature of autobiography, Peter Childs argues that autobiographical writing transcends traditional generic boundaries. "Autobiography," he explains, "is a hybrid form of writing that has often been used to question generic boundaries because it both bridges and falls between psychology, history, literature and essay" (152). In this sense, autobiography – again like Derrida's work – defies containment. Like Derrida, transgressing conventional disciplinary borders renders autobiography "slippery", and "unruly" (Anderson 1-2).

### **Autobiography and the Pitfalls of Memory**

Philippe Lejeune, the famous French theorist of self-writing, defines autobiography as a "*retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality*" (4; italics in original). Despite the obvious problems, i.e. ignoring the possibility of writing a poetic autobiography, Lejeune's much-quoted definition identifies two key features of autobiographical writing: reliance on memory and referentiality. Autobiography is almost always about the representation of the past of its writer; or, in the words of Peter Childs, it is "a frank account of the subject's personal and professional life" (151). This account of the past is hunted down and made present only through remembering – an act in which memory is an essential player, if not the only player:

For life narrators, by contrast, personal memories are the primary archival source. They may have recourse to other kinds of sources—letters, journals, photographs, conversations— and to their knowledge of a historical moment. But the usefulness of such evidence for their stories lies in the ways in which they employ that evidence to support, supplement, or offer commentary on their idiosyncratic acts of remembering. (Smith & Watson 6)

In other words, memory is called upon to mediate between the present and the past in an attempt on the autobiographer's part to re-construct and re-present a unified whole out of a dis-membered and fractured life. "Autobiography," Gudmundsdóttir stresses, "is inherently the genre of memory" (11). And memory, ironically, is inherently fallible faculty. Thomas Couser condemns memory as "a notoriously unreliable and highly selective faculty" (19). The process of remembering is not a neutral act of retrieving past events from a memory bank. Memory is not a passive faculty. Remembering inevitably involves reinterpreting. The act of recollection, hence, necessarily involves intervention in the process of making sense of past events. The autobiographer, in other words, does not mechanically bring back the past as it was lived or witnessed:

The writer of autobiography depends on access to memory to tell a retrospective narrative of the past and to situate the present within that experiential history. Memory is thus both source and authenticator of autobiographical acts . . . remembering involves a reinterpretation of the past in the present. The process is not a passive one of mere retrieval from a memory bank. Rather, the remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering. Thus, narrated memory is an interpretation of a past that can never be fully recovered. (Smith & Watson 16)

As memory is a selective faculty, autobiography becomes inevitably about forgetting as well as remembering. The autobiographer includes some memories, and avoids, or even chooses to forget, others:

Writing an autobiography entails choosing some memories and discarding others. More than that, it also means choosing a form for these memories, a narrative structure. In doing so the autobiographer consciously forgets (if that is possible) other interpretations of the same event, other memories that might contradict the one he or she writes about. (Gudmundsdóttir 36)

The questioning of the reliability of memory has led critics of autobiography to cast doubt on the genre's claims to fact-telling and objectivity. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, for instance, argue that autobiography does not re-present facts. It, at best, tells subjective truth: "While autobiographical narratives may

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contain 'facts,' they are not factual history about a particular time, person, or event. Rather they offer subjective "truth" rather than 'fact'" (10). Although some of the information in an autobiography can be verified, most of the autobiographical narrative is subjective. It is not subject to external verification. Memory, Smith and Watson add, "is a subjective form of evidence, not externally verifiable; rather, it is asserted on the subject's authority" (6). They go on to add:

Thus, when one is both the narrator and the protagonist of the narrative, as in life stories, the truth of the narrative becomes undecidable. We need, then, to adjust our expectations of the truth told in self-referential narrative. Of course, autobiographical claims such as date of birth can be verified or falsified by recourse to documentation or fact outside the text. But autobiographical truth is a different matter; it is an intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life. (12-13)

Autobiographers' concern about the question of truthfulness may account for their inclination to include historical documents, letters, diaries, and photographs. They use these to enhance the authenticity of their narratives. Although autobiography writers may try to corroborate their accounts through various means, personal memory remains the primary source of re-collecting the fragments of the written life:

An awareness of the fallibility of memory, however, is as old as man's fascination with memory itself, and efforts to authenticate and verify recollections by various means (e.g., documents, corroborative reports from contemporaries) are among the factors that distinguish history and biography from legend and folklore. Historians and biographers were and remain concerned with the construction of judicious accounts of the past. (Robinson 19)

These fundamental questions about memory and their effect on the authenticity of life narratives receive some attention in Enani's prefaces to his autobiographical trilogy. And this is what I examine in the following pages.

### ***Oases of a Lifetime and the Work of Memory***

Mohammed Enani published his autobiographical trilogy relatively recently (1998, 2000, and 2002). He devoted the first part, *Oases of a Lifetime* (1998), to his roots, childhood, and early years of intellectual formation in Egypt. It covers the first twenty years of the author's life (1945-1965). Enani's years in England (1965-1975) are the subject of the second part, *Oases of Expatriation* (2000), while the third, which should have been the *last* segment, *Egyptian Oases*

(2002), is an account of his life in Egypt following his return from England. This *last* installment covers the period (1975-2000).

In terms of narrative structure, *Oases of a Lifetime* adopts strict chronological order. Like other trilogies, it is "a story with a clear structure, a logical progression from beginning, middle and end, nearly all of it told in chronological order" (Gudmundsdóttir 103). Enani makes this clear in his preface to the 2002 edition of the complete autobiography:

The first part is concerned with the roots, upbringing, and formation (1945-1965); the second deals with the period of academic specialization abroad and the confrontation with a foreign culture (1965-1975); the third is about the return to Egypt and the career as a playwright, a critic, and a translator until official retirement (1975-2000). (III: 1)

Enani's very short prefaces show his awareness of the challenges which haunt autobiographical writing. He seems conscious of the centrality of memory in his attempt to revisit the past, reclaim and re-present it in writing. But he is also aware of its failings and the consequences of these widely accepted failings for the credibility and truthfulness of his life narrative. This may explain his repeated treatment of these vexed issues in the prefaces. His pronouncements on these issues are characterized by bold statements and confidence as well as hesitations, doubts, and even contradictions. The process of writing his autobiography is a journey towards coming to terms with the crippling limitations of the adventure. He is torn between stressing the truthfulness of his narrative and the sorrowful acceptance of the failings of memory. At times, he painstakingly tries to foster confidence in an inherently unreliable faculty: memory, but eventually he has to accept the futility of these heroic attempts. Trying to shake off the common charge against memory as selective, Enani proudly points to the strength of his memory: "I do not forget quickly. My memory, unlike Nehad's [his wife], is not selective" (III: 182).

Although Enani denies the selective nature of his memory which makes it exceptional, he does not succeed in ruling out other failures: forgetting. But his admission of forgetfulness does not come out easily. He is keen to emphasize that he does not forget quickly. He tries to validate memory as a reliable source of information, but all he could do is to stress its strength. In the final analysis, he admits that – like all mortals – he forgets. But he tries to make up for forgetting. In each preface, Enani persists that he supports and *supplements* his recollections with various sources such as diaries, notes, newspaper-cuts, letters, and photographs. In the preface to the first volume, he says that he draws on "the notebooks in which I regularly recorded events, and the letters which bear witness to what happened" (I: 5). This is emphasised again in the second part



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where Enani refers to what seems a diary: "my memory is helped by the papers in which I recorded those events" (III: 7).

The third part is no exception. Again, he refers to the diary and the letters as sources of corroboration to his narrative: "as I did in the first and second parts, I upheld the truth in all that I narrate; I adhered to all that was stored in the memory, relying on the diary in which I recorded – and still record – major events, the letters exchanged with friends, and newspapers-cuts which I keep until now" (III: 7). Indeed, there is nothing unusual about autobiographers' labouring to exhume more trust in their narratives through relying on what seems a more trustworthy means. Smith and Watson make this clear:

Oftentimes life narrators incorporate multiple ways of accessing memory, multiple systems of remembering, into their narratives. Some of these sources are personal (dreams, family albums, photos, objects, family stories, genealogy). Some are public (documents, historical events, collective rituals).  
(20)

The constant reminder of the reliance on these documents betrays an acute awareness of the suspicions about memory. That diaries, papers, letters, and photographs are used to make the narrative more trustworthy is based on the assumption that they are more immediate to, more contemporaneous with, the distant events narrated in the autobiography. In other words, these sources mediate between memory and the past being represented. They are supposedly more faithful in their transcription of events because of their temporal proximity to those remote events. They are used to make up for the time lapse between past events and the belated attempt at recovering and writing them.

However, although these supplements may help alleviate some of the suspicions about memory, they are never going to quash these suspicions away for good. This, Sabry Hafez argues, is due to the memory-based nature of the autobiographical text (8). Autobiography is essentially about remembering which, by definition, is a memory act. Enani seems conscious of the ever-present limitations of memory and the problems it poses for autobiography. He makes it clear that he does his best to represent his life as truthful as possible. This leads him to distinguish between "truth" and "fact". He argues that although his autobiography is truthful, this does not necessarily mean it is factual:

These are chapters of autobiography in which I tried to uphold the truth as far as I can. But truth does not always come with fact. Fact is "a hypothesis" postulated by the writer based on what he saw or heard. The hypothesis may turn out to be true or false. But the scenes and the words remain vivid in his mind. They may be coloured with the change of life around him or with his own change as life goes on. When I decided to visit the oases of my lifetime, I preferred to rid myself of what I have become today, and relive in them with both the old heart and the old mind. But alas! Although memory maybe

truthful, the feeling maybe false! The scene may come out truthful (based on the memoirs in which I regularly recorded what happened, and the letters which bear witness to what took place) but the accompanying feeling may differ leading to a change in its meaning. (I: 5)

This is a clear admission of the impossibility of making one's life fully present in writing. Enani argues that even if he has a strong memory, and the memory is aided by other sources including his diary, papers, letters, and photographs, it is still difficult, if not impossible, to access how he felt about events then. His attempt at travelling back in time and reliving in those distant oases with the old mind and the old heart is compromised. Although it is possible to re-collect what was seen and heard clearly, it is much more difficult to re-feel the same about those distant events. This kind of admission belittles, if not wholly undermines, the value of the supplementary sources Enani relies on to enhance trust in his autobiography. These aids are, on the one hand, called upon to compensate for the failings of memory, but, on the other, their importance is underestimated, if not instantly undermined.

In an earlier extract, Enani cites his papers – perhaps he means his diary – as a source of authentication to his narrative, but the same sentence belittles their value: "my memory is helped by the papers in which I recorded those events; *they are worn-out papers which may record events, but not their significance*" (III: 7; my italics). Moreover, the usefulness of Enani's diary seems wholly negated when he admits that his autobiography is not about major events: the type of events which he keeps record of in his diary. Introducing the third part, *Egyptian Oases*, he explains that "like the first and second volumes, this one is nothing more than a phase of the literary autobiography; i.e. *it is not a record of all events, nor of most events, not even of the most important events*" (III: 7; my italics). The uselessness of the supplementary sources is further clarified when we read the previous extract bearing in mind what Enani says about the content of these sources: "as I did in the first and second parts, I upheld the truth in all that I narrate; I adhered to all that was stored in the memory, *relying on the diary in which I recorded – and still record – major events*" (III: 7; my italics). In other words, if the autobiography is not about major events, while what he keeps in the supplementary, corroborative sources is about major events, it becomes crystal clear that these sources are valueless to his autobiography. Enani's life story becomes a pure act of his memory.

Enani's hesitant reconciliation with the pitfalls of memory is evident in his preemptive apology for any shortcomings in his autobiography. He is aware that other people who may have lived these events could have a different view of what he narrates. That is why he warns that "if some of those who lived in these oases with me during those eventful years see that I overlooked what I should not, or made secret of feelings that I should not have hidden, my excuse is that I

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changed, and I still change, and I may come back to what I ignored in the next part of the autobiography" (II: 5).

While it is true that autobiography is a personal recollection of one's life story, it is equally true that as the autobiographer writes his own life, he writes about other people. It is inconceivable that an autobiographer can write their own life without writing about their interaction with others. Autobiographers do not live their lives in isolation. Hence, what is written can be disputed by others who have witnessed the events narrated in an autobiography. What is in Enani's *Oases of a Lifetime*, for instance, is his own interpretation of events. In other words, autobiography is inevitably heterobiographical:

[A]utobiography is also always somewhat biographical because we are formed as individuals in and by relationships, and we exist within social networks. In life, and therefore in life writing, we are always characters in others' narratives, and our own narratives always involve other people. Just as no person is an island, no autobiography is a one person show. (Couser 20)

Enani is conscious that his autobiography is not his own alone. It is partially a biography of others. He is also conscious that they may have a different view of events. He apologizes for any missing details from his autobiography. "I hope," Enani pleads, "they [the many who lived in the oases of expatriation with him] forgive me for overlooking some of the details which fled from my memory unwillingly, or those details which are 'disowned by memory,' in the words of Wordsworth" (II: 7). Memory is to blame. Memory, Enani seems to suggest, is uncontrollable.

Finally, Enani comes full circle and admits the failings and shortcomings of his autobiography. He repeats that he does his best to be as truthful and accurate as humanly possible: "I tried to be as accurate as possible in recording events and dates, but only God is perfect. We are human beings: sometimes we are right, sometimes wrong. Of course, I welcome any corrections friends may recommend as I was happy to correct some accidental mistakes in the first part of *Oases of a Lifetime*" (II: 7-8). Failings and limitations are naturalized. Like all human endeavours, it should be accepted that Enani's autobiography is imperfect. Only the work of God is perfect.

### ***Différance* and Autobiography**

Derrida's important concept "*différance*" maybe useful in understanding the impossibility of making an autobiographer's life fully present in a written text. In a typical Derridean fashion, *différance* is a playful polysemic neologism. "The French verb *différer*," Catherine Belsey explains, "means both to differ, as in English, and to defer, literally to put off, to postpone, to subject completion or accomplishment to a detour" (105). It suggests that meaning is realized not only

through difference between signs (words), but is also subject to deference, or delay. Terry Eagleton explains Derrida's idea of *différance* and the role it plays in the process of the production of meaning in the following way:

When I read a sentence, the meaning of it is always somehow suspended, something deferred or still to come: one signifier relays me to another, and that to another, earlier meanings are modified by later ones, and although the sentence may come to an end the process of language itself does not. There is always more meaning where that came from. I do not grasp the sense of the sentence just by mechanically piling one word on the other: for the words to compose some relatively coherent meaning at all, each one of them must, so to speak, contain the trace of the ones which have gone before, and hold itself open to the trace of those which are coming after. Each sign in the chain of meaning is somehow scored over or traced through with all the others, to form a complex tissue which is never exhaustible; and to this extent no sign is ever 'pure' or 'fully meaningful.' (111)

Christopher Norris elaborates on the same idea:

Language depends on 'difference' since, as Saussure showed once and for all, it consists in the structure of distinctive oppositions which make up its basic economy. Where Derrida breaks new ground, and where the science of grammatology takes its cue, is in the extent to which 'differ' shades into 'defer'. This involves the idea that meaning is always *deferred*, perhaps to the point of an endless supplementarity, by the play of signification. (32; italics in original)

A written autobiography is meant to stand for, re-present the life of the autobiographer. In this sense, it replaces this life, makes it present to the reader. In other words, the life itself is absent. The autobiography in the form of a written text is put in the place of the actual life of the author. It is an image/a signifier of an absent signified. What is present is the *sign*, the signal i.e. the written text (the autobiography). The real life is mediated through writing, and it is therefore deferred, probably forever. The text suspends the presence of real life. The written autobiography is real life's replacement, or substitute:

The sign is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing, "thing" here standing equally for meaning or referent. The sign represents present in its absence. It takes the place of the present. When we cannot grasp or show the thing, state the present, the being-present, when the present cannot be presented, we signify, we go through the detour of the sign. We take or give signs. We signal. The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence. Whether we are concerned with the verbal or the written sign, or with electoral delegation and political representation, the circulation of signs defers the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself, make it ours, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, intuit its presence. (Derrida, "Différance" 9)

Furthermore, the full presence/meaning of a real life in an autobiography is deferred in another way. As it is a record of the autobiographer's personal history, an autobiography normally does not include a final closure because it usually does not end up with the death of the autobiographer (unless in the rare case of committing suicide). Thus, the ending of autobiography is necessarily arbitrary:

The problem for autobiography is that there is always a certain lack of retrospective knowledge, as the subject is writing his or her own life and the natural ending is therefore not available. Endings in autobiography must then, in one sense, always seem incomplete, if not arbitrary. (Gudmundsdóttir 61)

### ***Oases of a Lifetime and the Inevitable Supplement***

Writing an autobiography signals a drive towards remembering, but I maintain that the autobiographical process must also involve forgetting, as the writer chooses one memory and discards another, writes one version of that memory at the cost of another, probably equally valid, version. (Gudmundsdóttir 12)

In his preface to the complete autobiography, Reading for All project edition (2002), Enani reveals his intention to publish what he calls, literally translated, "a tail, or tails" to *Oases of a Lifetime* (III: 2). The tail, he explains, is meant to make up for tales he ignored to include in the original narrative. Enani thinks of this tail, entitled *The Oases Tales*, as "an endnote" to the original autobiography. It is, in this sense, something marginal. By definition, an endnote is an end. It lies at the margin of a text. It is set apart from the main text. Pushing it to the margin – usually to the back end of the text, separated from the main text by a horizontal line, if not emphatically dismissed to a new page, and possibly written in smaller font – is an indication of its inessentiality. What is in an endnote is deemed inessential to merit inclusion in the main text. Yet, an endnote is not completely outside the text. Although an edge, it is still inside the text; and it is there for a purpose. It is explanatory; it is meant to add something more to what is in the main text. And this is what Enani seems to suggest when he says:

I revisited these *Oases* this year (2002), and I found stories I overlooked due to the strict chronological order of *Oases of a Lifetime*. Some friends whom I respect and love insisted that I write them in a separate book to be like a tail or tails to the *Oases*. This I did. *The Oases Tales* will be published, God Willing, soon as a footnote to *Oases of a Lifetime* in an independent little volume. (III: 2)

The "tail-as-endnote" Enani decides to write in a separate or independent little volume is best understood in the light of Jacques Derrida's "supplement". Derrida thinks of the supplement in the following terms:

It is the strange essence of the supplement not to have essentiality: it may always not have taken place. Moreover, literally, it has never taken place: it is never present, here and now. If it were, it would not be what it is, a supplement. . . . Less than nothing and yet, to judge by its effects, much more than nothing. The supplement is neither a presence nor an absence. (OG 314)

Indeed, like Derrida's supplement, Enani seems to think that his *Oases Tales* has no "essentiality". In the first place, the tales to be included in the tail were left out of the original text. They were not thought of as essential to Enani's autobiography. That the "tail" is not essential is further reinforced by the revelation that writing the "tail" was not Enani's idea. It was his friends who "insisted" that he should write it. He seems hesitant and unwilling to write and publish the supplementary booklet at first. The impression is that he only agrees to publish it under pressure from his friends. Enani's *Oases Tales* is an addition which, in the words of Derrida, is "a surplus, a *supplement*" (WD 365; italics in original). Interestingly, when the tail was published, Enani complained in an interview that it did not receive the attention it deserved (n. pag.).

The supplement, Nicholas Royle explains, "is neither inside nor outside, and/or both inside and outside at the same time. It forms part without being part, it belongs without belonging" (49). Like Derrida's supplement, Enani's 'tail' is part of *Oases of a Lifetime* because it is meant to make up for what he overlooked in the original text(s). The supplement or the tail, in this sense, lies inside *Oases of a Lifetime*. At the same time, the tail lies outside *Oases of a Lifetime* because it is, in the end of the day, a separate, independent little volume:

A supplement is at once what is added on to something in order further to enrich it *and* what is added on as a mere 'extra' (from the Latin for 'outside'). It is both 'a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude', *and* it makes up for something missing, as if there is a void to be filled up. (Royle 48-49; italics in original)

As a supplement, *The Oases Tales* adds to the original autobiography on the semantic level. It is enrichment. "The supplement," Robert Bernasconi explains, "is an addition from the outside, but it can also be understood as supplying what is missing and in this way is already inscribed within that to which it is added" (19). A supplement, therefore, is present in the text. It will modify earlier reception and understanding of the original autobiography. But it is also absent because it lies outside the original text. This is the peculiar nature of Derrida's

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supplement and Enani's tail: neither a presence nor an absence. Or it is present and absent at the same time.

### **Concluding Remarks**

While it is true that life narratives are referential in the first place, their reliance on memory renders them inherently fallible. Memory, by nature, is selective. Hence, giving full account of one's life, and making full sense of it, is questionable. What is presented is only a partial account. This partial account is an incomplete substitute, replacement, of the autobiographer's life. In other words, real life is deferred, it is absent. What is present is its replacement, the written text. Mohammed Enani's *Oases of a Lifetime* is a lengthy three-part autobiography can be read to explain the difficulty of bringing a multi-dimensional, possibly fractured and incoherent, life under control in order to present it in a coherent textual structure. Enani's writing of a tail, *The Oases Tales*, to *Oases of a Lifetime* betrays an awareness of the slippage of the meaning of his life; it remains incomplete. The tail is a supplement in both senses of the word. On the one hand, it is a replacement, a substitute, in the way an autobiography is a real life's replacement and substitute. On the other hand, it is a supplement in the sense of an addition. The tail is meant to enrich the original autobiography. The ultimate hope is, of course, that it will help complete the meaning of the life it represents.

### **Note**

<sup>1</sup> Because Enani's *Oases of a Lifetime* (*Wahat Al-Omr*) is not available in English, translation of passages I quote is my own.

- The following is a list of abbreviations used in documenting in-text citations for the purpose of economy:
- I: first part of Enani's autobiography, *Oases of a Lifetime* (*Wahat Al-Omr*); II: (second volume, *Oases of Expatriation* (*Wahat Al-Ghorba*); III: (third volume, *Egyptian Oases* (*Wahat Masrya*).
- *OG* (*Of Grammatology*).
- *WD* (*Writing and Différance*).

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