

The multicultural in Vikram Seth's TWO LIVES: "history writ little" or global protagonism?

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I

Vikram Seth's *Two Lives*, published in 2005,¹ is a work centred on questions of expatriate diasporic identity, not easy either to define generically or to place spatially and culturally within the globalising literary economy of the early twenty-first century. It is a non-fiction narrative, set mostly in Germany and England, which chronicles the lives of two of Seth's own relatives across the second two-thirds of the twentieth century, in a bulky and profusely illustrated tome weighing in at (in the UK edition) 503 pages. The text-as-history character of the book and the mostly linear narration might suggest an unproblematic read, but there is nothing naïve or simplistic about this work: rather, it raises complex issues concerning the relationship between text and history, while also exploring questions of identity and belonging in terms that ultimately point beyond the very category of postcolonial writing into which Seth's volume apparently falls.

Two Lives recounts the true histories - at first parallel, later intertwined - of Vikram Seth's great-uncle Shanti Seth (or Shanti Uncle) (1908-1998) and his German-Jewish wife Hennerle Caro (Aunty Henny) (1908-1989). Shanti is sent by his family to study dentistry in Berlin in the early 1930s. He lodges with the Caro family, where he makes the acquaintance of his future spouse. The perspective darkens with the rise of Nazism: Shanti graduates in dentistry but is barred from practising as a foreigner, and relocates to England, where he requalifies. Indian but still a British subject, he serves in World War II and loses his right forearm at the battle of Monte Cassino in Italy. Meanwhile, Henny manages to get out of Germany and settles in London, where Shanti is the only person she knows. Her mother and sister perish in the Shoah. Hers is the arduous task of rebuilding a shattered life, with the friendship and, finally, the married companionship of Shanti, who himself heroically overcomes his disability and practises for years as a much-respected dentist. Neither thinks of returning 'home', despite Indian independence and West Germany's rise from the ashes: the couple resolutely make their life in England. In 1969, they offer a home base to Vikram, Shanti's great-nephew from Calcutta,² sent as a schoolboy to England. Years later and now a famous writer, Vikram returns to London and, staying once more with the now-widowed Shanti Uncle, discovers Henny's papers in a trunk in the attic, and conceives the idea of turning their two lives into a book.

II

This is not Vikram Seth's first work of non-fiction: *From Heaven Lake* (1983), was a first-person travel narrative set in China and Tibet. It is, however, his first non-fictional text to invite direct comparison with the author's two highly successful works of prose fiction, *A Suitable Boy* (1993) and *An Equal Music* (1999) - not only in length (while not as long as the

¹ Quotations from *Two Lives* are from the UK edition (London: Little, Brown: 2005).

² I use "Calcutta" rather than "Kolkata," following Seth's own practice (cf. *Two Lives*, 3) and also because the city's name was Calcutta throughout Shanti Uncle's lifetime.

mammoth *A Suitable Boy*, it is certainly its successor's equal in bulk), but also in its look on the page: like Seth's two conventional novels (and indeed like *The Golden Gate*, his novel in verse of 1986), *Two Lives* is divided into numbered sections-and-subsections of the type 1.1, 1.2, etc. The book's very typography thus aligns it from the beginning with the author's works of fiction, suggesting that this is Seth's way of organising a narrative of whatever kind. A further presentational similarity linking *Two Lives* and *A Suitable Boy* appears in the (historical) family chronologies appended at the end of the one, which neatly parallel and balance the (fictional) family trees that appear at the beginning of the other. The graphic aspect of *Two Lives* thus suggests from the outset that the factual narrative is likely to be closely bound up with its author's earlier fictional practice.

It is no simple matter to define *Two Lives* generically, for Seth's text lies somewhere on the fault-line between biography and autobiography. The Economist reviewer, while praising it as a "wonderful book," rather gingerly defined it as a "memoir-cum-biography";³ the Time review declared: "Fortunately, there is more to *Two Lives* than two lives."⁴ The book's first readers in general seem to have had problems deciding what kind of writing it is. This applies to both Western and Indian critics: a commentator on India's Rediffmail website, attending Seth's presentation of the book in Bangalore,⁵ observed with some perplexity: "The structure was part biography, part memoir and part history."⁶

On this point, some general considerations may be illuminative. Biography and autobiography, though related genres and both forms of what may be called "life-writing," exhibit striking points of difference on the formal level: the subject of a biography may be alive but is more typically dead, whereas that of an autobiography is by definition still alive and the life narrated is therefore necessarily incomplete. In autobiography, besides, the narrating and narrated "I" are one and the same, whereas biography draws a clear line between narrating "I" and narrated "he" or "she." On the level of content, (auto)biography may be divided into a number of subcategories depending on whose life is being narrated. The most obvious distinction here is between the famous and the non-famous. Lives of the famous are typically of respected (or else notorious) figures from the historical, political or high-cultural fields, but there is also a mass-cultural variant in the form of the celebrity life: one might distinguish here between the "consecrated" and the "celebrity" (auto)biography.⁷ (Auto)biographies of the non-famous, by contrast, take subjects not previously known to the wider world who are seen, by their biographers or themselves, as being representative of a particular category of person. One might, then, distinguish between "famous-person" and "representative" (auto)biographies. Life-writing of this kind has close links with the area known as Subaltern Studies, as in many cases the subjects of such (auto)biographies are presented as representatives of "non-hegemonic" social groups (women, ethnic minorities, migrants) that are perceived as oppressed or marginal. Such texts could be termed "subaltern (auto)biographies," an example being the Latin American *testimonio* genre.⁸ Any subaltern analysis of life-writing, meanwhile, needs to take account of the multiplicity of the subaltern, of what Antonia Navarro Tejero has called "subaltern voices that speak from variously

³ (unsigned), "Branches entwined" (The Economist), 101.

⁴ Donald Morrison, "A Family Affair" (Time), 52.

⁵ On 15 October 2005.

⁶ (unsigned), "In pursuit of Vikram Seth" (Rediffmail site).

⁷ The celebrity autobiography genre has, interestingly, recently been subverted by the renowned songwriter Bob Dylan in his autobiographical work *Chronicles Volume One* (2004), which pointedly ignores all the best-known parts of his career in favour of the early and the obscure, and was universally greeted by critics as a substantive work of literature.

⁸ Writing on the *testimonio* genre, Belén Martín Lucas ("North American Native Autobiographies and Latin American 'Testimonios'"), stresses its difference from conventional autobiography, since "the protagonist of the *testimonio* speaks ... as a member of a community, and not only as an individual" (Martín Lucas, 121).

subordinated positions";⁹ it may be added that someone can be in more than one subaltern position at once, or, equally, in a subaltern position at one moment in their life but not another.

Further, beyond the question of who an (auto)biography is about, the nature and duration of the events narrated varies: not all life-writing tells the subject's entire life. Sigmund Freud's *An Autobiographical Study* (in German, *Selbstdarstellung*, or 'self-portrayal') is better described as an 'autoergography', an ergography being a life that focuses on the subject's work and professional dimension to the virtual exclusion of the more personal. George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *Homage to Catalonia* are both narratives of clearly-defined periods of the author's life and could thus be called partial autobiographies; and autobiography, though not biography, in some cases shades into travel writing or vice versa, so that, for instance, Salman Rushdie's *The Jaguar Smile*, which relates his visit to Nicaragua, could be seen as a thin sliver of the "Rushdie by Rushdie" book which has yet to be written. In addition, biography and autobiography may combine in the same text, and thus Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land* is both a subaltern biography, of an twelfth-century Indian slave in Egypt, and a partial autobiography charting its author's time in that same country.

With *Two Lives*, we are faced with a text which is mostly biography but partly autobiography: Vikram Seth narrates the 'two lives' of Shanti and Henny, variously separate and intertwined, but also provides a considerable amount of first-person information about himself, his relations with his great-aunt and uncle, and the background to his own writing process for both *Two Lives* itself and various of his other works, notably *A Suitable Boy*. The "Vikram Seth" emerging from the text is both the narrator of the story and a character within it. Shanti and Henny were in no way famous before this book appeared, and will only become known to the general public because of it. As Rashmee Roshan Lall put it in a Times of India review, they are "worthy but unexceptional people, now more famous in death than they could ever have dreamed of being while they lived";¹⁰ or, to quote Seth himself from a 2005 interview: "When you write about people who did not make any great impression on the history of the world (...), people who 'rest in unvisited graves', as George Eliot said, then you are free to dwell on those parts of their lives that a conventional biographer cannot."¹¹ The quotation (in fact a slight misquotation) is from the closing sentence of *Middlemarch*, a novel with which critics have compared *A Suitable Boy*, and which is indeed mentioned by name in that book.¹² Eliot writes: "the growing good of the world is partly dependent upon unhistoric acts; ... half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."¹³ In the text of *Two Lives* itself Seth the narrator refers, in terms that seem consciously to echo Eliot's, to how "the acts and decisions of ordinary individuals, trivial or momentous, may lead, sometimes by imperceptible gradations, sometimes by sudden jolts ... towards making the world a humane and reasonably secure home for all its denizens."¹⁴

We are, then, dealing with "representative" rather "consecrated" biography, or with what Vikram Seth himself calls "history writ little."¹⁵ Shanti and Henny are, in most ways, two fairly ordinary middle-class people whose lives appear striking because they lived through exceptional times (the rise of Hitler, World War II, the Shoah, the reconstruction of Europe;

⁹ Antonia Navarro Tejero, "Telling (Her)story: An Overview of Subaltern Studies," 94.

¹⁰ Roshan Lall, "An Indian dentist and his frau," Times of India (Internet reference).

¹¹ Vikram Seth/Tim Adams, Observer interview (Internet reference).

¹² See Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, 1371.

¹³ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 795.

¹⁴ *Two Lives*, 348.

¹⁵ *Two Lives*, 348.

the Quit India movement, Partition and Independence). On the other hand, both can be seen as cases of subaltern lives in certain aspects, above all given their time and place(s) - Henny obviously, as a German Jew forced into exile in the 1930s, and Shanti as a British colonial subject who sacrificed himself in World War II, "in the service of a country that was ruling - and unwilling to relinquish - his own."¹⁶ On the latter point, Nilanjana S. Roy, reviewing the book on the Rediffmail site, states: "Indians fought in both of the Great Wars, but that experience has rarely been captured in our literature ... By giving Shanti a voice, Seth opens a window into the brown man's war."¹⁷ Observations like this suggest the realm of Subaltern Studies, and one might add that the "brown man's war" does actually figure prominently in at least two recent novels from the South Asian cultural space, Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*. Objectively, nonetheless, such subaltern status as may be claimed for Henny and Shanti is unlikely to strike most readers as applying in any kind of absolute or across-the-board terms to the *whole* of their story: in England, the couple eventually settled down into a suburban, professional/managerial middle-class existence.

Meanwhile, Vikram Seth's own biographical input into the book itself verges on both auto-ergography (liable to be read as direct or indirect commentary on *A Suitable Boy*) and famous-person biography (Seth is, after all, one of Indian Writing in English's biggest stars, and while his established place as a substantive writer gives him consecrated status, he also has certain celebrity attributes). Many readers, egged on by the massive sales of *A Suitable Boy* and the record-breaking publishers' advances¹⁸ paid for *Two Lives* itself, will no doubt buy this volume as much for what it reveals of its author as of his subjects. In a sense, *Two Lives* could even have been called *Three Lives* (albeit Seth himself has, in an interview, put the matter a shade more modestly: "It's *not* three lives - the focus of the book is still basically on Shanti and Henny. The ideal title of the book would be in Hindi, because we have a word for it: *dhai jeevan*, two and a half lives"¹⁹). Nonetheless and for all the glitter, the Indian critic Uma Nair correctly reminds us that this remains the story of "two people who would have never been known if not for a grand nephew who decided to tell the tale."²⁰ Summing up, we might describe *Two Lives* as a two-track representative biography with certain subaltern elements, fused with a partial autoergography with some consecrated-cum-celebrity aspects. We are, certainly, dealing with a highly complex textual phenomenon.

III

The lives recounted, be they Shanti's, Henny's or Vikram Seth's own, all have a transnational and transcultural reach. The novelist Seth's relationship with his Indian background has always been ambivalent: if *A Suitable Boy* consecrated him as an epic writer of post-independence India, both its predecessor and successor works are not located in India and refer to their author's homeland either scarcely or not at all (*The Golden Gate* is set in California, *An Equal Music* in England, Italy and Austria).²¹ *An Equal Music*, in particular, has raised eyebrows thanks to its lack of "Indianness" (though Silvia Albertazzi sees that

¹⁶ *Two Lives*, 119.

¹⁷ Nilanjana S. Roy, "Two Lives, remembered" (Internet reference).

¹⁸ *Time*, presumably a reliable source, speaks for the US of a "reported \$2.5 million advance," from Harper Collins (Morrison, 52). For the UK, *The Daily Telegraph* gives the figure of £1.4 million (from Little, Brown), calling it 'the biggest non-fiction advance in publishing history' (Vikram Seth/Alexander Masters, *Daily Telegraph* interview, 1).

¹⁹ Seth/Masters, 2.

²⁰ Uma Nair, *Newzin* review (Internet reference).

²¹ In *The Golden Gate*, the author himself appears in the text twice, first in a digression about an editor's party where he is addressed as "dear Mr Seth," and later as a party guest and under the thinly disguised anagrammatic appellation of "Kim Tarvesh" (Seth, *The Golden Gate*, 100, 239). *An Equal Music* has no Indian characters and does not refer to India at all.

novel as an instance of how "the Postcolonial representation of European culture can alter our (European) perspectives on Western arts," arguing that this novel privileges experiences of displacement and non-belonging that parallel the migrant's world - thus, effectively, reading it as indirectly constituting an 'Occidental' view of the West from outside).²² In *Two Lives*, however, one of the protagonists is Indian, and so is the narrator.

The tale Vikram Seth tells could be considered 'typically Indian' or 'representatively Asian' in the light of its author-narrator's obvious attachment to kinship structures, be it the close or the extended family (a factor underscored syntactically by Seth's referring throughout, in the Indian way, to "Shanti Uncle" rather than "Uncle Shanti"). In *Two Lives*, indeed, Seth admits that he wrote the whole of *A Suitable Boy* living in his parents' home, with his immediate needs taken care of by his family: "But my parents did not prevent their son from returning to live under their roof, to, in effect, sponge off them. They were happy to see me ...".²³ Seth confirms this kinship-structure orientation in an interview in The Observer in September 2005, in which he declares: "My family has been the biggest thing in my life."²⁴ One may also adduce the joint interview which appeared in Outlook in October 2005 with Seth and his mother Leila, where Vikram says of today's India: "It is certainly true that in some respects the bonds of the extended family are loosening. But I don't think that Indian families are going to become as distant from their parents, for instance, as people are in the West," while Leila, more personally, confesses: "I am so blessed that I get to live on a daily basis with my grandchildren."²⁵ Certain Indian values, then, remain crucial for the author of *Two Lives*.

Nonetheless, Vikram Seth is today an expatriate and has been in that condition for large swathes of his life, while Shanti Seth comes over as an actually more deracinated figure than his great-nephew, living in Germany, then England, and after "two brief visits to India during the mid-thirties"²⁶ not returning again (though in close touch with his family). On this sensitive issue of diasporic identity, immediate critical reaction within India varied. Rashmee Roshan Lall, in the already-cited review from The Times of India, declared: "He [Seth] has proved, if proof were needed, after his Chinese odysseys in print and *An Equal Music*, that he is possibly the most 'international' of India's literary success stories. Seth ... just happens to be Indian by birth and breeding; his literary sensibilities are European. This book could easily have been written by a European."²⁷ By contrast, Mini Kapoor, in an interview in the Indian Express, saw *Two Lives* as a typically diasporic book, saying to Seth: "[*A Suitable Boy*] engaged with independent India's early years. Now you move to the diaspora and your characters connect with major events of the 20th century, World War II and the Holocaust."²⁸ On this reading, the life-stories of diasporic Indians - of both Shanti and Vikram Seth - become part of a larger world-historical mosaic, in which Indian history has its autonomous dynamic yet is inextricably bound up with other countries' histories and with the whole global system.

The denizens of this book's pages inhabit an intercultural space which may be called tricultural (Anglo-Indian-German). The two Seths belong to Indian culture by birth, to British culture thanks to empire, language and residence, and to German culture for family reasons (marriage or great-nephewhood) and having learnt the language; Henny is German-

²² Silvia Albertazzi, "An equal music, an alien world," 103.

²³ *Two Lives*, 39.

²⁴ Vikram Seth/Tim Adams, Observer interview (Internet reference).

²⁵ Vikram Seth/Leila Seth/Sheila Reddy, Outlook interview (Internet reference).

²⁶ *Two Lives*, 95.

²⁷ Roshan Lall, "An Indian dentist and his frau," Times of India (Internet reference).

²⁸ Vikram Seth/Mini Kapoor, Indian Express (Internet reference). For other IWE explorations of the Shoah Jewish question, see Anita Desai, *Baumgartner's Bombay*, and, more recently, Salman Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*.

Jewish by birth and native language, British by residence and adoptive language, and India-linked by marriage. Professionally, Shanti Seth is an Indian who, having failed to get into one of his country's elite institutions, the Roorkee College of Engineering,²⁹ qualifies in dentistry twice over, in Germany and England, and ends up practising in his second host country; Vikram Seth is an Indian educated at Doon College, an Indian replication of the English "public school" (i.e. elite boarding school), and then, while based with Shanti and Henny, at an actual English public school, Tonbridge, going on to university at Oxford and then in the US; while Henny, though lacking formal qualifications, incorporates herself into the German and then the British labour market.

All, then, are culturally diasporic, and none belongs definitely anywhere. It is useful to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary expatriation (and return), but if Vikram Seth himself clearly at all moments in his career expatriates himself voluntarily and, indeed, returns voluntarily to India to write *A Suitable Boy*, with both Shanti and Henny matters are more complex. Shanti enters Germany voluntarily but moves to England by force of events, while later ruling out any return to India by choice; Henny in no sense voluntarily expatriates herself to England, but in later years both her non-return to Germany and refusal of India (she never sets foot there) are self-chosen. All things considered, none of the three has a single identifiable "home": while Vikram Seth's home is, if anywhere, the global anglophone literary market, Shanti and Henny - the one having lost an arm, the other having lost mother and sister - impressively build life and marriage in a country where neither is a native. As the Outlook reviewer put it, theirs is "the story of immeasurable love between two human beings of dissimilar backgrounds and cultures".³⁰ Vikram Seth the narrator himself asks: "Where did Shanti and Henny belong ...? Which country did they belong to? Not Germany any more, not India."³¹ Their marriage is certainly a classical "Western-style" love-match, with nothing of the Indian arranged marriage about it, and indeed nothing of the complex negotiation between generations that shapes the relatively liberal solution vouchsafed to Lata at the end of *A Suitable Boy* (as Shanti tells it to Vikram, "'The very next day I proposed to Henny and bought her an engagement ring").³² Yet if England appears (as Germany cannot) as a metonym for the 'advanced' West, they still do not "belong" there either: nor does there happen any definitive intercultural fusion to create a new generation, for this couple remained childless.

Nonetheless and despite this not-belonging, it is interesting to note, on all the evidence, the lack of racial prejudice experienced by both Shanti and Henny in England. Henny was, as needs no stressing, the near-victim of ethnic cleansing in its extremest form; Shanti was prevented from practising in Germany, despite his dental qualifications obtained there, for being a foreigner, a non-Aryan - ironically, if we consider that his British passport issued in 1938 described him as an "Aryan Hindu".³³ Once in England, however, both appear to have been accepted without ethnic prejudice intervening: neither's letters complain of it, Vikram Seth confirms ("Uncle ... averred on more than one occasion that he had never faced anything like racism in England, either within his profession or socially"³⁴), and indeed, if there is any social prejudice Shanti might have a legitimate grievance against, it concerns not his racial origins or skin colour but his disability. This is all the more remarkable if we consider that Shanti and Henny did not seek refuge in any German-Jewish or Indian community in London and that their friends there seem for the most part to have been British.

²⁹ Cf. *Two Lives*, 72.

³⁰ Ashokamitran, "Two Lives, Too Long," Outlook (Internet reference).

³¹ *Two Lives*, 400.

³² *Two Lives*, 370.

³³ *Two Lives*, 101.

³⁴ *Two Lives*, 395-96.

Vikram Seth, for his part, says he suffered from only minor racial abuse as a schoolboy in London, though adding that in the 1980s his brother Shantum, then in England to study, had a rougher time.³⁵ All in all, the world Shanti and Henny made for themselves in England seems in many ways a model of productive multiculturalism.

The multicultural and the multilingual go hand in hand, as Vikram Seth has amply shown in the pages of *A Suitable Boy* (in that novel, Hindi, Bengali, Urdu and English interact, affirming a multilingual identity for India that parallels and underpins the multicultural, secularist conformation of the Nehruvian polity).³⁶ The world of *Two Lives* is resolutely bilingual: Shanti and Henny are both equally at ease in English and German, using the former to operate in public and the latter as their preferred medium of communication with each other. It is true that both lose certain language skills over time: Shanti was at one point trilingual but "over the years lost his ability to speak Hindi, the language in which he would have felt most at ease for the first two decades of his life"; Henny in later years "still spoke [and wrote] German but read no German books."³⁷ Vikram Seth is more actively multilingual. He is in fact fluent in four languages - Hindi, English, German and Chinese. In *Two Lives*, his Hindi enters only marginally into play, but he nonetheless tells us it is his first language: "When I began to speak, Amma [his grandmother] insisted that it be in Hindi and only in Hindi. She herself was perfectly bilingual, but had decided that I would get more than enough English in England."³⁸ Curiously, if Vikram has to learn German in England for academic reasons (to get into Oxford), Shanti has a parallel experience in Germany with Latin (as a compulsory subject in his dentistry course). Both Seths learn German thoroughly enough to understand, speak, read and write it, and, notably, Vikram's reading knowledge of that language is a crucial factor in making this book possible at all. In parallel, Henny's English becomes good enough to enable her too to deploy all four skills (understanding, speaking, reading and writing) with comfort. Bilingualism, which we may view as metonymic of an open-ended multilingualism, thus appears as an integral part of Vikram Seth's universe.

Little of this book is actually set in India, though both Shanti and Vikram remain in different ways umbilically attached to their Indian extended family. Located as it is in two key European countries, *Two Lives* could indeed be read - if we extrapolate from Silvia Albertazzi's hint regarding *An Equal Music* - as an interesting case of "Occidentalism." This seems, certainly, a more useful avenue of exploration than Roshan Lall's rather reductive claim that "this book could easily have been written by a European." The Western world (including the inheritance of World War II and the Shoah) is interpreted for our times through Eastern (Indian) eyes: Vikram Seth, anglicised and americanised though he may seem, remains attached - through Asian family values, his continued knowledge of Hindi and his authorship of *A Suitable Boy* - to a vantage point on Western history which may be the outcome of hybridation, but is not and cannot be Western or European. All this takes on added significance with India's new-found protagonism on the world stage in the epoch of globalisation.

IV

³⁵ Of his own experience, Seth states: "There were a few taunts late at night on the tube when I was with a white girl, some muttered comments about 'you people', but by and large, in Tonbridge, Oxford and the parts of London I saw as a student, the atmosphere, if anything, was intolerant of intolerance" (*Two Lives*, 394). This certainly does not compare with some of the semi-autobiographical experiences of Indians in London recounted by Salman Rushdie in the final story of *East, West*, or Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines*.

³⁶ For a discussion of these issues in Seth's earlier book, see my own essay (Rollason, "On Some Aspects of Language in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*").

³⁷ *Two Lives*, 401.

³⁸ *Two Lives*, 5.

Two Lives, in view of all the above, is most certainly history - individual, family, group, diasporic, local and global history - but it is also text: indeed, it raises a set of vital questions concerning history as text and text as history. The first and most obvious aspect here is its relation to Vikram Seth's own textual corpus, and mostly, though not exclusively, to *A Suitable Boy*. Some, even many, readers and critics will have read *Two Lives* as, among other things, a fount of source material for the earlier book; equally, reading *Two Lives* is liable to alter the perception and understanding of *A Suitable Boy*. Seth himself indicates at several points in *Two Lives* that, at least to some extent, his possessive, hypermaternal grandmother Chanda "is" the widowed Mrs Rupa Mehra, his grandfather Raj, the railway engineer cut off in his prime, "is" her much-lamented husband³⁹ and his father Prem, a supervisor at the Bata shoe factory, "is" Haresh, Lata's "suitable boy." Indeed, Seth actually describes his father as "the suitable boy he more than proved to be."⁴⁰ Lata herself, however, can on Seth's own terms only be partly identified with his mother, given their very different careers (Lata is content to work as a teacher, Leila Seth aimed far higher and became a high court judge). Critics wedded to the "death of the author" school will doubtless object to such *roman à clef* readings as naive and intentionist, and it would indeed be superficial to reduce *A Suitable Boy* to a set of purely biographical determinants. However, Seth's explicit references to one text in the course of another objectively constitute an intertextual relation that cannot just be wished away (even less so if we recall that such crucial themes as multilingualism, multiculturalism and tolerance versus bigotry are very much common to both). From now on, *Two Lives* will be a conditioning factor for the reading of *A Suitable Boy*, and vice versa. Indeed, the explicit references to the fiction of *A Suitable Boy* and its (partial) grounding in fact should induce the reader to reflect on the shared textual nature of both these books of Seth's, and consequently ask how far the "real" history of *Two Lives* should also be considered a textual construction made in language, rather than an unmediated "slice of life."

With this in mind, we may now propose a closer examination of *Two Lives* as text (or texture). A distinctive feature of Seth's book is that it replicates large amounts of its source material in the form of - to adapt a term from applied linguistics - "realia" (here, textual objects already existing in the material world prior to the text in which they are included). The narrative in Vikram Seth's own voice is interspersed with the texts of substantial numbers of letters and other original documents. Many of these texts are complete, though others are given only in part. It needs, though, to be stressed that, while some of these documents are in English, the majority are translations, done by the polyglot Vikram Seth himself, from the German. The documents' status as realia is, in some important cases, reinforced on the graphic level by inclusion of the (English or German) originals in photographic form in the illustrations.

V

The very strong documentary character of *Two Lives* raises certain issues of documentation ethics that are, self-evidently, particularly acute in view of the highly sensitive nature of much of the German part of the subject-matter. Dora Sales Salvador, writing on documentation and its ethical aspect, reminds us that this activity is one of those "ejercicios críticos de responsabilidad, que nos sitúan conscientemente 'en el mundo'" ("critical exercises of responsibility, which situate us consciously 'in the world'").⁴¹ In other words, documentation - the searching-out and management of information, considered as a material practice - is never neutral, and Vikram Seth's act of documenting his relatives' lives, their

³⁹ See *Two Lives*, 68-69.

⁴⁰ *Two Lives*, 137.

⁴¹ Dora Sales Salvador, "Didáctica de la documentación," 605.

"history writ little" - selecting, adapting, translating and interpreting the textual evidence - is also an act of situating himself and them in the world according to certain ethical parameters, arguably implicit in the words we have quoted above from him in conjunction with George Eliot. In view of the historical events concerned, his responsibility is clearly to reproduce/translate the texts as accurately and completely as possible - and where, indeed, he does compress or omit he does usually give justifications. In one notable instance, Seth changes the name of one of Henny's correspondents, apparently for reasons of tact in relation to a possible lesbian interest (if only from Henny's friend's side).⁴² Details like this should remind us that documentary reproduction has its limits and should not be seen as 100% objective.

Certainly, Vikram Seth's own responsibility of accuracy is especially acute in the context not only of documentation but of translation, since he is translating much of the material neither into nor out of his native language, but into his second language (English) from a third one (German). Meanwhile, his final English text offers a deceptive homogeneity on its surface, for it is in reality a macaronic document which alternates translated material with original-English commentary. This part-translatedness should remind the reader that we are dealing with a textual construct, an object made in and through history: this is in no way to deny the objective nature of the historical facts related, but, rather, to recall the necessary role of language and interpretation in mediating and, therefore, constituting historical fact itself.

The alternation of quotation and commentary in *Two Lives* suggests a revealing parallel with one of the greatest books of the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, which has a structure that is curiously comparable to Seth's.⁴³ Benjamin's epic, unfinished study of nineteenth-century Paris is made up of a long sequence of what can only be called fragments, albeit interconnected and organised according to a master plan. A large part of his text actually consists of blocks of quotations from other writers, mostly from the nineteenth century, in French or sometimes in German; these quotations, generally brief, are arranged in sections, and are interspersed throughout with segments of critical commentary in German, again for the most part brief, by Benjamin himself. Benjamin's book is bilingual (German/French) and thus another kind of macaronic text: if Seth alternates German-to-English translation with English-original commentary, Benjamin alternates original texts in (mostly) French with commentary in German. Benjamin's book appears on the page in two languages and is thus visibly discontinuous; Seth's alternates original and translated text and thus conceals its heterogeneity. Curiously, the French translation of Benjamin's book, which of course keeps the French-language quotations as they were, comes out resembling *Two Lives*, as an instance of deceptive surface homogeneity. We should here also recall that Benjamin was a German Jew who died seeking the same refuge that Henny Caro successfully found (and her mother and sister did not). Benjamin breathed his last on the night of 25 September 1940 at Portbou, on the Spanish side of the border with France, after being held back at the frontier by the Spanish police. In a strange and riveting synchronicity, the first name of the woman who, accompanied by her young son, guided Walter Benjamin across the Pyrenees (and later paid for his burial, "as if" a Christian, in Portbou cemetery), Frau Gurland, was ... Henny.⁴⁴

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⁴² *Two Lives*, 359.

⁴³ For an extended discussion of *The Arcades Project*, see my own study (Rollason, "The Passageways of Paris").

⁴⁴ See Heinemann, "Liza Fittko: La fuite de Walter Benjamin," 160. For the circumstances of Benjamin's death, see Rollason, "Border Crossing, Resting Place."

The parallel with Benjamin may surprise, but, like a lightning flash, it illuminates both *Two Lives*' status as a construct in language and its complex relationship with history. Lit up by that same flash, we may close this study by considering what new doors Seth's book opens. Where, finally, should we position this highly unusual text? Where is Seth writing it from? How "European" is it in fact - or, alternatively, how "Indian," or, indeed, how "postcolonial"? How far is there a tension between Shanti and Henny's "history writ little" and Vikram Seth's own fame and fortune? Edward Said declared at the end of his *Culture and Imperialism*:

No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are purely starting-points, which if followed into actual experience are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival is, in fact, about the connections between things; in [T.S.] Eliot's phrase, reality cannot be deprived of the "other echoes [that] inhabit the garden."⁴⁵

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* and *Two Lives* can be seen as works of literature that echo Said's theoretical position, affirming the vital need for coexistence and understanding between individuals and peoples, in a world where to define oneself exclusively as "*one* thing" may lead to disaster. Seth closes *Two Lives* with a brief reflection which we may fairly juxtapose with Said: "May we not be as foolish as we are almost bound to be. If we cannot eschew hatred, at least let us eschew group hatred. May we see that we could have been born as each other."⁴⁶ Seth's book, with its tale of human dialogue across cultural barriers, corroborates Said's notion of "other echoes."

In view of all this, is Vikram Seth the writer, if certainly not '*one* thing', still more 'some things' than others? A tentative answer is that Seth's perspective is increasingly that of a globalised Indian, viewing the modern world through a prism that may be multicoloured but is, ultimately, made in Asia. His first book, the tale of an Indian in China, today seems uncannily predictive of current geopolitical and economic trends, with the twin ascent of India and China now a key theme of the emerging century. By now, he clearly feels entitled to interpret the West, to both Western and Eastern readers, with a confidence and authority that betoken an Asia and an India that no longer consider themselves subordinate. Indeed, given the by now established worldwide prestige of Indian Writing in English's leading exponents, it seems reasonable to argue that this book, with the extraordinary advances it secured its author, has been written from the beginning from a position of power in the global cultural hierarchy. *Two Lives*, like Seth's own *An Equal Music* before it or, more recently, Anita Desai's novel of Mexico *The Zigzag Way*,⁴⁷ may, provocatively, be read a harbinger of what may become a major wave of Indian and Asian globalised literature. Indeed, it may point the way to a new kind of Indian Writing in English, perceiving itself, and perceived, no longer as third-world, subaltern or even postcolonial writing, but as a literature of global protagonism.

⁴⁵ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 407. The T.S. Eliot quotation is from "Burnt Norton," the first poem in his *Four Quartets*.

⁴⁶ *Two Lives*, 499.

⁴⁷ The India-Europe encounter in the post-Independence era was explored as early as 1960 by Raja Rao in *The Serpent and the Rope*, with its complex intercultural criss-crossing between India, France and England. Today, however, the likes of Seth and Desai have the global economy on their side.

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