

What Does a Woman Want?

READING
AND
SEXUAL
DIFFERENCE

Shoshana Felman

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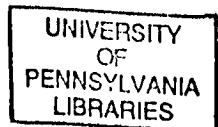
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1

What Does a Woman Want? The Question of Autobiography and the Bond of Reading

(Postface)

I must ask you to imagine a room . . . and on the table inside the room a blank sheet of paper on which was written in large letters *Women and Fiction*, but no more: . . .

A thousand questions at once suggested themselves. But one needed answers, not questions; and an answer was only to be had by consulting the learned and the unprejudiced, who have removed themselves above the strife of tongue and the confusion of body and issued the results of their reasoning and research in books which are to be found in the British museum. If truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British museum, where, I asked myself, picking up a notebook and a pencil, is truth? . . .

When a subject is highly controversial—and any question about sex is that—one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker.

For in a question like this truth is only to be had by laying together many varieties of error.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF, *A Room of One's Own*

I

Difference and Truth

This is a book on love, desire, prejudice, confusion, “many varieties of error,” insofar as they are all determined by the enigmatic truth of sexual difference. As the most contradictory human driving power, sexual difference is at once what separates and what attracts and brings together human beings; it draws us toward each other even while it estranges, threatens, and divides us. “It is precisely,” writes Adrienne Rich, “*because difference is so powerful* (though the ‘different’ may be socially disempowered), that it seems the target of threats, harassment, violence, social control, genocide.”¹ Sexual difference raises, thus, on the one hand, questions of desire, and on the other hand, questions of violence: the truth of difference is at once its power and its violence, and it is this power and this violence that the present book tries to understand.

But if, as Virginia Woolf suggests, the reality of sexual difference is inextricably tied up with “the strife of tongue and the confusion of body,” if it cannot, moreover, be articulated as an answer that itself escapes the strife and the confusion, where, indeed, should we attempt to look for it? Could the literary work, or the psychoanalytic work, offer answers?

Toward the end of his career, Freud confessed that sexual difference was one question that, despite his work, remained unsolvable, at least for him:

The great question that has never been answered and which I have not been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is “What does a woman want?”²

What might it mean, this book will ask, for a woman to reclaim (reread, rewrite, appropriate) Freud’s question? The answer, Freud acknowledged, was not available to him. It is not certain that the question has an answer. It is not certain that the answer—

if it exists—can become available to any man, or, for that matter, to any woman in our culture. But the question can be truly opened up and radically displaced, I would suggest, by being repossessed, reclaimed by women. It is the possibilities of this reopening and this displacement that the present study sets out to explore.

Reengendering the Question

Can literature in turn claim the question as its own specific question, and consequently be reclaimed by it? Can psychoanalysis? Is it in the power of this question to engender, through the literary or the psychoanalytic work, a woman's voice as its speaking subject? What consequences might such attempts at *en-gendering* a self-analytical female discourse have for the possibilities of reading, writing, thinking, analyzing, living, of women *and* of men?

This book proposes to explore these questions on the basis of close readings by a woman reader, on the one hand, of some women writers' autobiographical attempts (chapters 1 and 5), and, on the other hand, of three texts by male writers who dramatize, each in his own way, a male encounter with femininity as difference, a male experience, that is, of femininity as precisely the emergence of the (unexpected, baffling, and not always conscious) question: "What does a woman want?"

The male texts that consistently return to this central, though implicit, question are two literary, fictional stories by Balzac, "Adieu" (chapter 2) and "The Girl with the Golden Eyes" (chapter 3),³ and one semiconfessional, semiautobiographical text by Freud (chapter 4), a psychoanalytic (referential) narrative that is, however, also crucially expository and exemplarily conceptual and theoretical: chapter 2 of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which focuses on Freud's historic dream about his patient Irma. The practical and theoretical interpretation of this "specimen dream,"⁴ as Freud entitles it, in fact lays the primary foundation for the whole theory of the unconscious.

These three male texts are obviously very different from each

other in both form and content. All of them, however, can be thought of as love stories and, specifically, as narratives of failed love. The first and last (Balzac's "Adieu" and Freud's dream narrative) involve, moreover, a therapeutic project: in both, a woman must be cured but fails to be cured. In strange and very different ways both are, therefore, stories about healing. And in both, surprisingly and unexpectedly, healing turns out to be tied up with killing. There are differences, of course, in the purpose and the substance of the lesson—and the insight—that each text implicitly derives from the lethal accidents involved in the attempt at healing, differences the chapters in this volume seek to elucidate.

But the most peculiarly significant and the most striking feature that the three male texts turn out to have in common through the different issues they engage and through their diversity of narratives is that all of them are *stories about female resistance*. In "Adieu," the beloved woman, Stéphanie, by virtue of her madness, resists her "woman's duty"—*resists male recognition*, in unwittingly refusing to ground specularly as meaning, to serve as a narcissistic mirror for her lover and thereby to reflect back simply and unproblematically man's value. In "The Girl with the Golden Eyes," the desired woman, Paquita, by virtue of the fact that she loves a woman and that she has *two* lovers or two sexual masters, ironically and paradoxically *resists sexual appropriation*. In Freud's dream narrative the female patient, Irma, resists Freud's male "solution"; the feminine complaint *resists interpretation*; the female knot of pain resists and undercuts the mastery—and the integrity—of psychoanalytic theory.⁵

The three texts thus enact female resistance, even as they struggle with it and attempt to overcome and erase it. My strategy as reader is to encroach precisely on the female resistance in the text.

By picking up on the resistance in the text I do not propose, however, to become a "resisting reader" in the sense defined by Judith Fetterly: "Clearly, then, the first act of the feminist reader must be to become a resisting rather than an assenting reader and,

by this refusal to assent, to begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in us.”⁶

Reading and Resistance

I do indeed endorse the necessity—and the commitment—to “exorcize the male mind that has been implanted in us.” But *from where* should we exorcize this male mind, if we ourselves are possessed by it, if as educated products of our culture we have unwittingly been trained to “read literature as men”—to identify, that is, with the dominating, male-centered perspective of the masculine protagonist, which always takes itself—misleadingly—to be a measure of the universal? How should we come, in other words, in possession of our female mind as distinct from the male mind into which we have been coerced? Fetterley believes that we should do the exorcizing from outside of literature, as though our feminist convictions guaranteed an immediately graspable female mind outside of culture from which to demystify the literary myths. “Such questioning and exposure,” she writes, “can be carried on only by a consciousness radically different from the one that informs the literature. *Such a closed system cannot be opened up from within but only from without*” (xx; my emphasis). It is thus by stepping *outside of* literature that, in Fetterley’s conception, one becomes a “resisting reader.” Quoting Adrienne Rich’s powerful words suggesting that rereading or “re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.”⁷ Fetterley concludes: “We must learn to re-read. Thus, I see my book as a self-defense survival manual for the woman reader” (vii).

But can *reading* be truly subsumed by *self-defense*? If reading has historically been a tool of revolutions and of liberation, is it not rather because, constitutively, reading is a rather risky business whose outcome and full consequences can never be known in advance? Does not reading involve one risk that, precisely, cannot

be resisted: that of finding in the text something one does not expect? The danger with becoming a “resisting reader” is that we end up, in effect, *resisting reading*. But resisting reading for the sake of holding on to our ideologies and preconceptions (be they chauvinist or feminist) is what we tend to do in any case. Simply stepping outside literature by becoming a “resisting reader” might not suffice, thus, to debrief us of our “male minds.”

If reading cannot be subsumed by self-defense, literature in turn cannot simply be subsumed by the cultural prejudices that traverse it and by the ideologies its authors hold. All great texts, I will propose, are literary to the precise extent that they are self-transgressive with respect to the conscious ideologies that inform them.⁸ This is why my effort in this book, in being careful never to foreclose or to determine in advance the reading process, is to train myself to *tune into the forms of resistance present in the text*, those forms that make up the textual dynamic as a field of clashing and heterogeneous forces and as a never quite predictable potential of *surprise*. My effort is, in other words, not to “resist” the text from the outside but rather to seek to trace within each text *its own resistance to itself*, its own specific literary, inadvertent *textual transgression of its male assumptions and prescriptions*. Although this literary excess, this self-transgression of the text (which is, I argue, precisely what makes it a work of art: a work that no agenda can contain) might be at first invisible, inaudible, because it exceeds both the control and the deliberate intention of the writer’s consciousness, I am suggesting that it can be amplified, made patent, by the desire—and by the rhetorical interposition—of a woman reader. It is this double practical process of amplification and rhetorical interposition—and its incalculable theoretical and emotional effects—which I would like here to propose.

An Ethics of Interpretation, or the Priority of Practice

The chapters that follow are my own attempts in the apprenticeship—and the enactment—of such a method, through the exploitation of different theoretical perspectives (mainly those de-

veloped in France since the 1960s) and through the concrete utilization of different resources of theory, which I reclaim from my position as a woman reader in bringing them to bear on the elaboration—and the reinvention—of new (feminist) strategies of reading. Chapter 2 (on encountering Balzac's "Adieu") practices primarily "deconstructive" and other philosophical techniques of reading (inspired mainly by Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault)⁹ for its voicing (its reclaiming) of the woman question in the text. Chapter 3 (on encountering Balzac's "The Girl with the Golden Eyes") implicates, for its interpretive illumination of the "feminine resistance" in the text, a Lacanian psychoanalytic grasp of the complexity of the manifestations of desire and of the multiplicity of levels on which human action operates and has effects—effects of difference: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real.¹⁰ Chapter 4 (on encountering Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*) uses biographical, autobiographical, and Freudian psychoanalytical tools of analysis: it is informed simultaneously and differently by Freud the interpreter (the analyst, the theorist) and by Freud the dreamer (an analysand, an unconscious actor). Systematically decentered from its exclusive male enunciation through the rhetorical interposition of my own utterance, psychoanalysis is here staged—and exploited—in its double aspect as theory and as practice, as a *conceptual framework* that breaks new ground and yet, at the same time, as an idiosyncratic *clinical event* (advent), a symptomatic narrative, a process of concrete unfolding of particular discoveries and insights evolving from the difficulties of a singular life story.

All the chapters of this book are also crucially inspired, in the very heart of their endeavor, by the feminist renewal of both the theoretical and the critical perspectives, and each chapter takes its point of departure from some relevant feminist works, which it discusses. But the present book is not in any way intended as a summary, a survey, or an overview of feminist theory and scholarship. Rather, it attempts to think out new procedures of approach, to listen in new ways to both psychoanalytical and literary texts. It opens up new ways of reading as concrete events (unique encounters with another's story) and as pragmatic acts,

or interventions in the process of rethinking and of modifying (personal and social) expectations.

In insisting on the origin of the present volume not in theory per se but in the production of a practice, this book encounters feminism as an enabling inspiration, not as a theoretical orthodoxy or as an authorizing new institutionalization. My endeavor is thus situated in the realm of the question Michel de Certeau has pointed to as “the antinomy” between what he defines as “ethics” and what, “for lack of a better term,” he calls “dogmatism”:

Ethics is articulated through *effective operations*, and it defines a distance between what is and what ought to be. This distance designates a space where we have *something to do*. On the other hand, dogmatism is authorized by a reality it claims to represent and in the name of this reality, it imposes laws.¹¹

In its dogmatic aspect, every theory is legislating. It dictates on the one hand and censors on the other. Practice is not censoring but merely showing *what can be done*, and done otherwise, for instance in the classroom, for instance with students who might very well be eager, as they often are, to acquire psychoanalytic tools of insight or to communicate with literature as some form of artistic wisdom about life. Practice does not institute its laws but shows us ways (that work or do not work: ways whose measure is not rightness but effectiveness) enabling us, as Adrienne Rich has put it, “not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us”¹²—enabling us, that is (I would add), to intervene in the transmission of canonic culture not just in demystifying its blind spots, its bigotry, and its coercive structures but in illuminating, at the same time, its self-critical perspectives and its own implicit (inadvertent) self-subversive insights.

Rather than attempting a dogmatic summary of feminist theory and scholarship as yet another legislating process of codification of the real and another institutional legitimation and authorization, the chapters that follow experiment pragmatically with *strategies for reading sexual difference* insofar as it specifically *eludes* codification and resists *any* legitimizing institutionalization. Each chapter explores a different strategy not merely through the use of different tools of theory but through the concrete complex-

ity and the interpretive intensity unpredictably derived, each time, from the incomparable uniqueness of a practical textual experience. Each chapter will thereby engage, in its own way, in a reading practice whose effectiveness is coextensive with the freshness of its impact of surprise and whose endeavor is to elaborate, each time, a reading model that would be, precisely, unanticipated, different from the one imagined by the previous chapters and thus different, unanticipated, also, from one chapter to another.

II

Writing and Self-Resistance

To understand is always an ascending movement; that is why comprehension ought always to be concrete (one is never got out of the cave, one comes out of it).

—SIMONE WEIL, *First and Last Notebooks*

I did not know, however, at the outset, that such a methodology was to become the focus of my attempt; I practiced it intuitively, without at first articulating its significance. Nor did I anticipate, in the beginning, the actual (practical and theoretical) outcome of my readings. I have discovered it in process, in the course of my own readings, and more clearly, upon rereading them, upon reflecting retrospectively on their common features and their common meanings. Mainly, I did not foresee what I now term “the feminine resistance in the text,” and still less could I anticipate that *all* the texts, whose authors happen to be men, that I have randomly selected for a study of the female figure would lead consistently to this common denominator, would all intersect and encounter one another on this unanticipated point of female resistance.¹³

This point has, moreover, *resisted me* for a long time; this book has been long in the making, and its writing process—not coincidentally, I would suggest—has spun out over many years. Once

reclaimed, the question, "What does a woman want?" has turned out to resist closure, to inhibit my own writing, and to delay completion of this book. But it has thus exemplified ironically and vitally, in practice, at once the desire and the difficulty, or the *self-resistance*, not simply of reading as a woman (since what this means is not immediately graspable outside of the prescriptions and beliefs of patriarchal structure) but of *assuming* one's own sexual difference in the very act of reading; of assuming, that is, not the false security of an "identity" or a substantial definition (however nonconformist or divergent) but the very insecurity of a differential movement, which no ideology can fix and of which no institutional affiliation can redeem the radical anxiety, in the performance of an act that constantly—deliberately or unwittingly—*enacts* our difference yet finally escapes our own control.

"For a long time I have hesitated to write a book on woman," writes Simone de Beauvoir, introducing thus through a *self-resistance*—through this written "hesitation" built into the very move to assume her sexual difference—nothing less than the groundbreaking theory of *The Second Sex*:

For a long time I have hesitated to write a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially for women; and it is not new. . . . After all, is there a problem? And if so, what is it? *Are there women, really?* . . . We are extorted to be women, remain women, become women. It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman; to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity. . . .

A man would never get the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the human male. But *if I wish to define myself, I must first of all say: "I am a woman"*; on this truth must be based all further discussion.¹⁴

In a dialogue with Simone de Beauvoir thirty-three years after the publication of *The Second Sex*,¹⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre reflects on the singular speech act accomplished by the book:

JPS: What strikes me is that you began [*The Second Sex*] with no preconceived ideas. It wasn't a refusal or a condemnation. You

wanted to know what it meant to be a woman, probably you wanted to find out also for yourself, because you were thinking already of doing your memoirs?

SdB: Absolutely. When I started writing—it wasn't exactly memoirs, but an essay on myself—I realized that I needed first of all to situate myself as a woman. So first I studied what it meant to be a woman in the eyes of others, and that's why I talked about the myths of woman as seen by men; then I realized it was necessary to go deeper to the heart of reality, and that is why I studied physiology, history, and the evolution of the feminine condition.

JPS: It's rather odd. You began as a non-feminist, as a woman in this sense like any other woman that would have simply liked to know what it meant to be a woman. And in writing this book you became a feminist. You recognized your enemies and attacked them, and you specified what being a woman was like. This is the value of the book.

SdB: I wrote on a theoretical level. The book can be of value to feminist militants because there are not so many theorists among them, but I myself remained then on the theoretical level. It was not yet a feminist commitment such as I've been involved with in recent years.

JPS: Perhaps it's normal. It's the best way. *You became a feminist in writing this book.*

SdB: It's normal. . . . *But I became a feminist especially after the book was read, and started to exist for other women.* [Emphasis mine.]

On Becoming

The Second Sex is thus engendered by an impulse and a quest that the writing process carries out but that the author does not at first own. The book en-genders its own readers, who resonate at once to its content and to the process of its writing—that of finding out about oneself something one is not a priori in possession of, of finding out, that is, what one does not know one is or has in effect become. But it is the readers who in turn en-gender the author's

knowledge of herself: "I became a feminist," says Simone de Beauvoir, "especially after the book was read and started to exist for other women." Feminism comes to be defined here almost inadvertently, as a bond of reading: a bond of reading that engenders, in some ways, the writer—leads to her full assumption of her sexual difference; a bond of reading and of writing which, however, paradoxically *precedes* knowing what it means to "read as a woman," since this very bond, this very reading, is precisely constituted by the recognition that the question "what *is* a woman?" has not yet been answered and defies, in fact, all given answers. "Are there women, really?" *The Second Sex* asks provocatively:

One wonders if women still exist, if they will always exist, whether or not it is desirable that they should, what place they occupy in this world, what their place should be. (vii)

"One is not born, one *becomes*, a woman," writes Simone de Beauvoir (2:267). "You *became* a feminist by writing this book," says Jean-Paul Sartre. "I *became* a feminist when the book was read and started to exist for other women," says Simone de Beauvoir. The bond of reading constitutes a renewed relation to one's gender insofar as it establishes a relationship among all these becomings. *Becoming* a feminist is undertaking to investigate what it means to *be* a woman and discovering that one *is* not a woman but rather *becomes* (somewhat interminably) a woman; discovering, through others' reading and through the way in which other women are *addressed* by one's own writing, that one is not born a woman, one has become (perhaps never quite sufficiently) a woman.

If the present volume is, therefore, an inquiry into the act of reading, and specifically into what "reading as a woman" means, it is only insofar as the practical readings that compose this book encompass and unwittingly reveal the implicit story—and the autobiographical itinerary—of how one becomes a feminist. At the outset of the writing process of the book, my current feminist positions were not a given. They were neither altogether con-

scious nor truly owned by me with their full critical potential: I arrived at them through reading, acquired them in writing. The impact of these insights on the audiences that first heard them presented in lectures, the knowledge that early published versions of them found resonance and repercussions in female colleagues who were discussing them in conferences and assigning them in classrooms, and the letters I received from women readers in turn deepened their own impact on me and rendered more compelling and more articulate the critical significance of the feminist convictions to which the readings and the writing led me. Only much later did I realize that these readings and this writing, which kept speaking to me through their unexpected power of address and of reverberation but which at the time seemed purely theoretical and purely literary, were also coping inadvertently—although with no awareness on my part—with the reading and the writing of my own life.

III

Reading Autobiographically

Feminism, I will thus suggest, is indeed for women, among other things, reading literature and theory with their own life—a life, however, that is not entirely in their conscious possession. If, as Adrienne Rich acutely points out, rereading or “re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival,” it is because survival is, profoundly, a form of autobiography.

Reading autobiographically is, however, an activity and a performance far more complex than the mere project—and the mere stylistic trend—of “getting personal.”¹⁶ Because as educated women we are all unwittingly possessed by “the male mind that has been implanted in us,” because though women we can quite easily and surreptitiously read literature as men, we can just as easily “get personal” with a borrowed voice—and might not even

know *from whom* we borrow that voice. "Getting personal" does not guarantee that the story we narrate is wholly ours or that it is narrated in our own voice. In spite of the contemporary literary fashion of feminine confessions and of the recent critical fashion of "feminist confessions," I will suggest that *none of us, as women, has as yet, precisely, an autobiography*. Trained to see ourselves as objects and to be positioned as the Other, estranged to ourselves, we have a story that by definition cannot be self-present to us, a story that, in other words, is not a story, but *must become* a story.¹⁷ And it cannot *become* a story except through the *bond of reading*, that is, through the *story of the Other* (the story read by other women, the story of other women, the story of women told by others), insofar as this story of the Other, as *our own* autobiography, *has as yet precisely to be owned*. I will suggest that it cannot be owned by our attempting a direct access to ourselves as women ("getting personal") or by our pretending to leave culture or to step outside the text (by becoming a "resisting reader"). Rather, I will here propose that we might be able to engender, or to access, our story only indirectly—by conjugating literature, theory, and autobiography together through the act of reading and by reading, thus, into the texts of culture, at once our sexual difference and our autobiography as missing.

I should hasten to explain that by adopting the generic "we" in what I have just written ("I will suggest that none of us, as women, has as yet, precisely, an autobiography"), I am not proposing to speak in the name of women: the "we" is a rhetorical structure of address, not a claim for epistemological authority. I am speaking not *for* women, but *to* women. My utterance is meant as a *speech act*, not as a constative *representation*; it is a cognitive suggestion, an intuition, but its rhetorical force is primarily performative. The contemporary female autobiographical self-consciousness is a crucially important, innovative theoretical and critical resource, and I do not mean to underestimate or undercut its strategic value. But I do propose here to *unsettle* the very notion of autobiography, precisely insofar as we have *settled* into it (I feel) a little too impatiently and self-complacently, as though we could be

sure that we already have—in culture or in life—“a room of our own.”

As what follows will make clear, this book is, among other things, the account of how I made the discovery—and the experience—of my own autobiography as missing, and why this *missing* of my own autobiography appears to me today to be characteristic of the female condition. I am mainly speaking for myself. And yet I venture to propose this insight as a metaphor for the dilemmas and the problematic of autobiography for women, since the observations of my personal experience cannot invalidate it with respect to any woman I know, and since I have gained this self-understanding, once again, once indirectly, by listening to other women speak about themselves, by looking closely at the stories (which narrated, ultimately, the absence of a story or, what amounts to the same thing, the presence of too many stories) of a number of close female friends.

The autobiographical testimony of various women writers (women who are culturally worlds apart from one another) seems to confirm this insight. “My life,” writes English aristocrat Vita Sackville-West in the opening paragraph of her posthumous autobiography, “[is] a deceitful country.”¹⁸ What woman’s life is not a “deceitful country”—mostly to herself? “I have no recollection whatsoever of having written this,” attests, in her own way, French writer Marguerite Duras in the first page of her autobiographical narrative, *La Douleur*: “I know that I have [written] it, . . . I recognize the handwriting, but I do not see myself writing this journal. . . . *La Douleur* [“Pain”] is one of the most important things of my life.”¹⁹ Duras exemplifies the possibility that women have no real memory of their autobiography, or at least that they cannot simply command autobiography by the self-conscious effort of a voluntary recall. Unlike men, who write autobiographies from memory, women’s autobiography is what their memory cannot contain—or hold together as a whole—although their writing inadvertently inscribes it. To the extent that “Pain” is “one of the most important things” in Duras’s life, it is, like many stories of profound pain and of traumatization, a

story of (partial) amnesia, a story present in the text but whose writing cannot coincide with the writer's consciousness. Indeed, I will suggest—in line with what has recently been claimed by feminist psychiatrists and psychotherapists—that every woman's life contains, explicitly or in implicit ways, the story of a trauma.²⁰

When We Dead Awaken

Because trauma cannot be simply remembered,²¹ it cannot simply be "confessed": it must be testified to, in a struggle shared between a speaker and a listener to recover something the speaking subject is not—and cannot be—in possession of. Insofar as any feminine existence is in fact a traumatized existence, feminine autobiography *cannot be* a confession.²² It can only be a testimony: to survival. And like other testimonies to survival,²³ its struggle is to testify at once to life and to the death—the dying—the survival has entailed.²⁴

But how do we write our own death (our own survival) and still keep the integrity, the wholesomeness, of the narrative itself? "To me," says African American feminist Bell Hooks, "telling the story of my growing up years was intimately connected with the longing to kill the self I was without really having to die. I wanted to kill that self in writing. Once that self was gone—out of my life forever—I could more easily become the me of me."²⁵ Is not this violent and paradoxical predicament of "writing a woman's death" precisely part of any feminist undertaking of "writing a woman's life?" "The awakening of consciousness," writes American poet Adrienne Rich, "is not like the crossing of a frontier—one step and you are in another country." Even if the crossing of the frontier of female "sleep" or numbness—the crossings by each woman of a line of death—is shared today collectively by women, even if "it is no longer such a lonely thing to open one's eyes," the *process of awakening* cannot simply be equated with the state (the dream?) of wakefulness. Rich can cite, in sympathy, Bernard Shaw's comment on Ibsen's feminist play in 1900, "What remains to be seen as perhaps the most interesting of all

imminent social developments is what will happen 'When We Dead Awaken.'"²⁶ But when we assume and reappropriate, as women, Ibsen's title and Shaw's comment, when we become, today, the speaking subjects and the autobiographical bearers of the sentence "When we dead awaken . . .," the sentence is no longer simply sayable, narratable as a simple story but becomes itself, upon each utterance, an *enactment*, and a *reenactment*, of its own event (its own advent). As a *story*, "When we dead awakens . . ." is, however, bound to remain split, and indeed unfinished.

This is why I have suggested that "none of us, as women, has as yet, precisely, an autobiography," and that "we have a story that by definition cannot be self-present to us, a story that is not a story but *must become* a story." Let me illustrate this by my own example, which is also the example of this book (not merely of its statements but of its utterance, and of the process of its writing).

I have written that "we might be able to engender, or to access, our story only indirectly—by conjugating literature, theory, and autobiography together through the act of reading and by reading, thus, into the texts of culture, at once our sexual difference and our autobiography as missing."

I cannot confess to my autobiography as missing, but I can testify to it.

I cannot write my story (I am not in possession of my own autobiography), but I can read it in the Other.

I realize today—but did not know at the time of writing—that my work on Balzac's "Adieu" (chapter 2) was itself reliving an "adieu," attempting to work over and think over the violent significance in my own life of a separation from a man I loved, a rupture that (as in the story) was consummated by my own geographical departure, but whose traumatic consequences I was still apparently experiencing, even though on the surface of my life this episode, which had occurred years earlier, was overcome.

I was even less aware of my own involvement in the chapter I

wrote next, some two years later (chapter 3). A core curriculum course required me to teach Balzac's "The Girl with the Golden Eyes." I remember that the textual ambiguity I was attempting to decipher was entirely baffling and astonishing to me: it took me time and labor even to understand it literally, to figure out that what the text was so elliptically narrating was the story of a triangular affair, of a woman loving both a woman and a man, and that the story's ambiguities derived, primarily, from the confusion, the misreadings, the mistakes made by (experienced by) a man (a suitor) in his difficulty—and indeed his impossibility—of grasping the situation from his male perspective: a predominant, stereotypical perspective that puts men (himself included) at the center of women's lives and that cannot conceive of femininity except as subordinate to man (himself, or else a rival who must surely in turn be male) as its only center. The protagonist, Henri, thus fails to guess that his rival is in fact a woman, and tragic consequences ensue. Henri is deluded, and his reading of the sexes and of sexual difference is ironically demystified and subverted by the text. But are we not all, in fact, the cultural progeny—and cultural hostages—of this perspective? This is why it was a text so hard to read in the beginning: its interpretation had to go against the grain of universal sexual error.

Struggling with this error, struggling with the text's deception so as to articulate its truth, I failed entirely to notice my own autobiographical implication in it. It is only today, only with hindsight, with the remoteness of perspective afforded by the distance in time, that I realize how my own life, at the time of writing, involved a similar complexity (of languages, of cultures, of relations). But at the time of writing, when I was struggling with the text both to figure out its actual (factual) narrative and to analyze its philosophical and rhetorical prowesses, I had no clue, no inkling, that this testing of the virtuosity of the interpreter had anything to do with what, on different levels and in very different ways, I was also living.

If the critical suggestion I am making in this book is that people tell their stories (which they do not know or cannot speak) through others' stories, then the very force of insight of this

critical suggestion was at once borne out and actively enacted, put in motion, by the process of my writing which was *driven*, in effect, by the ways in which I was precisely missing my own implication in the texts before me.*

*To be continued in chapter 5 (Afterword).

Notes

Chapter 1. *What Does a Woman Want?*

1. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and as Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976; Tenth Anniversary Edition, 1986), xxxii; my emphasis.

2. Sigmund Freud, letter to Marie Bonaparte, quoted in Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* (New York: Basic Books, 1955), 2:421.

3. Honoré de Balzac, "Adieu (Nouvelles philosophiques)," in *Le Colonel Chabert, suivi de El Verdugo, Adieu et Le Réquisitionnaire*, Collection "Folio" (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 141–209; and "La Fille aux yeux d'or: The Girl with the Golden Eyes," in *History of the Thirteen*, trans. Herbert J. Hunt (Baltimore: Penguin, 1974), 307–91.

4. Sigmund Freud, "The Method of Interpreting Dreams: An Analysis of a Specimen Dream," in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (London: Hogarth Press, 1978), 96–121. Vol 4 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey.

5. This is a quintessential, simplifying, schematizing summary of an interpretation that each chapter will develop in an infinitely deeper, more concrete, and more nuanced way.

6. Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), xii.

7. Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (New York: Norton, 1979), 35.

8. For a lengthier elaboration of this conception of literature ("la chose littéraire"), see my *Writing and Madness: Literature/Philosophy/Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), esp. 11–32 and 251–55, and *The Literary Speech Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univer-

sity Press, 1983). See also the chapter “Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable” in my *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), esp. 91–97, and the definition of literature proposed in the conclusion of my essay, “Turning the Screw of Interpretation,” in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading—Otherwise*, ed. S. Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), a definition whose elaboration is introduced as follows: “There are letters from the moment there is no Master to receive them, or to read them: letters exist because a Master ceases to exist. We could indeed advance this statement as a definition of literature itself” (see development, pp. 206–7).

Other theorists and critics have, moreover, in their turn, though in different contexts, underscored a similar conception, equally central to their own specific critical endeavors. Among recent works, see for instance, Ross Chambers’s explicitly political use of the concept, *literary discourse*, in his subtle analysis of what he calls “oppositional narrative” in *Room for Maneuver* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 3. (“Without falling into idealism, it is possible, I believe, to argue that discourse—and notably the discourse called literary—has characteristics that enable it, in an important sense, to elude both repression and recuperation, or more accurately to ‘maneuver’ within the ‘room’ that opens up *between* the two”), and Michel de Certeau’s philosophical use of the concept, *fiction*, in his powerful reflection on the relation among history, psychoanalysis, and institutions in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 202 [“Fiction plays on the stratification of meaning: it narrates one thing in order to tell something else; it delineates itself in a language from which it continuously draws effects of meaning that cannot be circumscribed or checked. . . . It is ‘metaphoric’; it moves elusively in the domain of the other. Knowledge is insecure when dealing with the problem of fiction; consequently, its effort consists in an analysis (of a sort) that reduces or translates the elusive language of fiction into stable and easily combined elements”)].

9. See, in conjunction with the treatment by this chapter of the question of madness in its relation to women, my discussion of the controversy between Foucault and Derrida on the question of madness, its philosophical status, and its relation to the history of philosophy, in chapter 1 of my *Writing and Madness*, 33–55.

10. See my *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight*, esp. chap. 5, “Beyond Oedipus: The Specimen Story of Psychoanalysis,” 98–159.

11. De Certeau, *Heterologies*, 199, emphasis mine.

12. Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 35.

13. The word *resistance* is here used with a deliberate conflation of its various—and heterogeneous—connotations: physical, psychoanalytical, political, and ethical.

14. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1989), vii, x, emphasis mine.

15. In the 1982 film on Simone de Beauvoir produced by Malka Ribowska and José Dayan.

16. See Nancy Miller, *Getting Personal* (New York: Routledge, 1991) for a subtly nuanced feminist position that identifies, however, the autobiographical with the personal and the confessional. Miller points to the contemporary "outbreak of self-writing," which "(although it is not practiced uniquely by feminists or women) can be seen to develop out of feminist theory's original emphasis on the analysis of the personal: . . . the current proliferation in literary studies of autobiographical or personal criticism," and comments:

The spectacle of a significant number of critics getting personal in their writing, while not, to be sure, on the order of a paradigm shift, is at least the sign of a turning point in the history of critical practices. . . . In the face of the visible extremes of racism or misogyny, or the equally violent silences of theoretical discourses from which all traces of embodiment have been carefully abstracted, the autobiographical project might seem a frivolous response. How can I propose a reflection about an ethics in criticism . . . from these individualistic grounds? But the risk of a limited personalism, I think, is a risk worth taking. ("Preface," *Feminist Confessions*, ix–x, xiv)

This equation between the autobiographical and the "confessional" is commonly encountered in current feminist criticism and perception. See, for instance, the excellent introduction of the editors to the section, "Autobiography," in the anthology entitled *Feminisms*: "When the writer's presence seems to tear through the fabric of the academic text—revealing glimmers of the lived experience that forms the context for scholarly writing—"confessional" moments occur in otherwise conventional prose. . . . The confessional mode can also govern an entire essay. . . . In this new form of academic writing, autobiography merges with scholarship, and a personal voice begins—if only tentatively—to take shape in expository prose" (Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, eds., *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* [New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991], 1033).

For a different perspective, which insists on analyzing, on the contrary, the radical gap and consequent differentiation between "the

autobiographical” and the illusions of the personal, see (in the same anthology) Shari Benstock’s study of Virginia Woolf (“Authorizing Autobiography”) and its critique of what might be called the mystique of traditional autobiography (“definitions of autobiography that stress self-disclosure and narrative account”), insofar as this tradition gravitates around the delusion of a coherent (or “organic”) self. In contrast to this mystique, says Benstock, the modern feminine autobiographical project (as embodied by Virginia Woolf) stresses language as “a principle of separation and division” through which the “self” is at the same time constructed and decentered: “‘Writing the self’ is therefore a process of simultaneous sealing and splitting that can *only trace fissures of discontinuity*. This process may take place through ‘the individual’s special, peculiar psychic configuration,’ but it is never an act of ‘consciousness’ pure and simple” (ibid., 1054, emphasis mine).

17. My point here is different from the one developed by Carolyn Heilburn in her moving and effective essay, *Writing a Woman’s Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988). Heilburn argues that women have been hindered in their quest for accomplishment because “power and control” have always been “declared unwomanly.” As a result, “women have been deprived of the narratives, or the texts, plots, or examples, by which they might assume power over—take control of—their own lives” (17). “Power is the ability to take one’s place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one’s part matter” (18). Thus, women suffer from the fact that they have “no models on which to form their lives” (25). Heilburn’s enterprise is to provide new models in narrating the life stories of exceptional women and in attempting to “face systematically” the “choices and pain of the women who did not make a man the center of their lives” (31), women who wrote themselves a “life beyond convention” (96) and thereby contributed to “transform female destiny” (120) and to create, specifically, “new stories” (122), having “moved beyond the categories our available narratives have provided for women” (131).

My argument is that *our own autobiography is not available to us*, not simply because we have no models and because, inhabiting male plots, we are enjoined not to transgress convention and to leave the realm of accomplishment to men (to live around a male center) but because we cannot simply *substitute ourselves as center* without regard to the *decentering* effects of language and of the unconscious, without acute awareness of the fact that our own relation to a linguistic frame of reference is never self-transparent. We can neither simply “write” our stories nor decide to write “new” stories, because we *do not know* our stories, and because the decision to “rewrite” them is not simply external to the language that

unwittingly writes us. My emphasis is on the unavailability for women, not simply of "power" but of knowledge, and self-knowledge; on the unavailability, that is, not only of new models but of new linguistic *structures of address*.

The question of a model is one of origins, of sources. The question of address is one of goals, of destinations. Life as a complex relation to the Other (to society, to history) poses not merely the question, "What model do I imitate?" "What structure of otherness do I identify myself with?" but also, "What structure of otherness do I address myself to (in my speeches and my actions)?"

This is why the key, in my perspective, is in *learning how to read* (rhetorical, psychoanalytical, political, ethical) *structures of address* and in attempting, through the reading, to transform or "rewrite" these structures not merely from the vantage point of *one* language (in whose ethnocentric, pseudotransparent medium we will simply substitute one center for another, in shifting from male-centered plots to female-centered stories) but from the *cross-cultural* perspective of the difference and the interaction between different languages and cultures.

For a study of autobiography that insists, precisely, on a multicultural, multiracial, multilinguistic perspective, and yet that tries to analyze how women writers from different races and different languages, those specifically "who must survive (and write) in the interval between different cultures and languages," nonetheless share not just conflicts and dilemmas but common concerns, strategies, and ways of coping, see Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

18. Vita Sackville-West's autobiography was, as is well known, edited and published by her son, Nigel Nicolson, as *Portrait of a Marriage* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973 [citation from p. 9]). Vita's story, which she herself condemned to the *absence of a story* because she could not find in herself the force to address and to transmit it and because she literally locked it up and hid it, could thus accede to us, ironically only posthumously and distortedly, through the male intrusion of the son's voice and through the male-centered perspective of the son's own appropriation of the narrative in his framing, overseeing plot (turning the "writing of a woman's life" into the "portrait of a marriage").

19. Marguerite Duras, *La Douleur* (Paris: P.O.L., 1985), 10, my translation from the French.

20. See Laura S. Brown, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," in *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Trauma*, ed. Cathy Caruth (*American Imago* 48, no. 1 [1991]). Discussing the traditional psychiatric (diagnostic) definition of "psychic trauma,"

Brown argues that "the notion that [traumatic] events must be 'outside the range of human experience' in order to qualify as traumatic stressors results in excluding many traumatic events that are common in the lives of girls and women" (110). Brown refers not only to the great numbers, among women, of abuse, rape, and incest survivors but to the "traumatic stressors" involved in "all those everyday, repetitive, interpersonal events that are so often the sources of psychic pain for women" and to the unconscious transmission from generation to generation of those "insidious traumata": "How, then, do we understand the woman whose symptoms of psychic trauma have occurred entirely at second hand, as it were, through the mechanism of insidious trauma? Mainstream trauma theory has begun to recognize that post-traumatic symptoms can be intergenerational, as in the case of children of survivors of the Nazi Holocaust; we have yet to admit that it can be spread laterally throughout an oppressed social group . . . for whom insidious trauma is a way of life" (128-29).

On the transmission of trauma from generation to generation, see Dori Laub's moving and illuminating theoretical, clinical, and autobiographical insights in chapters 2 and 3 of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M.D., *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57-92.

21. For a comprehensive definition of trauma in both its psychoanalytical and philosophical significance, and specifically in its relation to memory, see Cathy Caruth's introduction to *Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Trauma* (*American Imago* 48, no. 1 [1991], no. 4 [1992]).

22. It is not that women do not have the possibility, or the right, to *confess* their stories. The critical fashion of autobiographical confession among feminist writers attests to the contrary and has its important critical reasons. But female autobiography, I am suggesting, is not *available* to a confession and cannot truly and effectively be accessed by this mode, which, in its inadvertent search for absolution (the originary and, in fact, the inescapable desire behind any confession), runs the risk of offering still more masks (idealizing or counteridealizing) for a self-conscious feminine identity still unwittingly preoccupied with exorcising female guilt, a perennial exercise that inexorably amounts (no matter how sincere and in good faith) to a false confession, or what I would call "*a screen confession*," in the sense I use when I refer (in chap. 4, on Balzac's "The Girl with the Golden Eyes") to the textual functioning of "*a screen-woman*," or in the sense Freud uses in speaking of "screen memories."

23. See Laub, "Truth, Testimony, and Survival," in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, chap. 3, 75-92.

24. See my "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's *Sboah*," in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, chap. 7, 204-83.

25. Bell Hooks, "Writing Autobiography," from *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* in Warhol and Hernde, *Feminisms*, 1036.
26. Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 48, 35, 139.

Chapter 2. Women and Madness

1. Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1973), xxii.
2. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1974); *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1987).
3. Freud has thus pronounced his famous verdict on women: "Anatomy is destiny." But this is precisely the focus of the feminist contestation.
4. Honoré de Balzac, "Adieu" in *Colonel Chabert, suivi de El Verdugo, Adieu, et du Requisitionnaire*, edited and annotated by Philippe Berthier. Preface by Pierre Gascan (Paris: 1974).
5. Balzac, "Adieu," 9. Quotations from the Préface, the "Notice" and from Balzac's text are my translations; in all quoted passages, emphasis mine unless otherwise indicated.
6. Louis Althusser, *Lire le Capital* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1968), 1:26–28 (translation mine; emphasis Althusser's).
7. Balzac, "Adieu," 148, 156, 159, 164.
8. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 540 (citations from Foucault are in my translation; page references are to the French original); *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).
9. This suicidal murder is, in fact, a repetition not only of Philippe's military logic and his attitude throughout the war scene but also of a specific previous moment in his relationship with Stéphanie. Well before the story's end, Philippe had already been on the point of killing Stéphanie, and himself with her, having, in a moment of despair, given up the hope of her ever recognizing him. The doctor, seeing through Philippe's intentions, had then saved his niece with a perspicacious lie, playing precisely on the specular illusion of her proper name. "'You do not know then,' went on the doctor coldly, hiding his horror, 'that last night in her sleep she said, 'Philippe!.' ' 'She named me,' cried the baron, letting his pistols drop" (206).
10. Here again, the ambiguous logic of the "savior," in its tragic and heroic narcissism, is prefigured by the war scene. Convinced of his good reason, Philippe, characteristically, imposes it, by force, on others, so as to "save" them; but ironically and paradoxically, he always saves them *in*