

'Return to Sender'

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'Renvoyer à l'expéditeur'

Une parenthèse ouverte, le travail autobiographique des femmes est un travail entre les genres, à la fois l'écriture d'une vie et la vie en écriture. Le sujet se figure par l'écriture en se configurant avec l'autre, avec la lectrice. Ce texte est une lettre à une amie, T, la lectrice, un texte de et sur la vie en écriture.

Recent interrogation of the traditional boundaries between 'fiction' (novels) and 'fact' (auto/biography), both through critical recognition of women's autobiographical work as literature and through the experimental 'novels' of such writers as Daphne Marlatt and Gail Scott, has created a new genre, 'life writing.' The term, however, eludes definition precisely because it is most useful when it creates a category for writing that doesn't fit into conventional genre definitions, or a category which can accommodate diverse materials for the purpose of comparison. The first would include primarily those experimental texts which clearly deal with issues of the self, but cannot be classified strictly as autobiography, biography, or fiction; 'life writing' describes such texts particularly well because it implies a fusion between the creative act of writing and the act of living creatively, between the textual and the biological. The second, however, could include these texts ('life writing proper'?) as well as conventional autobiography, biography, journals, diaries, letters, interviews, memoirs, shopping lists, and anything else which consciously or unconsciously presents a self or selves, or confronts the difficulty or impossibility of doing so.

I realize that this last is not a very helpful definition, but maybe definition isn't a very helpful activity. To be more practical, though, I would say that for my purposes, life writing means primarily writing which deals deliberately with the problem of self, either through con-

ventional methods or through the questioning of these methods, i.e. either by representing the self as it exists or existed (I'm speaking through the assumptions of conventional methods here, not taking sides in the argument about whether or not the self exists!) or by imagining or constructing a self as it *might* exist in the future through the transformation effected in the life writing process. Such writing differs from 'straight' fiction in that it leaves the boundaries between authorial and written selves more fluid and open to question (Paul Morel may be a 'self' for D.H. Lawrence, but the book presents him as though he were fictional). But I also think it might be useful to compare, say *Ana Historic* with *Sons and Lovers* as life writing, which puts me back into the middle of my second category.... Ultimately, I consider the term 'life writing' more valuable the more inclusive it is; after all, didn't the unclassifiable texts which gave rise to the term seek by subverting genres to question the very notion of such classification?

life writing
inscribing as on the vast expanse a curve
double, the parting and converging
like literary doubles, preying / prey
like us
life conceived in *two*
(but it's only me who does the writing)

This is a love letter to my friend. (Autobiography is creating not only a self but also an audience) I think she is unknowable because she appears in my text, & like the multitudinous unity of Unknowable Woman written in the desiring eyes of men floats disembodied, unsigned because a sin of the other's need (that is, the SELF, the need of the SELF which cannot be the OTHER.) I'm walking the vast expanse where Mary Shelley's Walton set sail for illumination and a friend where the curve, the symbiotic dance on the surface of alone (but Mary gave the monster a voice. How do I give you a voice? You

should write a paragraph, but you're a Pharmacy student not an English major. And anyway you're not my monster. More like Lucy Maud Montgomery's girl in the glass cupboard door. Only who's looking out and in?)

II

One ought to acknowledge that as this life takes on form, its shape on the page echoes and reflects that of other life writing, other pages recently turned. (One ought also to question the project of representing my self exclusively in terms of this friend; the impulse is to try to include all the relationships, all the component elements, requisite if this text is to represent 'me'. (When I was about fourteen I used to spend hours compiling lists of the things I liked (popular songs, foods, people, TV shows, smells, activities, books, objects, places etc.) which I would include in my letters as if not to leave anything out which might be the deciding factor as if an interior snapshot, only these were all 'outward' things perhaps like the attributes of a goddess, the story and symbolic resonances carried in the dove, the helmet, the bow and arrows, the moon) (or when we did Family Trees in grade five, and I could never draw a diagram that could quite explain the convolutions of my reciprocal step-families (Dad having proclaimed his claim and fatherhood's by running away from the stereotypical Dad Who Ran Out On ... thus keeping his toe on his spot in the diagram; no, keeping his whole self in; but it was he, not me, who was afraid he'd disappear) One ought, aught, any, also zero, o, (w)hole, but of course I can't keep my whole self in any more than he could, nor can I disappear, even though that is also what I'm afraid of. That in the telling I make the ought / aught smaller&smaller until

III

So I have decided to talk about T because much of my inscribing has been by means of her. (This is appropriation.) But feeling the need to distance my dependence on her by reminding THE READER that other factors exist. (Other OTHERS.) Or by reducing her to a sterile initial, protecting the innocent with an angular alphabetic marking the absence of her presence. Or is this a conventional disclaimer? Why I Have Chosen to Include Some Works And Not Others. What This Text Is Not.

(As for what it is)
we sit here islanded you and I
upon the water we only
and the feel of your skin
under my fingers
I caress you like a mother, like a sister
and think of your lover's fingers
of how they caress this skin
in moments of solitude no less than this
My love for you is like the sky
but fluttering through it like a butterfly
questions
(is this sky too wide, too bright, too tender?)
Today we need no answers, you and I
only these hands, this skin
like two hearts smiling

IV

CRINGE! but I won't edit that because I think it's significant that I couldn't end it convincingly. Turned to triteness because I wanted to leave the question in, yet not to imply an erotic feeling that I wouldn't have admitted even if it was there. (Was it?) Because we wouldn't have been able to accept it, or known what to do with it. The question, we could handle. (But also, I didn't know how much of you I could lay emotional claim to. After all it was only sunscreen and it was the year we both struggled or blossomed into bikinis (watching our stomachs the whole while of course, but opting for cheesecake and daiquiris anyway) and we were waiting for our respective boyfriends to come back from town (they were bored with tanning; we had more at stake) and, as you said this afternoon on the phone, our relationship always seems to want to make itself too casual. his is called distancing.

I like Marlatt's idea, I won't close the parentheses. Does that leave the ought / aught open? Because I'm afraid in the telling I make it smaller&smaller until