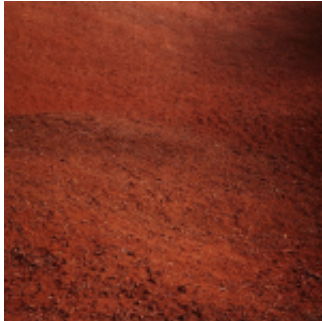


Playing the Blues: Pete Townshend's Who I Am and Music as Experimental Autobiography

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*Reviewer Tim Keane suggests that Pete Townshend's memoir **Who I Am** captures the tension animating The Who's career, the duality of autobiographical blues and (art-school inspired) auto-destruction. But, Keane suggests, the book also articulates the written autobiography's inevitable (if sometimes interesting) failure to achieve the "ex-static" atemporality of music. "I Can't Explain" ends up telling us more about Townshend's soul than **Who I Am**.*

Stalled by the project of clarifying his existence through narrative, St. Augustine asks of himself, "Who are you?" and then responds, "I'm a man" (212). But his division of self into body and a soul complicates a foundational problem intrinsic to writing about the self. In Augustine's metaphysics, the body is subject to temporality; the soul is not. In its struggling to represent the experience of time, **The Confessions** discloses how the autobiographical enterprise runs aground on the insufficiency of the temporal categories past, present, future. Augustine repeatedly experiences an impasse, and suffers, shall we say, a severe case of the autobiographical blues.

Centuries after **The Confessions**, the American singer Bo Diddley echoes Augustine's nominative phrase "I'm a man," in his update of a blues standard, "I'm a Man," (1955). That blues song, like others of its type, represents a creative autobiographical avowal, a mini-narrative in which the normal demarcations of experience into past, present or future dissolve into a timeless present of candid and playful expression. That expression takes place as a recurring present voiced by the refrain, "I'm a man" and the phrase is underpinned by the hypnotic, steady syncopation and repetitive strumming. The lyrics explore the singer's emergence into manhood and describe past and

future conquests, but the recurring assertion "I'm a man" underscores that those usual categories of one's lifetime - the past and the future - are dissolved into a timeless present, an exuberant blues-based *now*: "I'm a man"

The blues singer signs his identity far from the cultural domain determined by official, written self-historicizing documents such as Augustine's. As a form of autobiographical deliverance, Diddley's confident present-ness to himself, tinged with a gospel call-and-response in certain of his later renditions, indicates the blues' power to temporarily liberate an authentic, secret, and troubled self from historical, institutional or therefore *chronological* confines constantly imposed on him. from outside. Unlike the linearity in prose narrative, music's spatiality removes, or brackets, the singer's ordinary, day-to day invocations of who he is in clock-time or calendar-time. Removed from those spheres into the fictive space afforded by a song, the singer's experience of time, and by extension his privileged listener's experience of time, is unmoored from routine classification into the categories of past time, present time, and future time. Unlike written autobiography or even an autobiographical fiction, the song upholds personal identity within a constant present, a constancy sustained by melody, voice, intonation, instrumentation, repetition, rhythm and so on. To paraphrase The Rolling Stones, in the blues, time is on our side. A blues song generates a two or three minute mode of being that transcends the static state of everyday life. Examined closely, this transformation of the experience of time through folk music like Diddley's is, in fact, an intensification and even a revelation of the concealed, ecstatic nature of time attested to by thinkers from Augustine down through today.

Writing his autobiography, Augustine discovers the artificiality of narrative time by describing how the three poles, past, present and future constantly converge. He asks of his implied addressee, God, "how can [...] the past and the future *be*, when the past no longer is and the future is not yet? [...] and [since] the present is time only by reason of the fact that it moves on to become the past, how can we say the present is?" (***Confessions*** 264).

Music that centers itself around problems of a socially determined identity, such as the blues, might best be understood as an *ecstatic* alternative to a written autobiography. Such autobiography is truer than prose chronologies in the sense that song attenuates, or makes manifest and real, how experiential time involves the never-ending collapse of past, present and future in constantly renewed musical moments.

Perhaps this intuition about time and music is the reason why American musician Lightnin' Hopkins entitles his 1959 LP ***Autobiography in the Blues***, and why Daniel Stein's ***Music is My Life*** (University of Michigan Press, 2012), examines jazz great Louis Armstrong's copious life-writing and traces parallels between the performance of jazz and autobiographical discourse.

Notably Diddley's declarative hit single "I'm a Man" inspired a cover version, ten years later, by the British band The Who, on their first LP, ***My Generation*** (Decca Records, 1965). That album's title, with its aggressive use of the possessive case - "*my* generation" - stakes out a unique collectivist autobiographical note that corresponds to the swagger in Diddley's blues' hit.

Indeed the proliferation of pronouns like "you" "we" or "I" in The Who's musical catalog reveals that the band's main lyricist, Pete Townshend, envisioned rock composition as a hypothetical dialogue in front of, and alongside his audience, around a shared autobiographical question: *who am I?* Townshend's extensive body of songwriting demonstrates an aptitude at infusing, into the subtext of the lyrics, a horizon of performer-audience interchangeability. The songs arise from severe tension as their various personae seek relief from profound autobiographical doubts. In the song "The Real Me" (1973) a rootless young London mod seeks to know himself by consulting his mother and his "shrink," his friends and his would-be lover. Driven into a breakneck sonic register by lead singer Roger Daltrey's delivery, the chorus of "The Real Me" ecstatically besieges both the singer's implied self and the listener with an interrogation they are presumed to share: "Can you see the real me? Can you? Can *you*?"

In speaking collectively on identity even when he seems to be doing so singularly, Townshend's songs build on the blues' playful autobiographical idioms and intensify the ecstatic and therefore impossible quest to know the "real" self. When his vocal surrogate, The Who's lead singer Roger Daltrey, stutteringly asks, in "My Generation" "why don't you all *ffffade* away?" the imperative in the interrogative "you" refers to unnamed authorities outside the song's otherwise communal frame of reference, insinuating that the singer has stepped forward to speak on behalf of a disaffected and put-upon group, a generation, of which he (and the listener) is presumed to be a member. "We need you to join together/Everybody c'mon together," goes the repeated, urgent exhortation of "Join Together" (1972). "You declared you would be three inches taller," singer Daltrey snarls in The Who's "The Punk Meets the The Godfather" (1973), "you only became what we made you. Thought you were

chasing a destiny calling/You only became what we made you." Any apparent ambiguity about the antecedents for "you" or "we" disappears in the avalanche of Townshend's power chords, Enwistle's bass interlude, and Moon's thundering drum fill. The cascading instrumentation repudiates, in an exalted present tense, the sarcastic condescension of a powerful figure toward an underling's presumptions about free self-determination. The bad guys in control preempted our self-fashioning, Townshend's lyrics seem to declare, we're stuck with a life we did not choose, yet in the space of this song, our suffering ends *now*. The "Punk and the Godfather" transforms a beleaguered past and a compromised future into a pure, blues-driven present that singer and audience share.

This conscious ambition to mark rock music as a new type of creative social autobiography hovers around The Who's songwriter Pete Townshend's official memoir, *Who I Am* (2012), published in late 2012 by HarperCollins, sixteen years after the book was contracted and thirty years after The Who retired as an active recording group. Given Townshend's public and private confrontations with identity, struggles which inform most of his music and many of which have made headlines, this memoir has a hard act to follow. In fact, the memoir's title *Who I Am* is a tacit acknowledgement that Townshend's creative autobiography already courses through his songwriting in ways that are far less apparent than in the work of other recent musician/memoirists, like Neil Young or Keith Richards.

The Augustinian self-interrogation, "Who are you?" has already been answered across several decades by Townshend's music. In "I'm a Boy" (1965) a young man bristles at his English provinciality and complains about a forced cross-dressing by his sadistic parents. In "I'm One" (1973) a soulful, isolated "loser" attempts to resolve a near schizophrenic nervous breakdown with a mystical assertion about himself. In "I am an Animal" (1980) a middle-aged rock star acknowledges himself as a degenerate who has decided his wretched behavior has become, in fact, his reason for being. Such capsuled fictive autobiographies course throughout Townshend's songbook: "I'm the Face" (1964) "[I'm a] Substitute," (1966), "I'm Free" and "I'm a Sensation" (1969), "[I'm a] Seeker" (1970) "I am the Sea" (1973), "I'm Gonna Get Ya" (1980) "I am Secure (1985), and "I am Afraid (1993), along with other musical rejections of a fixed personality, like "I Can't Explain" (1965), "I've Had Enough" (1973) and "I Don't Even Know Myself" (1973).

To paraphrase Walter Pater, then, we might ask, has Townshend's written autobiography that aspires to the condition of his music? Music's apparently ex-temporal autonomy is the envy of many autobiographers. Struggling to write the biography of her friend, the painter Roger Fry, Londoner Virginia Woolf complained that chronological life writing "leave[s] out the person to whom things happened" by listing sequential facts. In addition, by mimicking the artifice of the clock and the calendar, these chronicles fail to account for the person's essential, discontinuous "moments of being" (65-66). As an alternative, Woolf theorizes a musical arrangement which would be designed around discontinuous incidents of personal "shock" or "rapture" which cannot be accounted for by reflective reasoning, chronology, or logic. "I am hardly aware of myself," writes Woolf on the act of writing such a memoir, "but only the sensation" (67). She compares writing autobiography to the methods of the composer:

It [autobiographical meaning] is a rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what [...] behind the cotton-wool is hidden a pattern; that we - I mean all human beings - are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art. Hamlet or Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself (Woolf 72).

Since Woolf's era, many memoirists reconfigure their presentations so as to capture what being is *outside* of habitual time, and to address temporality as it is actually experienced. Michel Leiris, Jean Genet, Joe Brainard, Georges Perec, and Edouard Levé to name a few such experimental memoirists, resist the naturalizing of human time and resort to writing their life stories into disconnected patterns, using associations, repetitions, variations and other such features that are characteristic less of prose literature than of musical arrangement.

Recent memoirs by popular musicians have even partly taken up this aspiration, too. Bob Dylan's ***Chronicles: Volume I*** (2004) disproportionately magnifies the musician's early New York period in 1961, mostly bypassing his ascendancy to fame in the mid and late 1960s, and then fast-forwarding in time, first to the early 1970s and then to the late 1980s. Patti Smith's ***Just Kids*** (2009) reads like an instantaneous prose poem as it languorously explores and evokes her time-defying symbiosis with the photographer Robert

Mapplethorpe. The Eels' front man Mark Oliver Everett's *Things the Grandchildren Should Know* (2009) conforms to the demands of a linear representation of a musical career, but the text's device of turning harrowing anecdotes into surreal and seminal disruptions subverts the smooth showbiz narrative clichés of striving, success, mistakes, redemptions, corrections and restoration.

Who is better qualified, then, to produce a definitively *ex-static* autobiography aspiring to music's timeless qualities than Pete Townshend?

Townshend is nothing if not a literate rock musician. He remains lead guitarist and primary spokesperson and curator for The Who. He has been a recurring subject for in-depth print, online and video interviews right up to the present day. He is a frequent contributor to magazines, newspapers, and the lecture circuit, the author of short stories and poetic self-portraits collected in *Horse's Neck* (1985), an early Internet user blogging about his processes of writing and composition, and the author of copious linear notes and "librettos" that accompany both his solo records and various reissues of The Who's recordings. *For further reading see Pete Townshend's Tommy* (Hal Leonard, 2005), *Lifhouse by Pete Townshend and Jeff Young* (Simon & Schuster UK, 2001), and *Pete Townshend "Quadrophenia"* (booklet) MCA Records, 1973. And, like poet and critic T.S. Eliot, Townshend was a book editor at the English publisher Faber & Faber for several years.

Furthermore, through these interventions into discussions of craft and in writing, he has highlighted, again and again, the inherent reflectivity in The Who's music, emphasizing how such personal songwriting can speak assuredly on behalf of those who are not Pete Townshend. Writing on this initial discovery in *Who I Am*, he cites the enthusiastic backstage response from fans at the band's earliest London gigs, outcasts like "Irish Jack Lyons," who point out that the band's then-current U.K. hit, "I Can't Explain," (1965) parallels their voiceless state within their own scattershot lives. The fans react as if, in penning what Townshend had thought of as disposable lyrics built around a melody stolen from The Kinks, he had accidentally improvised *their* memoirs by liberating them from false individualities associated with the normal, or non-musical, restrictions of everyday time and conformism (80). Based on this response from fans, Townshend recontextualizes the band's music as inventive autobiography and a dialectical art, recognizing rock-n-roll as potentially more consequential to his search for identity than the fine arts he

was then studying at school. "Their [fans] brief was simple: we need you to explain that we can't explain; we need you to say what we are unable to say [...] I felt vindicated. I was hooked on sudden fame and notoriety, being on the TV and radio, having written a hit song. But now I knew The Who had a greater mission than just being rich and famous [...] I knew with absolute certainty, that after all what we were doing was going to be Art" (80-81).

Such important revelations into music as collective autobiography make Townshend's laboriously written *Who I Am* a significant document, particularly in its accounts of that mission in his early and later years. The autobiography charts how The Who are molded by artistic currents and crosscurrents and by commercial forces that sometimes carry their work beyond their original choices. Its author's compulsive attempts at self-understanding over the years are compromised by nebulous private traumas and extraordinary wealth and fame, the latter complicated by his status as an envoy for his largely anonymous and often distant and ageing fan base.

The factors that shape Townshend's musical career are extensive and provide a microcosmic look at national and cultural economies in the immediate postwar years. Each artistic school and musical style alters Townshend's initial approaches to self-formation and his ever-evolving relationship to listeners, and each provides new strategies for how his public self might successfully disassociate from the repressive options posed by the uncommunicative preceding generation.

Throughout the 1950s, competing postwar artistic movements coincide with a robust Anglo-American cultural interchange. From within this diversity, the young Townshend gradually situates music as the ideal vehicle for introspective and contradictory representations of shock and alienation. When these experiences are transformed into the imaginaries of song lyrics, band recordings, and live performances, they resonate outside of normal time, ecstatically, much as Woolf hopes for her own poetic form of autobiographical writing around "shocks." Indeed, for Townshend, the pervasive shocks of World War II and the London blitz have a catalyzing effect on this autobiographical project, exactly inverse to that war's ruinous impact on Woolf and her generation.

Townshend's father, Cliff, is a young saxophone and clarinet player in the Royal Air Force during the war. Townshend *père* tours military bases, in the UK and in Europe, playing Dixieland, swing, and traditional jazz for the servicemen

and their families. His wife Betty joins the band as singer and "The Squadronnaires" tour army bases in Britain. Within this itinerant context, Townshend is born in May of 1945, at the very beginning of the war's prolonged aftermath, and this conflict between a sluggish recovery process that impedes a fresh beginning mirrors Townshend's lifelong neuroses.

The memoir begins by contrasting the continuities of adult time, or history, with the non-linear intervals and discrete confusions of childhood, that form his worldview. As parents work through marital discord beneath a larger national program of recuperation, the young Townshend is often neglected and displaced, randomly dispatched to "holidays camps," to movie matinees or concerts, to households of various eccentric neighbors, and, most ominously, to live for a year with his unstable maternal grandmother, "Denny," who runs her home "with military precision" while she keeps a series of unpredictable lovers, "bus drivers and airmen" one of whom "had a Hitler mustache" and may have molested the young Townshend. That year of childhood exile is laid out as a series of disquieting Woolf-like "blows," leading to a foundational collapse in his trust: "At the age of seven," he writes, "love and leadership both felt bankrupt" (18). Lacking a coherent narrative, or even a grip on selfhood, he drifts toward art and music, in part to speak on behalf of others while trying in vain to do so for himself. "I was brought up in a period when war still cast shadows," Townshend writes, "in 1945 popular music had a serious purpose: to defy postwar depression and revitalise the romantic and hopeful aspirations of an exhausted people" (4).

This personal, presumptive quest for a suitably optimistic medium coincides with a time when visual artists and musicians in the U.S. and Britain are questioning received art forms and even the moral purposes of such expression. Townshend carefully documents how he negotiates this transitional period. Just before Townshend enrolls as a scholarship student in Ealing Art College in the early 1960s, classmate Jon Enwistle, himself a talented trombone player, recruits him to play rhythm guitar in a local cover band named The Detours, founded by the singer and band leader, Roger Daltrey, "specializing in Country & Western songs, 'Hava Nagila' the hokey-cokey, the conga and Cliff Richards" (44). Once at art school, steered by his flat-mate Richard "Barney" Barnes and Tom Wright, a record collector, Townshend absorbs the American music of Chuck Berry, Big Bill Broonzy, Howlin' Wolf, Charles Mingus, Jimmy Reed and John Lee Hooker (75).

As art student by day, he is exposed to radical pedagogies and postmodern trends that are themselves responding to institutional insidiousness evidenced by two previous world wars and the coming catastrophes promised by military and industrial technology and epitomized by nuclear weapons and profligate consumerism. Townshend presciently underscores what creators and cultural critics of that era theorized about the postwar psychic situation and its ramifications for the arts. Reflecting on the advent of Abstract Expressionism in New York City, Frank O'Hara writes, "that faced with universal destruction, as we are told, our art should at last speak with unimpeded force and unveiled honesty to a future which well may be nonexistent, in a last effort of recognition which is the justification of being" (O'Hara 26). In responding to a Jackson Pollock painting for its "lyrical desperation" and "ecstatic, irritable, demanding force" O'Hara's choice of language prefigures the effusive reports of music critics writing on The Who's live performances several years later.

The link between the changing New York School of painting and the environment at Townshend's Ealing Art College is convincingly detailed. The British abstract painter Anthony Benjamin challenges the drily technical orientation of Ealing's curriculum. Benjamin knifes open his own finger during a studio session and drags the blood across the canvas to illustrate the students' requisite break with the orderliness of realist techniques that predominate among the college's painting faculty (49). Action painting is an aesthetic revolt preferred over tradition. Townshend, who initially wants to practice kinetic sculpture, switches to graphic design, and participates in computer artist Roy Ascott's "Groundcourse," involving sensory deprivation exercises. Its graduates include the Conceptualist Stephan Wallats and musician and producer Brian Eno. Ascott introduces the young Townshend to "installations combining vibrant colour, lighting, TV screens, and complex coded music" (56). The American painters Larry Rivers and Ron Kitaj, both of who rejected Abstract Expressionism to create flat, parodist distortions of figuration and realism, teach at Ealing Art College, too. The most influential mentor at school is the Fluxus or Anti-Art figure Gustav Metzger; decades after his Ealing Art College days, Townshend bankrolls Metzger's first solo show at MOMA Oxford (464).

Born into a Jewish family in Nuremberg, Metzger fled Nazi Germany. As an expatriate artist in England in the 1940s and '50s, Metzger found that, like the innovative Pop Art and Conceptual painters in New York City, expressionistic "all over" painting like Pollock's seemed to have exhausted itself. Metzger graduated to recalcitrant forms of painting such as "acid on nylon" and

"dematerializing the work of art" through a Dada-like confrontation with viewers. Writing in 1959, Metzger argues that only so-called "auto-destructive art" can hold a mirror up to runaway capitalism, a system that remains in a necessary denial about its ongoing collective suicide:

Look at the destruction taking place around you. If we go into the streets we are attacked by exhaust - lethal in concentration. The air in cities is polluted by hundreds of chemicals from differing sources. Add to this disease engendering atmosphere, pollution by smoking, carbon dioxide through human activity, the incessant physical and psychic pressure of millions of people in confined, ill ventilated spaces. [...] to survive capitalism must continue to expand production. It is boom or bust! (Metzger 28-29)

In response, Metzger rejects the finished art-object as such and tries transitory art productions that depend on the viewer's creativity as much as the maker for their realization. That art's performative nature and its ephemeral content mirror worldwide destructiveness and implicitly indict that impulse:

The artist does not want to give his work to a society as foul as this one. So auto-destructive art becomes a kind of boycott. The artist refuses to embody his finest values in permanent works - to be bought, enjoyed and appropriated by the class of people whom he detests - and who is largely responsible for the catastrophe in which we exist (49).

Though he is discussed only periodically, Metzger's influence looms large in *Who I Am*. The trope of the self-destroying artwork casts long shadows in the dispiriting chronicle of The Who's discord, its physical destructiveness, the members' drug and alcohol abuse, and assorted legal battles with managers and publicists and Metzger's ideas on auto-destruction both complicate and enrich Townshend's quest for a shared vocabulary between musician and audience.

Early on, Townshend coopts Metzger's auto-destructiveness and works it into a refashioned British rhythm-and-blues that in its stage presentation borrows heavily from performance art and Mod clothing fashion, and the band's act is bankrolled by the newly founded recording label, Track Records. The integration of art, fashion, and hybrid musical styles explains much of The Who's early appeal in London, especially as the band competes for press and chart prominence with the more popular groups like The Beatles, The Kinks, and The Rolling Stones. Drummer Keith Moon introduces elements of manic

comedy, extreme unpredictability, and dark wit into the band, styling himself after his jazz idol, Buddy Rich, and coming into his own after a long affinity with surf music. Moon adds propulsion, nimbleness and splash to his reinvention of rock drumming. *For an astute and long overdue evaluations of Keith Moon's contribution to rock-n-roll drumming, see James Wood's "The Fun Stuff: My Life as Keith Moon" in The New Yorker, November 10, 2010, and Tony Fletcher's biography, Moon: The Life and Death of a Rock Legend (It Books, 2000).* By amplifying their instruments to unprecedented acoustic ranges, incorporating feedback and distortion into their sound, and presenting circus-like histrionics and emotive vehemence in live performances, the band rejects mid 1960s pop expectations, daring their growing audiences to adapt to them rather than the other way round. Their pop engagement with "an aesthetics of revulsion" has no well-defined connection to a political program like Metzger's. However their live act, as orchestrated by managers Pete Meaden and Kit Lambert (son of composer Constant Lambert), much like the contemporaneous "happenings" of Andy Warhol and The Velvet Underground in New York City, marks their audience off as part of an artistic club. The Who's style is subversive insofar as its hyper-kinetic fury repudiate both Merseybeat sentimentality and, later, hippie pacifism. Townshend's songwriting poses sincere, lyrical questions of identity while the band's incendiary platform literally explodes those problems. Autobiographical blues and auto-destruction unite.

Once Townshend drops out of art college and the band has been remade by 1965-66 as flamboyant "mods," with UK chart hits in "My Generation," "The Kids Are Alright," and "Anyway Anywhere Anyhow," Gustav Metzger visits the band backstage and urges a change in course. "[It] was the first time Gustav had seen my version of auto destruction in process," Townshend writes, "and though he was pleased to have been such a powerful influence he tried to explain that according to his thesis I faced a dilemma; I was supposed to boycott the new commercial pop form itself, attack the very process that allowed me such creative expression, not contribute to it. I agreed. The gimmicks had overtaken me" (115).

However those guitar-and-drum smashing gimmicks do not immediately cease. The band heavily exploits them in their first American tours. Rather than alienating audiences, that incendiary stage violence distinguishes them. Opening for Herman's Hermits in the U.S., Townshend writes, "the concerts

made for a strange culture clash: we smashed our guitars and screamed about our disaffected generation, whereas Herman sang about someone who had a lovely daughter, and the fact he was Henry the Eighth, he was" (124).

There is an unexplored paradox to the band's breakthrough success in late 1960s America. Around mid-1967, when the band first enters the American radio market, the civil rights movement has escalated into urban revolts and ferocious riots while the Vietnam war is peaking, as half a million Americans are fighting overseas and the US Air Force is dropping bombs at a rate unequalled in human history. "*The Impossible Victory: Vietnam*" in *A People's History of the United States 1492 to the Present* by Howard Zinn (*Harpercollins: New York, 1980*). p 477. An auto-destructive band is a curiously contradictory choice for imported musical entertainment in this context. Though he detects fissures and lapses in American society, Townshend seems oblivious to any connection or disconnection between real American violence documented in daily headlines of the day, and the band's staged acts of destruction as it tours the States.

During The Who's breakthrough performance at the ostensibly "folk music" festival in Monterey, the band, with the exception of bassist Jon Entwistle, utterly destroy their instruments to a stunned audience of mostly idealistic counter-culturists. The visual impact of the gesture so incenses Jimi Hendrix that he follows the band's act by smashing his own guitar and then lighting its fragmented remains on fire. A few weeks after the Monterey show, during The Who's American TV debut on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, drummer Keith Moon triggers a dynamite explosion in his drum kit at the end of "My Generation," sending singer Roger Daltrey reeling off the stage and singeing Townshend's hair, permanently damaging his eardrum, all in front of a "panic stricken Bette Davis and a sweetly concerned Mickey Rooney" (129).

The auto-destruction turns inward as well. Exasperated by the effects on live performances by his band mates' amphetamine abuse, Daltrey punches Moon backstage and is temporarily kicked out of the band (84). The band members are frequently involved in brawls with one another and drawn-out legal and financial wrangling between the band and producer Shel Talmy, and, later between once trusted managers Kit Lambert and Chris Stamp. The Who seems to implode just as it starts to succeed. The fans are also at risk. A three alarm fire rages next door to the Fillmore East Theater in New York City in May of 1969 when The Who are in the middle of their live act. An officer from the

"Tactical Police Force" commandeers the stage, takes the microphone in order to safely clear the hall and is summarily kicked in the crotch by Townshend, who is arrested and charged with assault (170-171). Months later, he famously boots activist Abbie Hoffman off the stage at the Woodstock music festival while Hoffman is advocating for imprisoned activist John Sinclair. And on it goes through the 1970s. The band's 1973 double LP *Quadrophenia* re-dramatizes the gang warfare and summertime riots in Brighton that had roiled Britain only a few years earlier. A Who concert in 1976 enters the band in the Guinness Book of World Records as the loudest concert ever, registering a dangerous 120 decibels. By 1979, after drummer Keith Moon's death by drug overdose, *Time* magazine describes the band as existing at "rock's outer limits" when eleven fans are crushed to death entering a Who concert at Riverfront Stadium in Cincinnati, Ohio. see *Flippo, Chet "Rock and Roll Tragedy: Why Eleven Died at The Who's Cincinnati Concert" Rolling Stone, January 24, 1980. <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/rock-and-roll-tragedy-why-eleven-died-at-the-whos-cincinnati-concert-19800124>*

If the band's auto-destructive aesthetic fails to effect social and political changes in the larger culture as Metzger hopes for through his own art, those elements of The Who's act totally reshape rock music's status as an unassuming commodity. Though Townshend's memoir comes up far short in its accounting for this aspect of the band's legacy, The Who's ferociousness clears the way for explicitly political punk bands from The Sex Pistols to Black Flag to Rage Against the Machine. *Townshend's impatience with The Who's waning cultural relevance in the late 1970s expresses itself in a clubroom brawl with members of The Sex Pistols The incident becomes the inspiration for his semi-autobiographical Who song, "Who Are You" (1978) [Who I Am, 301-302].*

Though The Who's initial success in the 1960s is partly a result of their masterful capacity to integrate diverse musical and artistic fashions in publicity and performance, Townshend's songwriting in that period evolves beyond the superficialities and easy ironies of Pop Art, performance art, and even auto-destruction, into "dramatic and epic mode [that] extended musical forms that served as vehicles for social psychological and spiritual self examination for the rock-n-roll generation" (341).

Under financial pressure to move the band beyond hit singles, Townshend composes a mini-opera "A Quick One," (1966) and immerses himself in the teachings of the Indian avatar and mystic Meher Baba while planning songs for

the band's next album. **Tommy** (1969) is deliberately highbrow in its intent, a quasi-Modernist project complete with a "narrator," "a *leitmotif* of 'See Me, Feel Me,' " intimations of childhood privation, songs about "bullying," "sexual abuse" and drugs, structured like a classical European opera and thematically inspired by the example of "Hesse's hero Siddhartha's tough lessons at the feet of the ferryman"(150, 158). **Tommy** raises the sonic possibilities and subjects for rock, potentialities initiated by The Beach Boys' **Pet Sounds** (1966) and the Beatles' **Sergeant Peppers' Lonely Hearts Club Band** (1967), and **Tommy's** convoluted narrative content and its song cycles are later emulated by album-oriented art rock of the 1970s, such as David Bowie's **The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust** (1972), Genesis' **The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway** (1974), and Pink Floyd's **The Wall** (1979).

Yet The Who skillfully avoid being categorized as art rock, drawing on a kinship with the no-frills, loud performance style of American roots musicians, allowing them to keep concert goers immediate and even intimate as the band graduates to performing in opera houses, arenas, and stadiums. In fusing the blues' fevered directness in delivery with sophisticated jazz-like improvisations, they perform well-crafted singles that bookend the interconnected songs from **Tommy**. The Who's live act electrifies audiences and critics throughout 1969-1970. *One measure of The Who's international reach after Tommy is that the band's 1970 album Live at Leeds is referenced in a "Self-Pitying is a Kind of Lying Too," (1972) by the New York School poet James Schuyler. See The Postmoderns the New American Poetry edited by Donald Allen and George Butterick (Grove Press: New York, 1982). p 119.* Discussing the band's meteoric rise at this time, Townshend implies that his exhaustive attempts in subsequent years to follow up on the ambition of **Tommy** define the rest of that career and precipitate the band's creative deterioration.

While manager Kit Lambert, lays lucrative plans for a film version of **Tommy**, Townshend crafts **Lifehouse** (finally recorded as a solo project in 1999), first by publishing articles through which he hopes to initiate a dialogue with fans and journalists toward concepts for the next recording, taking a communal life-narrative ambition to its next logical step. This open source recording scheme, borrowing heavily in its thematic backdrop from Sufi teacher Inayat Khan's **The Mysticism of Sound** and Aldous Huxley's **Brave New World**, reflects problems in Townshend's dualistic thinking. On the one hand, the scheme displays a quixotic optimism about transcendence of identity through popular music and Eastern mysticism. On the other hand, **Lifehouse** reflects a justified

paranoia about the misuses of technology and the domineering imperatives of managers and the music industry, the latter projected onto murky notions about "government" as outlined in ***Lifehouse***:

in the dark future [...] humanity would survive inevitable ecological disaster by living in air filtered seclusion in podlike suits, kept amused and distracted by sophisticated programming by the government. As with *Tommy*, people's isolation would, in my story, prove the medium for their ultimate transcendences. [...] allied governments of the world would join forces to demand that ordinary folk accept long enough period of hibernation in the care of computers, in order to allow the planet to recover (203).

The Who and their management reject ***Lifehouse*** and its components are pared down into the epochal ***Who's Next*** (1971). Songs like "Baba O'Riley", "Bargain," "Behind Blue Eyes" and "Won't Get Fooled Again" showcase the band at its creative peak, fluently blending folk, blues, Celtic, electronica, and balladic structures and melodies into singularly compact harmonies that extend and reformat the rock song. The record stands as the most efficacious early use of pre-recorded music, methodical pauses, tape loops, and synthesizers in mainstream rock, and its track list serves as the backbone of the band's live concerts to this day. Yet Townshend touches on these songs only in passing, preoccupied as he is by his failure to become rock's answer to Mozart. As he cites his writing in ***Melody Maker***, the messianic zeal reads like misplaced narcissistic delusions of the alcoholic he admits to having become:

The music we play has to be tomorrow's, the things we say have to be today, and the reason for bothering is yesterday. The idea is to make the first real superstar. The first real star who can really stand and say that he deserves the name. The star would be us all (211).

The songwriter loses track of his references and he no longer knows who "us" means. Still, the band audaciously follow ***Who's Next*** with the double-LP ***Quadrophenia*** (1973), which integrates historical BBC news flashes about rampages and fights between mods and rockers, ambient recordings from the street and the seaside, and further augments the band's usual instrumentation with Entwistle's horn playing and a reliance on piano for rhythmic effects as Moon's drumming tempo decelerates. The album is recorded using a quadrophonic sound system, and its main character, "Jimmy," a stand-in for the younger version of Townshend, undergoes a breakdown or splintering of his selfhood; Jimmy's identity is variously linked to the four disparate

temperaments of the members of The Who. The record remains one of the band's most durable works, but, as Townshend explains, the tour in support of the record flops. By 1974, he is ready to quit the band. Here and elsewhere the memoir fails to distinguish private problems from professional ones, so that the malaise seems both imaginary and murky even as its consequences and effects are undeniably real. Drummer Moon is living in California, engaged in a death spiral of excessive drug use and addiction, yet no apparent intervention is made; as Townshend describes it, the band members, well-off, live like monads.

This protracted, monotonous period of big money, worldwide fame and tedious self-pity draws the memoir into a meaningless recitation of new home purchases and yachts, drinking binges and destructions of hotels, periodic touring and questionable songwriting and releases [e.g., *Who by Numbers* (1975), *Face Dances* (1981), *It's Hard* (1982)]. The familiar celebrity memoir tropes of privileged distress and publicity campaigns overtake its prior reflectiveness and cultural insights. Worse still, the text caves to autobiographical clichés right out of VH1's melodramatic documentary series *Behind the Music*. Townshend the beset businessman rises again through film and publishing projects in the late 1970s and the band's flagrantly mercantile "comeback" tours in the 1990s and 2000s. Townshend the artist falters and finally renegotiates the industry's demands and enjoys modest success as a solo artist while bringing The Who's recording career to a definitive close. Townshend the fallen father and admittedly failed husband struggles with assorted girlfriends and groupies and eventually finds patches of sobriety and true love in late middle age. Most puzzling is the memoir's frequently perfunctory tone and its narrator's beleaguered detachment from those around him. His ex-wife and lifelong partner, Karen Astley, as well as his band-mates, and past friends and lovers seem half remembered coworkers. In framing who he is, Townshend seems unwilling or unable to think through these complicated relationships or to refine significance from their successes or their breakdowns.

As the narrative progresses toward the 1980s, it relies on well-known media metanarratives to generate interest and to maintain the biographical momentum. This undercurrent is palpable to any reader familiar with the band's sudden dissolution in 1983, and Townshend's stunning arrest in London in 2003 on charges of viewing child pornography online. The latter incident lends the memoir an edgy voyeuristic fascination. Much of this period consists of

epiphanies that come after disparate personal shocks, resembling the punctual quality of life-writing that Woolf strives for in her prescriptive example of experimental memoir.

As the music-business recedes from the narrative, the tedium of chronology is unsettled by how Townshend's life fragments. Mostly retired from the music scene by the mid 1990s, he cyclically hones in on his perturbed curiosity and paternalistic concern about the exploitation of orphans and sexual abuse of children in the online child pornography industry. This troubled utopianism about the web as a means for interpersonal connection and transformation dates back to the halcyon years of The Who's reception at the Woodstock and Isle of Wight mega-festivals and Townshend's imaginary societal grid of instant communication put forth in the 1971 *Lifehouse* project. The writer's fantasy of a redemptive inter-subjectivity affirmed through technology unravels through a private, legal misadventure at home. Claiming to operate an unofficial "sting" operation to demonstrate how easy it is to access child porn, Townshend enters his credit card into one such website and is arrested five years later in an internationally coordinated sweep called Operation Ore (464, 487). *The case still generates interest in online news outlets, as conflicting accounts by both Townshend and editorial writers have proliferated. The interested reader will have to aggregate and evaluate these accounts.* Found not to have downloaded any pornography and released by Scotland Yard after being put on a registry of sex offenders, Townshend is suicidal as he endures worldwide media attention that irrevocably damages his public image. He describes his life at this time an eerie kind of Nietzschean hell of eternal return, as the ageing man relives the child's hazy yet convincingly evoked consciousness of isolation, self-loathing, and neglect.

Overall *Who I Am* aspires less to the condition of music than to being an easily digestible, detailed riposte to the pop music annals, much of which is still to be written. The gaps are significant. Townshend glosses over how his music frequently confronts and reimagines sexual desire, masculinity and religiosity, especially on his numerous solo LPs that have been modest commercial successes but critically undervalued. The autobiography's account of how he comes to terms with the deaths, at relatively early ages, of comrades Moon and Entwistle, seems strained and cursory compared to the impact those losses have on the lucrative, ongoing reformations of The Who. Though the description of the renewed allegiance to singer Roger Daltrey is detailed and convincing, the lead singer appears like a Shepherd's Bush caricature - a loyal,

thuggish foil to Townshend's more refined and still unfulfilled art college aspirations. Townshend never address his situation within the contemporary rock music industry, either, issues alluded to but not expanded on in his recently controversial lecture about digital music distribution. See *Townshend's John Peel lecture on digital distribution of music and piracy and censorship*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/nov/01/pete-townshend-john-peel-lecture>

Concluding his memoir with the contents of a letter he wrote to his eight-year old self as a therapeutic exercise, alongside his reading of a previously unopened fan letter from 1967, Townshend tacitly acknowledges the widening deficit in autobiographical knowledge alluded to in the memoir's title. The memoir's depiction of time begins to take on the unstable, ecstatic dimension with which it began. He writes to his younger self that "the bad feelings you sometimes have today are helping to make you strong and talented and empathetic to the pain that other people feel" (502). The reader senses a pathetic chasm between the ingenuous confessional songwriter of yore and the saccharine literalisms of the 67 year old memoirist (502). Then he turns to an unopened fan letter sent to him in 1967. The letter, addressed to the twenty-one year old Pete Townshend, is finally read and reported on by this much older Townshend. In it, the young woman gently lampoons a pop music press account that describes the young rock musician as "beautiful." After slightly qualifying it with her own commentary, the fan signs off with the touching salutation that "my time is short, and you're so BEAUTIFUL" (506). Here the admirer is revising the journalistic profiles of the young Townshend, who is now the wounded, much older musician, the lyricist who had attempted to write on behalf of a disoriented generation at exactly that period.

Given the metaphorical playfulness inherent in the act of blues music-as-autobiography, the iconic line "I hope I die before I get old" from The Who's "My Generation" is not, of course, a suicidal death wish. It is a metaphorical, and therefore timeless aspiration about living on without ceding to the ossifications of feeling and imagination that can come with personal authority, or with a settled and privileged life. On the evidence of *Who I Am*, Townshend has not gotten "old." Whether the author knows who he is remains fittingly unresolved. No less questionable is the larger question of form and genre, and whether such a chronological autobiography can uncover the self to the self, or self to reader. Autobiographical discourse barely served St. Augustine's purposes. The basic impossibility of producing a forceful self at the level of everyday life

is precisely why The Who became Townshend's vehicle for autobiographical experimentation. Musical compositions accommodate the expression of a multifaceted and conflicted autobiography. Their articulated truths about "who" one is unfold within the temporary suspension of calendrical time. This suspension happens because the song, the melody (and the howling, distortion, feedback, noise, and "windmill"-style guitar playing), attenuate the experience of time. The abstract fields of past, present and future seem to be confused and, moment to moment, constantly evaporate into one intensified now. This an ecstatic access that eludes the conventional autobiography describing a self fixedly into categories of past, present, and future, and establishing a narrative anchored squarely to a constructed history whose stasis seems, in the end, to be, as Augustine sensed, an expedient fiction rather than a genuine testimony.

The final song on *Tommy* (1969), "We're Not Gonna Take it" (known mostly by the name of its extended exit chorus "See Me, Feel Me, Touch Me") epitomizes Townshend's reinvention of rock music as a socially performed, mirror-like autobiography. In that climatic number, an authority figure resembling a cult leader named "Tommy" welcomes a community of pilgrims to an inexplicable "holiday camp." As the song progresses, Tommy, the ersatz savant whose traumas and trials are playfully and bitterly dramatized in the album's song cycle, attempts to dictate their behavior and alter their stereotypical behaviors. This Tommy figure is rapidly repudiated by the "guests" with a hammering chorus of "we're not gonna take it." The turning of the followers against the would-be "pinball" savior indicates Townshend disavowing and mocking the facile powers of audience manipulation that pop music endows on its idols. Tommy, personified on stage and screen by singer Daltrey, is, in this lyrical context, a doppelgänger for songwriter and band leader Townshend, and his direct identification with the fictive biographical details of Tommy's life is insinuated throughout Townshend's memoir *Who I Am*.

As the negating chorus of "We're Not Gonna Take It" repeats itself, the referential "we" becomes purposefully vague. Is the "we" only the followers gathered against Tommy, or is "we" gradually coalescing into a cooperative voice consisting of Tommy *and* his admirers and thus breaking down a counterfeit hierarchy? The question dissolves into irrelevance as the gospel-like chorus of "See me feel me touch me heal me" explodes the very concepts of personal identity and historical reference through the song's famously soaring climax:

Listening to you, I get the music
 Gazing at you, I get the heat
 Following you, I climb the mountain
 Right behind you, I see the millions
 On you, I see the glory
 From you, I get opinions
 From you, I get the story.

The song showcases how rock music can affirm an ecstatic, communal autobiography, made up of both performer and audience, and doing so only to the extent that such a phenomena is sustainable in a consumerist, pop market. The erasure is temporary yet convincing. The "Listening to you/I get the music" chant with its confusing and thus merging of *I* into *you* replicates not only the Sufi-derived spiritual practices of Meher Baba's adherents like Townshend. That chant closely emulates the transcendental aspirations of Augustine when he rhapsodically addresses God as "you" in his autobiography, ***The Confessions***.

In the closing of "We're Not Gonna Take It," the rock song becomes a religious meditation writ large, engaged in simultaneously by however many thousands might be present at a live performance, or present virtually in their listening to the recording in private. Rock music shares many features with religious meditations which themselves provided the original space within which modern autobiography developed. The introduction of individualized memories into the meditative practice produced imaginative autobiographies, and these were not acts of self-concentration but investigations into how the individual is "the conjunction of the within and the without" (Beaujour 44). The Who's body of songs retains its affective dynamism for live audiences because its songs are rooted in Townshend's implicit dialectical exchange between the songwriter and themselves, just as there is an unrestricted, *present* questioning of identity in the painfully exposed and emotive singer in the American blues tradition. Townshend exploited that musical space with a scrupulous intensity unrivalled in rock-n-roll. In that regard, ***Who I Am*** is just a superfluous autobiographical encore.

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